The Boston College Sustainable Living-Learning Community: An Assessment

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What is Sustainable Living?

As tuition costs continue to increase to staggering levels, residential universities such as Boston College have a growing responsibility to defend these high rates for prospective students. One of the new ways that universities are building this defense is through the formation of “special interest housing” on campus. These programs, sprouting up at universities across the country, seek to create housing environments that foster community and learning outside of the classroom. By assigning particular floors, or in some cases entire dorm buildings, to be inhabited by students with a common interest, universities are seeking to add value to higher education. Boston College has created many such communities on campus over the past several years, and one of the newest additions has been the Sustainable Living-Learning Community (SLLC). This report seeks to assess the progress of this fledgling community, address some issues that have arisen, and most importantly provide some potential recommendations in order for it to grant the best experience for students that it possibly can.

In order to guide the progression of this report, as well as guide the further development of the SLLC, we believe it is first important to develop a meaningful mission statement for the program. An effective mission statement will synchronize the various aspects of the SLLC, such as academics, community engagement, action, environmental stewardship, and hopefully lead to tangible benefits for the students. Although we recognize that the mission statement should be decided on by all relevant stakeholders within the program, we wish to propose one here to serve at least as a starting point of the discussion.

The Sustainable Living-Learning Community strives to expand the college residential experience by bringing like-minded and driven individuals together and instilling in them a sense of environmental stewardship. Through academic programs, knowledgeable mentors, and engagement with the community, participating students will gain the theoretical and practical knowledge necessary for good citizenship in the 21st century. Upon completion of this program, students should have a basic understanding of what sustainability is, a drive to help change the culture at BC and the greater community, and be prepared to lead a more sustainable lifestyle.

This mission statement focuses on the most important aspects of a successful living and learning community focused on sustainability. The selected students should be driven towards a common
goal and connected by common interests. Once in the program, they will focus on building a community through engagement with one another, gaining knowledge through talented mentors, and experiencing directly the various aspects of a sustainable lifestyle. Lastly, it emphasizes the importance of using their gained knowledge and experiences to be active advocates within the greater communities in which they operate.

Any pilot program is expected to have certain shortcomings, and our research has led us to uncover several that we believe must be addressed in order for the SLLC to reach its potential in the coming years. First, there seems to be a lack of engagement from students enrolled in the program. This fact is illustrated partially by the fact that despite several attempts at reaching out to the students, only 2 of the 24 were willing to provide us with their experiences thus far. Although we understand that BC students are incredibly busy, we would expect that students who are excited about the program would find time to briefly discuss their experiences. This lack of engagement seems to have arisen partially from the fact that many of the students originally applied to the SLLC in order to get the housing benefits of a guaranteed room in Edmond’s as opposed to any sort of commitment to the purpose of SLLC. Second, although the academic programs have been held on various and relevant topics by distinguished speakers, there appears to be a lack of continuity or sense of purpose when viewed as a whole. For example, both responders to our survey expressed that they did not develop a better understanding of the meaning of “sustainability.”

We recognize that our survey data is flawed due to it representing the views of only two individuals; nevertheless, we maintain that their answers were honest assessments of the program. Furthermore, both individuals were described to us by the RA as some of the more active students who expressed more interest within the program. Most importantly, we want to use their insights to guide our recommendations.

In the remainder of this paper, we will lay out more specifically the greater context of the SLLC within Special Interest Housing at BC and throughout the country, the methods we used to study the SLLC, the particular problems that we discovered, and finally our recommendations and solutions that we hope will be taken into consideration by those who are overseeing the program. All of the authors of this assessment believe that the program has potential for becoming one of the strongest on campus. The interdisciplinary nature of sustainability, its emergence as a recognized necessity for good citizenship in the 21st century, and the presence of
many talented leaders on campus willing to see the SLLC achieve its potential, lead us to believe that it can be a truly transformative housing program.

**An Introduction to the Current Program**

The Sustainable Living-Learning Community is a community for sophomores who have an interest in sustainability. There are twenty-four bed spaces available on the seventh floor, west wing of Edmonds Hall. There is an application that must be completed in order to live in the community, and the application specifically outlines what it means to live in this community. The *community description* on the application states:

Assuring a sustainable future for us all will require knowledge and skills, community cooperation, and optimism about new possibilities. If you are a rising sophomore who cares about sustainability, you can join a new living-learning community of students who share your interests, where you can develop your skills and make your contribution to a sustainable future. Even if your interest in sustainability is new, you can be a welcome member of this living-learning community, so long as you have a willingness to join others in becoming better informed about the challenges and working toward a brighter future.

The *participant expectations* given on the application state:

Students will be given the opportunity to connect with other students, faculty and staff who are committed to these issues. As members of this community, students will be expected to attend floor activities (including informal dinners and discussions) and participate in a culminating experience. Residents will be required to take a one credit seminar to supplement events and opportunities on the Sustainability floor.[1]

In addition to filling out the cover sheet of the application with roommate and application information, the students are required to answer three questions in 200 words or less. These questions include:

1) How do you define a sustainable future?
2) How will living and participating in this community help you reach your goals?
3) What will you contribute to this community to make it strong and effective?
The students must follow all the normal housing rules and regulations, and in addition were required to attend six mandatory sessions in the fall and three programs and complete one project in the spring. The Residential Director Anya Villatoro explained that the SLLC is offered to sophomores because members of the Office of Residential Life believe that there are already many resources that are targeted to freshman, juniors, and seniors, so they wanted to give sophomores a chance to be part of a tight-knit community in which the members share similar interests.

[1] Although the participation expectations section of the application may state that the students were required to take a one credit seminar, it was not implemented into the program.

Positives and Negatives

From the students that we interviewed, we learned that there were some positives and negatives about the SLLC that need to be addressed. There were a few programs that the students said that they liked. They were a part of an apple-picking program in which they had a tour of the facility and learned about farming practices and what the strategies are for sustainability. They were able to pick apples that were in season and then cooked with them as a community. Another program they were involved with included a tour of Corcoran Commons, also known as lower dining hall. They observed their production and waste management, what types of local and fresh foods BC has, and how recycling is handled. The students said that they liked learning about organic and locally grown foods, recyclable utensils and serving ware, and vegetarian or chicken dishes. They also said that they liked the knowledgeable professors, programs that were more discussion based and seminar-like, the water lecture on water usage and water issues, the consumerism presentation, and they also appreciated videos that were included in presentations. Eighty-three percent of students completed all of the program requirements, including the six mandatory sessions in the fall and the three mandatory sessions and project in the spring, which suggests that most students were willing to show up to the mandatory sessions.
But, there were several issues and factors that limited the effectiveness of the program. The most apparent of these was the considerable housing advantage that the program extended to its participants. This program consists solely of sophomore residents. Sophomores generally live in either a standard double dormitory or a suite consisting of four double rooms, two bathrooms and a common room that contains a kitchenette. This kitchenette will generally hold a refrigerator, a microwave and a sink. In the Sustainable-Living Learning Community, however, students live in a suite that contains an entire kitchen (stove, oven and dishwasher in addition to the aforementioned items), which is considered highly desirable by many students. Furthermore, participation in this program guarantees that the participants get to live on Lower Campus as opposed to in the College Road residence halls, which is also considered highly desirable by sophomores. Therefore, it is plausible that students that apply for the Sustainable-Living Learning Community do so simply to receive housing benefits and in fact have no genuine interest in living more sustainably. Several students admitted outright that they applied to the program because of the housing advantages.
Another considerable issue with the program was a lack of a community atmosphere. Many of the students expressed a desire for more of the social and community component with more bonding. They want to be able to spend time with one another and build relationships and friendships. One of the students that we interviewed stated that she does not know all of the names of the students in the SLLC.

The final problem with this program was its content. Students interviewed found the programs to be focused on topics that were over their heads. There were no introductory programs that provided a basic definition of sustainability for the students. Programs were selected assuming that students already had knowledge of sustainable and environmental sciences when many of the students held major in completely different fields. One of the interviewed students explicitly stated that she believed that students with an environmental science background would have gotten much more out of the program. Further, students found many of the programs unenjoyable. Interviewed students concluded that the program was more of a burden than a good educational experience.

**Solutions and Recommendations**

The Sustainable Living-Learning community has the potential to be a catalyst for sustainable living on Boston College’s campus, especially in an era where environmental issues are increasingly becoming more relevant to the causes of social justice and everyday living. After looking over the current state of the Sustainable Living-Learning Community at Boston College, we would like to propose a few solutions to the problems that the program faced this year in order to help create a thriving living-learning community that fosters the mission statement of Boston College in which the search for truth in every discipline, the desire to learn, and the call to live justly together are all encompassed. Two areas of the program that we would propose to improve are: 1) the structure of the program and 2) the seriousness of the candidates.

**1. Structure of the Program**
The current structure of program is a good framework for what the future of the program should look like. We would like to propose a more engaging program in which students will need to be more proactive in their participation in sustainable living. The first step to achieving this is to marry academics to everyday living. Through the employment of a one-credit course for the first semester of the school year, we hope that students will be introduced to sustainability from an interdisciplinary perspective and find that sustainability goes beyond the classroom. These one-credit courses will be run by professors from different departments, who will come in to discuss what sustainability means in their field. This will cater to the students who may not be environmental studies majors or minors and can foster more interesting discussions.

To make this class more hands-on, the homework and grading will be based on activities that students can do at home: such as actively tracking their waste/energy use by counting how many bags of trash they dispose of and how much they recycle each week. Not only should this class be a learning tool, but it should also cultivate community building through field trips such as bike tours, camping trips, waste facilities tours, hiking trips, and kayaking. Not all the trips have to relate to green living; rather the focus is community growth and interconnectedness. Like in any dynamic ecosystem, there needs to be continual interaction and communication through living, learning, and having simple fun.

In addition to the one-credit course, we want to make community interactions back at their living spaces viable through biweekly dinners where one four-person suite will be responsible for cooking food for the whole community. During these dinners, the students can discuss issues of sustainability relating to the environment as well as sustainability of current cultural movements and other forthcoming issues in the global sphere. Once again, it should be a priority for the program to be able to engage not only one discipline, but all disciplines. Finally, it would be beneficial for the students in the community to be able to access the greenhouse that is located diagonally across Beacon Street from Chestnut Hill Campus and participate in the community garden on Brighton Campus. We believe that the structure of this program will not only engage the students intellectually and physically, but also challenge them to see the beauty of living intentionally in an increasingly unjust global world.

2. Seriousness of the Candidates
In order to address the seriousness of the candidates, there should be a tighter screening process for the applicants. As mentioned previously, there is a large interest for special housing initiatives such as this one because it guarantees good housing in the much-coveted lower campus of Boston College. In order to rectify this, we propose that there be a mandatory information session where prospective community members must attend to pick up an application and learn about what it will mean to be a part of this community. Through this information session, interested students will be informed that there will be a one-credit course involved, as described above. This process as a whole is not only meant to deter applicants that apply for the sake of just housing, but also to reinforce the commitment required to truly having a strong community. A community is built not by the power of the achievements of individuals, but the collective efforts of the whole.

Besides the seriousness of the candidates, a final major consideration is the seriousness of the Residential Assistant who is to oversee this program. The RA selection process for this Sustainable Living-Learning Community needs be rigorous because he or she will be the one most engaged with the residents of the community. The RA should be someone who has a serious, demonstrated interest in sustainability. If the RA is engaged, the community of students will most likely be able to follow in his or her footsteps. This will provide for a more fruitful and stronger program.

These seminars and activities we are proposing reflect in many ways those that have been proven to be successful in other campuses and communities. University of Wisconsin-Madison is into its third year of its successful living-learning community and is focused on “hands on” learning. We hope that Boston College will emulate this “hands on” learning for its academic and learning component of the SLLC. With regard to the community aspect, the University of North Carolina’s Sustainability Living-Learning Community is a great example of promoting community involvement among the students as well as engagement with the wider community through discussions and awareness programs. We recognize and understand that Boston College’s SLLC is only in its first year, and thus we hope that these recommendations and critiques to the screening process and the program structure will emulate successful community building as demonstrated by other schools. We believe that the distinguishing factor for Boston College’s SLLC compared to other schools will be the Jesuit ideals and spirituality that upholds Boston College, in its pursuit of knowledge and call to justice.
Chart 2: Overview of recommendations for the future of the program.

**Conclusion**

Our findings show that although the program may not be perfect, it is a new and growing program. There is room for improvement, and we believe that some of our suggestions could help to make the program grow and generate more interest. Starting with a strong mission statement that we have outlined throughout the paper can allow the program to strive to meet the goals it has set forth. We hope that through the academic structure and atmosphere of a one credit course, serious students, an involved RA, and exciting bonding and community activities, the students will come together to work toward a common goal of sustainable living. Ultimately in a living learning community, we would like to emphasize the aspect of community. In any successful movement or educational experience, community is going to be the driving factor in determining if the participants will be engaged. Through the sustainable living learning community at Edmonds Hall, we hope to create individuals who are passionate and proactive about sustainability and will leave the program feeling like they have the necessary skills to engage in fruitful conversations with other people about the implications of green living.