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Externships in Sustainability Program as an Outreach Tool for Extension

Abstract

In 2011, Arizona Cooperative Extension implemented Externships in Sustainability, a program in which undergraduate students conduct community-based sustainability projects. In contrast to internships, in which students shadow a professional, externship students apply their skills to community outreach. Extension faculty proposed projects and recruited undergraduates from within their communities to execute the projects. Students were given responsibility for planning, implementation, and Extension. Agents, students, and communities have benefited from improved relationships between the university and communities, and through rainwater harvesting, community gardens, and other projects to increase resilience. Extension programs in other states could adopt this model to reap similar benefits.

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Introduction

Diminished funding for Extension programs is leading agents to find cost-effective ways to reach out to communities and deliver Extension programs. Externship programs provide creative and dynamic cost-effective outreach and Extension. Externships in Sustainability, a University of Arizona Cooperative Extension program, is providing service and learning opportunities for students through sustainability projects, while assisting agents in serving their communities.

Community sustainability projects are multi-disciplinary activities involving individuals, community organizations, externs, Extension faculty, and campus resources. They foster the enhancement of social and natural resources, address community needs, and contribute to community resilience. The program aims to integrate multiple perspectives into Extension programs on sustainable living, including the ways that "choices, decisions, and behaviors affect natural resources, equity, and economic development at the local, regional, national, and global scales" (Elliott et al., 2008).

Internships Versus Externships

Within the disciplines of medicine, nursing, and law, externs are typically defined as unpaid students who shadow professionals for short-term periods; externships expose students to the day-to-day rigors of those careers (e.g., Cronau & Haines, 2009; Rush, McCracken, & Talley, 2009). In Arizona Cooperative Extension, externs, much like interns, are paid a minimum stipend and work for an entire semester rather than just a few weeks. The idea of externships was pioneered in 2010 at the University of Arizona (UA) through the Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences, whose externships create opportunities for students in the Family Studies and Human Development program to gain experience in Extension's community engagement programs. The key distinction between typical internships and our modified definition of externships is that students are bringing particular skills and applying them in service to their communities, through Extension, the outreach arm of the University—hence the term "externships."

The Program

The program is supported by the University of Arizona Green Fund, which is funded by student fees. The Green Fund provides opportunities for students and employees to test innovative solutions to challenges in renewable energy, energy and water efficiency, waste reduction, and environmental sustainability education, research, and outreach. Extension externs fulfill the outreach mission of the Green Fund, by taking sustainable practices from the campus and extending them in collaboration with Arizona communities.

Community sustainability projects are developed through requests for proposals from county Extension agents, with guidance from an Extension faculty sustainability working group. In the first year of the program, projects were developed in four counties. These projects included: the installation of rainwater harvesting tanks and landscape design at a community college facility (Graham County); the start-up, publicity, and management assistance for a new farmers market (Gila County); a teachers' sustainability curriculum training (Cochise County); and initiation of a tribal lands community garden (La Paz County). The projects were all conducted during the 2011 summer semester and required active community participation.

Externships in Sustainability has since expanded to include projects in six counties, including eight new sustainability projects and 10 new externs. The projects range from rainwater harvesting demonstration facilities to Integrated Pest Management information delivery.

Once the projects are approved, the project managers recruit students and give priority to students from the communities in which the projects are being implemented. This helps defray housing costs and builds on the students' familiarity with their home community. More important, local recruitment teaches students the importance of applying broad-based sustainability practices, to the unique situations in their communities, i.e., thinking globally, but acting locally. Students are paid minimum wage, but given a substantial degree of responsibility to plan and implement the projects; the latter is similar to the experience garnered by field experience internships in some Extension education programs (Scheer, Ferrari, Earnest, & Connors, 2006). To ensure success, both county agents and externs must have clear goals and expectations of what is to be accomplished (Wilken, Williams,

Cadavieco, & Walker, 2008). To ensure that tangible impacts can be measured, project managers are required to develop evaluation criteria at the beginning of their projects.

Impacts

The 2011 Externships in Sustainability program was evaluated through exit interviews with the externs and their Extension supervisors. A preliminary evaluation of these interviews yielded three broad categories of impact: personal impact on the student (e.g., increased self-reliance, critical thinking, leadership); Extension and community impact (e.g., building community capacity; strengthening Extension ties to communities); and sustainability impact (e.g., increased awareness of sustainability issues; evidence of new behaviors). One extern working in Safford, Arizona summed up his experience as follows: "My community has given me a lot of tools to succeed in life and this was an opportunity to give a small piece back that will hopefully continue to get the community involved in sustainability." These brief results illustrate the value of an externship program as a means of integrating Extension's strategic goals, with the development of sustainability practices in rural communities, the expansion of Extension capacity, and the development of leadership skills to promote sustainable community capacity.

Conclusions

Extension is well known in communities, through Master Gardener, Water Wise, 4-H, and other programs. Externships in Sustainability provides a fresh "face" of the university to community collaborators. The enthusiasm, skills, and education of the student externs contributed to the success of each of the projects in which they participated and to the sustained relationship between the university, Extension, and each community. Local recruitment of student externs has the potential to teach students the importance of working with their own community, i.e., thinking globally and acting locally.

With just a small amount of financial support and the dedication of Extension personnel to sustainability goals, Externships in Sustainability methods can be applied in most parts of the country. Many rural communities are suffering economically from the loss of their educated population. Programs like Externships in Sustainability can provide students with incentives to contribute to their communities after graduating.

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