Occidental College Environmental Representative Pilot Report

Spring 2015

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Introduction:

EcoRep programs allow students to learn about sustainable living from peer mentors. EcoRep programs help to foster a more sustainably-minded campus environment. EcoReps are student representatives that live in each residence hall, they are there to answer questions from residents, research sustainability issues and initiate sustainability projects on campus. To examine if Occidental would be a good campus to implement an EcoReps program I did case studies of peer institutions with similar programs to outline steps and goals towards implementation on Occidental’s campus. I worked with a team of four first-years to run a small pilot of the program within a couple of residence halls.

Similar Institution’s Programs:

Institutions with similar programs are useful to examine as they provide further insight into the potential for Occidental’s program. Some comparable institutions to Occidental with EcoReps programs are Skidmore, Middlebury, Bowdoin and Tufts. By examining these case studies there is the opportunity to create plans more targeted for success specific to Occidental.

SKIDMORE
Skidmore has around 10 Sustainability Reps (S-Reps) per year that work with the school’s 2,400 students. One student is paid $8.25/hr for up to four hours per week and they act as a manager for the other volunteer S-Reps. The managing S-Reps works directly with the staff Sustainability Coordinator. Having levels of organization and management within the system allowed for problems to be tackled more realistically with the managing S-Rep being selected from the volunteer representatives.

MIDDLEBURY
Middlebury, a school of about 2,400 students started their EcoRep program in 2010 and has about 25 “Residential Sustainability Coordinators” or RSCs every year. There are five Head RSCs paid $8.75/hr for up to five hours per weeks. The first-year RSCs are volunteers. Each Residential Commons is supervised by a Head RSC who each manage a group of first-year RSCs. The whole organization is supervised by the Sustainability Integration Office. They have found their program successful as it prompts initiative and creates an organized system for implementation. Middlebury has also found that more sustainability projects are taken on by the students when they have other students as mentors.
BOWDOIN
Started in 2004, Bowdoin’s school of 1,700 maintains an average of 16 Eco-Reps per year. Each Eco-Rep is paid $15 per week. A Student Manager is selected each year from the former pool of Eco-Reps and works in conjunction with the staff Sustainability Coordinator. Bowdoin starts their annual energy conservation competition early in the year to get students thinking about the steps they can take to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on campus. Eco-Reps hold events and open discussions to keep sustainability a focus along with doing research in areas of the campus falling behind in sustainability (i.e. annual trash audits).

TUFTS
Larger than Occidental, Tufts’ student body of 5,100 undergraduates has included 10 Eco-Reps since 2001. Tufts reorganized their program in 2010 to include more management structuring. The current program includes 8 underclassmen Eco-Reps supervised by two upperclassmen co-coordinators. Adding the student co-coordinators has been effective in allocating Eco-Rep preparation based on all participating member’s coursework as well as scheduling meetings to hold all participants accountable to each other. Eco-Reps at Tufts demonstrate leaderships by organizing training sessions, weekly meetings with the Sustainability Director as well as participating in Sustainability Office stand meetings. All participants are compensated $25 per week for three to five hours of work. The program is supervised by the staff Sustainability Program Director. Tufts reports both the school’s administration and students having very high environmental standards because of the expectations and culture created by the Eco-Reps.

Occidental Pilot Program:

In order to determine the possible benefits and drawbacks of a fully implemented program I ran a trial EcoRep pilot program on Occidental’s campus. To mitigate possible outliers I ran the trial with two residence halls comprised of only first year students. I used Braun and Chilcott as my two trial residence halls. Two student volunteers were selected from each of the two residence halls. Each residence hall had a different focus within sustainability. Braun focused on better waste disposal practices while Chilcott focused on wasting less water.

After an initial meeting with myself and the EcoReps each representatives for residence halls set out a questionnaire to their halls. The questions were to gauge awareness and knowledge of the residents. We then all met to analyze the survey results. Combined we had about 70 results from both residents halls.
Chilcott Questions Asked on Initial Survey:
1. Do you consider yourself an environmentalist and/or sustainably conscious? 35/42 yes
2. Do you feel you strongly know the definition of sustainability and what that entails? 29/42 yes
3. Do you turn off the sink water while you brush your teeth? 40/42 yes
4. Did you know that a 7-10 minute shower uses approximately 30-50 gallons of water? 19/42 yes
5. Do you think the automatic toilets unnecessarily flush while using them? 41/42 yes
6. Free Response/Comments

Braun Questions Asked on Initial Survey:
1. Do you make sure to separate trash from recyclables when you throw away your trash? 24/25 yes
2. How often do you make a conscious effort to recycle? 17/25 “every time I have trash/recyclables” 8/25 “sometimes, only when its available”
3. If someone else disposed of a recyclable into a trash can, would you pick it up and throw it away into the correct bin? 14/25 yes
4. Did you know that if a recyclable item is not cleaned of food and residue when thrown away, the ENTIRE collection of items that it is recycled with is thrown away with it? 18/25 yes
5. If there were more recycling bins readily available, would you make more of an effort to recycle? 24/25 yes
6. Do you think that people are environmentally conscious in general? 7/25 yes

Initial Questions Results:
Chilcott Results

1. Do you consider yourself an environmentalist and/or sustainably conscious?
   - Yes (35)
   - No (7)

2. Do you feel you strongly know the definition of sustainability and what that entails?
   - Yes (29)
   - No (13)
3. Do you turn off the sink water while you brush your teeth?

- Yes (40)
- No (2)

4. Did you know that a 7-10 minute shower uses approximately 30-50 gallons of water?

- Yes (19)
- No (23)

5. Do you think the automatic toilets unnecessarily flush while using them? 41/42 yes

- Yes (41)
- No (1)

6. Other Comments/Free Response Summary

- Students are concerned about sprinkler water usage as well
- People hope to see a better compost system implemented
- Students are worried that automatically flushing toilets waste more water as they flush multiple times while one person is in the restroom
1. Do you make sure to separate trash from recyclables when you throw away your trash?

- Yes (24)
- No (1)

2. How often do you make a conscious effort to recycle?

- Every time I have trash/recyclables (17)
- Sometimes, only when its available (8)

3. If someone else disposed of a recyclable into a trash can, would you pick it up and throw it away into the correct bin? 14/25 yes

- Yes (14)
- No (11)

4. Did you know that if a recyclable item is not cleaned of food and residue when thrown away, the ENTIRE collection of items that it is recycled with is thrown away with it?

- Yes (18)
- No (7)
After the Initial Survey:

I then met with the EcoReps to review their poll results. We worked together to determine what steps should be taken in order to most effectively reach the residents of their residence halls. I wanted to try two different methods of communication in order to compare results. We determined that Chilcott would work with their dorm on a broad scale by putting up posters in the bathrooms and hallways they also put up timers in the showers. In Braun we decided they would focus on more direct communication by putting flyers into the key-card slots of the rooms. They also put signs on the waste receptacles with information about exactly what could be disposed of in the bins.

We then allowed two weeks for the outreach to take effect within the residence halls. At the final week of the semester prior to finals week the EcoReps sent out a final questionnaire asking their residents if they felt more knowledgable about sustainability on Occidental’s campus.

Chilcott Questions Asked on Final Survey:
1. Do you now have a stronger understanding of conservation and sustainability, and what these entail?
2. Have you been using the shower timers these past few weeks?
3. Have you reconsidered your eco-footprint, and altered your lifestyle? (This entails showering, water usage, diet and recycling)
4. Have the posters made you more knowledgeable on your water usage and impact?
5. Comments and reflections?

Braun Questions Asked on Final Survey:
1. Did you read the new informational posters?
2. Did you scan the QR Code for more information?
3. Do you feel more aware of the recycling rules on campus?
4. Does the knowledge of the campus recycling rules make you want to recycle more often?
5. Have you changed you recycling behavior?
6. Do you feel you will be more sustainable with this new information?
7. Would it be helpful to have someone in the dorm who encourages sustainability?
8. Is there anything you believe could be improved about the recycling system on campus?
9. Is there anything about recycling on campus you did not know before?

Final Questions Results:

Chilcott Results:

1. Do you now have a stronger understanding of conservation and sustainability, and what these entail?  
   - Yes (18)  - No (4)  
   - 18%  

2. Have you been using the shower timers these past few weeks?  
   - Yes (22)  - No (0)  
   - 100%
3. Have you reconsidered your eco-footprint, and altered your lifestyle? (This entails showering, water usage, diet and recycling)

4. Have the posters made you more knowledgeable on your water usage and impact?

6. Comments and Reflections?

- Students are still concerned about the automatic toilets and how often they unnecessarily flush
- People found the shower timers very helpful and said every hall should have them
- Students want more education and outreach beyond just water
- Students thought the outreach was effective in general
Braun Results:

1. Did you read the new informational posters?
   - Yes (8) 27%
   - No (3) 73%

2. Did you scan the QR code for more information?
   - Yes (0) 100%
   - No (11) 100%

3. Do you feel more aware of the recycling rules on campus?
   - Yes (8) 27%
   - No (3) 73%

4. Does the knowledge of campus recycling rules make you want to recycle more often?
   - Yes (9) 18%
   - No (2) 82%
5. Have you changed your recycling behavior?

- Yes (9)
- No (2)

6. Do you feel you will be more sustainable with this new information?

- Yes (10)
- No (1)

7. Would it be be helpful to have someone in the dorm who encourages sustainability?

- Yes (11)
- No (0)

8. Is there anything you believe could be improved about the recycling system on campus?

- Put the bins all in the same area for convenience
- The Tiger Cooler should have more sustainable practices
- More recycle bins
- Figure out a way to include composting on campus

9. Is there anything about recycling on campus that you did not know before?

- Students did not realize that cardboard was separate from the paper
- They didn’t know that food couldn’t be on the containers
- Didn’t know how the EcoClam shells worked
Final Analysis and Conclusions of Pilot Program:

POTENTIAL DRAWBACKS
One of the major potential faults I see as a possibility for EcoReps at Occidental is that students in the EcoRep positions wouldn’t take their responsibility seriously and information spread and changes wouldn’t occur. To counter this potential pitfall I believe it is important to have a Sustainability Coordinator to keep EcoReps accountable as well as having some hierarchy within the organization where dedicated members are put into leadership roles after being involved for a year. Having both a Sustainability Coordinator and experienced students helping motivate and keeping others accountable an environment of hard work and creativity can be fostered.

Another potential problem that could hinder the success of an EcoRep program would be if the administration doesn’t accept and work with the EcoReps. It is important to make sure that all aspects and members of the college are committed to progressive change. It is up to the administration to make a commitment to supporting the EcoReps and working with them. If there is not cooperation and information exchange between the EcoReps and the administration the EcoReps will be ineffective in fostering change.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS
After the completion of my pilot program I have come to the conclusion that Occidental College would benefit from a fully implemented EcoRep program on campus. While we had less responders to the second survey sent out (likely because it was sent during reading days/finals) there was a positive response. There was also a lot of reported vocal support from residents to the EcoReps in their buildings. Students expressed excitement over the changes being made and many wanted to become more involved in sustainable initiatives as they saw the potential for more change to occur. Students reported being excited that there was a person that was easy to reach to voice concerns and suggestions to.

It is critical for the future EcoReps to have connections within facilities, especially a Sustainability Coordinator, to both have access to accurate information to answer questions as well as having a resource to utilize in carrying out changes. An EcoRep program has the potential to add a level of transparency to the sustainability initiatives taken out within the administration and facilities. It also has the potential to create an atmosphere of cooperation and interconnectedness between the student body and the rest of the Occidental community. Occidental would benefit from the addition of an EcoRep program as many students feel disconnect and unknowledgeable about the sustainable changes being made at the non-student
level. The current students of Occidental feel left in the dark about changes that are being made; students want to know what is going on and because it is not readily available or transparent false information gets circulated leading to frustration about the administration on behalf. Creating EcoReps would create a bridge of information to help students feel included in the changes being made that they are currently unaware of.

Implementing an EcoRep program on Occidental’s campus will allow for an institutionalization of sustainable living. It will be another step Occidental can take to be a leader in sustainable colleges as well as being a real method to foster change. By implementing an EcoRep program Occidental would join other leading colleges in committing to making changes to help ensure a better environmental future for the attending students and entire Occidental community.

FUTURE SUGGESTIONS
There are a range of tasks I see as potentially beneficial for EcoReps to take on should they be fully implemented. EcoReps would come before freshman orientation with the Resident Advisors for a two day training on leadership, environmentalism and encouraging sustainable living. They would work with each other as well as the Resident Advisors to collaborate on how to best create an environmentally conscious climate on campus. They would then present at first-year orientation to promote the sustainable living options Occidental provides as well as giving facts and information about what is currently happening and how to get more involved in the sustainability initiatives already occurring on campus. This would not only introduce their position to the incoming students but would also include information on sustainable dining and dorm life practice as well as how to contribute to the Occidental environment in an environmentally conscious way.

For the structure of the program I would recommend creating and EcoReps program with one EcoRep per residence hall on campus. At least three EcoReps should be returning EcoReps, they will work in leadership roles organizing trainings, fostering outreach ideas and taking on larger scale sustainability projects on campus. These Manager EcoReps would be selected by the Sustainability Coordinator based off of the work done in the prior year.

All EcoReps, in addition to working with their residence hall, would be responsible for taking on a sustainability project on campus for the year. They would target areas of perceived sustainability weakness and could work alone or with one other EcoRep to draft goals, a schedule and deliverables for the end of the year, aiming to combat the problem. These proposals
would be submitted as part of the application to be selected as an EcoRep and would be approved by the Sustainability Coordinator.

In addition to the projects taken on in the beginning of the semester EcoReps would have goals every month that foster change and interaction within their immediate residence hall. Some of these would be activities such as creating posters, speaking at hall spreads and leading some FYRE meetings to teach sustainability. The monthly delegation of these tasks would be headed by the Manager EcoReps. The Managers would be responsible for meeting with the Sustainability Coordinator on a bi-monthly basis to come up with goals and deliverables for these more short term projects.

To incentives to program EcoReps should be compensated in some form. This can also work to keep them accountable so if they do not meet their goals and deliverables they will not be paid. I believe that hourly pay would be the best option for compensation. The EcoReps should be paid for 2 hours a week of work if they are a new EcoRep and 4 hours a week if they are returning EcoReps put into leadership roles by the Sustainability Coordinator. If the EcoRep program is successful over a three year-long period I would recommend looking into implementing a representative for off campus housing outreach.