Final Report:
Sustainability: Awareness and Activism in a Seminar Course for New Students

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Problem Statement

Each year, approximately 50% of entering students at Francis Marion University elect to take our academic skills course, Freshman Seminar 100. During Fall 2001, 372 students were enrolled in 13 sections of this 3-credit course taught by faculty from a variety of programs and majors. Freshman Seminar is interdisciplinary in nature and includes emphases on academic preparedness and skill development, services and organizations available on campus, and meeting the social and emotional challenges of life as a new college student. In particular, students are helped to identify their academic strengths and limitations and responsibilities to themselves, their university, and their community. Under the guidance of their instructors, students generate plans for their well being at FMU and beyond.

Given the goals of Freshman Seminar, as well as its potential to directly impact a maximum number of students, this course is seen as the perfect venue to offer instructors the opportunity to adopt a sustainability teaching unit. Thus, such a unit was prepared that could potentially meet all four of the goals of the Sustainable Universities Initiative. The intent of the unit is to teach students environmental literacy by offering instructors prepared exercises designed to foster active learning in the following areas: The impact of consumerism on available resources, ecological economics, sustainability specific to the Pee Dee region, individual responsibility, being environmentally proactive, etc. Thus, in addition to meeting SUI’s formal educational goal (#2), such a teaching unit models the initiative’s commitment to environmental best practices (#3), integrate sustainability with other disciplines (#1), and seek collaboration with other organizations where feasible (#4). In particular, students participating in the unit are asked to monitor their own sustainability behavior, prepare presentations on local environmental organizations and initiatives, and/or discuss the integration of their new awareness with the material taught in their other courses.

Target Population

While offering Freshman Seminar instructors a prepared teaching unit that they could immediately adopt with little of their own time-consuming preparation, they are also encouraged to tailor the sustainability module to meet their own course goals and interests. Such an earth-friendly, environmentally conscious unit will be offered to Freshman Seminar faculty prior to the start of each semester as they plan their course content and prepare syllabi.

Furthermore, to lend cohesiveness to the module and stimulate discussion, a single text (Weisman’s Gaviotas, any of several by McKibben, or the annual editions series, Ryan and Durning’s Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things, Shutkin’s The Land that Could Be, just to name a few examples) or video series will be utilized, along with online listservs between teachers and students in all sections.

Changes to Freshman Seminar likely to Impact Sustainability Unit

The unit was prepared during late summer and early fall of 2002. Since that time, a proposal has been submitted to the faculty requesting that the Freshman Seminar course be reduced from 3-credit hours to 1-credit hour. This proposal is expected to pass in April 2003. Unfortunately, such a change to the course will drastically reduce the amount of face time instructors have with students and the single text chosen to enhance the sustainability unit. Thus, a meeting with Freshman Seminar has been set for late April to discuss revisions made to the sustainability unit and encourage its adoption despite the changes in the seminar course overall. As an already interdisciplinary course taught by a dozen or so faculty each year and taken by hundreds of new students, such an environmental unit could be easily adopted and integrated into the goals and desired outcomes of the course. Finally, such a module has the potential to spur discussion and activism beyond the classroom and to effect real change in the way students and instructors manage their resources.