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PROJECT LEAD
University of Minnesota Sustainability Education Network

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The opinions expressed in this report are those of the Sustainability Education Network and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Minnesota or any of affiliated member colleges, schools, institutes, and centers.

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A note on authorship: Carissa Schively Slotterback, Associate Professor at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, and founding director of the Network, supervised the research and this report. Barrett Colombo conducted the interviews, and led the analysis and drafting of the report. During the 2010-2011 academic year, support for the Network was provided by the University of Minnesota Graduate School through its funding program for new interdisciplinary graduate groups. During the 2011-2012 academic year, direct support for the Network was provided by the Institute on the Environment (IonE). However, neither the Graduate School nor IonE staff supervised the writing or reviewing of this draft, and this report does not necessarily reflect the position of the Graduate School or IonE.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE PROJECT

This report synthesizes the perspectives of faculty across the University of Minnesota in an ambitious project to determine priorities, preferences, and challenges for creating a more coherent set of graduate sustainability education offerings across the University. Thirty interviews were conducted with faculty from twelve of the University’s schools and colleges. As a descriptive synthesis of these interviews, this report provides important evidence about faculty and staff priorities for sustainability education at the University of Minnesota.

GRADUATE SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION

According to interviewees, graduate sustainability curricula at the University must promote interdisciplinary capacities and experiences, in addition to disciplinary skills. Such experiences allow students to develop some fluency in the language and perspectives of other disciplines, in particular developing capacities for “bridging” across disciplinary and professional boundaries. Specific approaches to sustainability curricula that should be further developed include design thinking, holistic and systemic approaches to problems of sustainability, “challenge-based” learning, and the practice or application of these problems to complex and multi-stakeholder situations.

MAJOR ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Faculty and staff identified five central issues that should be addressed in order to improve the suite of sustainability education offerings at the University.

SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES ARE DISCONNECTED

The University offers a broad range of opportunities for graduate students to engage in issues of sustainability. However, interviews with faculty and staff from across the University indicate faculty and students involved in sustainability-related courses in one department or college are unaware of, or have difficulty connecting to, initiatives in other parts of the University. The University should promote the development of a “systems model” for sustainability education at the University, in which existing and emerging sustainability initiatives remain independent, but are much more connected through a network coordinated by a convener at the center. The recommendations for this issue are:

- Support a central convener for the suite of initiatives across the University.
- Promote a faculty and graduate student community.
- Enhance collaboration among leaders across colleges.
- Strengthen institutional support at the University.

INSUFFICIENT COMMUNICATION AMONG SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

Opportunities for collaboration among faculty and interdisciplinary study for students are diminished by a lack of information on relevant courses, and fragmented information about programs and other opportunities. The University should improve and coordinate internal communications to provide coherence around sustainability education. The recommendations for this issue are:

- Support a central convener for the suite of initiatives across the University.
- Promote a faculty and graduate student community.
- Enhance collaboration among leaders across colleges.
- Strengthen institutional support at the University.
• Improve web-based information resources.
• Use digital media to proactively communicate about sustainability opportunities.
• Develop a web-page to support convening functions.
• Improve course-level information tools.

**Critical Gaps in Content and Skills Offerings**

There is a conflict between the disciplinary structure of the University and the need for holistic and transdisciplinary approaches required to engage effectively in issues of sustainability. However, there are many opportunities that allow students to focus their academic study on issues of sustainability without creating new requirements or programs. The recommendations for this issue are:

• Develop short-courses and workshops for common interdisciplinary skills.
• Create graduate minors or concentrations that integrate with existing offerings.
• Encourage new initiatives at “untapped nexuses” of strength at the University.
• Offer object-based or thematic interdisciplinary courses.
• Incentivize interdisciplinary problem-solving in doctoral dissertations.
• Offer accessible international experiences,
• Facilitate the development of a sustainability minor or certificate.
• Combine traditional programs with sustainability-related programs in joint degrees.

**Faculty Incentives**

Faculty generally have few incentives to participate in the formation of new sustainability curricula, including the departmental accounting model that discourages teaching courses outside the home department, and the lack of course waivers for curriculum development. The recommendations for this issue are:

• Improve the incentive structure for interdisciplinary collaboration.
• Work within current administrative initiatives to build support.

**Integrating Community-Based Projects Into Curriculum**

Experiential opportunities to work on sustainability-related issues in communities are generally too brief in duration and lack sufficient coordination for both students and clients. The transaction costs for faculty to design experiential learning elements in sustainability-related courses can be reduced. The recommendations for this issue are: