Office of Sustainability 2010-2014 Review Team Report  
September 22, 2014

Introduction

The purpose of this review is to assess and analyze the performance of the student green fee and the Office of Sustainability in meeting the original intent of the Green Initiative Fund proposal and the University’s sustainability goals as contained in the 2020 Strategic Plan.

Team

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Timetable

2014-06-23 Charge Meeting of Review Team

2014-07-11 Interview with Shannon Wilder, Director of the Office of Service-Learning, and Dr. Quint Newcomer, Director of the UGA Costa Rica Program

2014-07-18 Interview with Dr. Kathy Pharr, Chief of Staff in the Office of the President; Prof. Alfie Vick, Associate Professor in the College of Environment and Design; Landon Bubb, Former President of Students for Environmental Action; and Dr. Robert Scott, Associate Vice President for Research

2014-07-28 Interview with Dr. Jan Barham, Associate Dean of Students and the Director of the Tate Student Center

2014-07-30 Interview with Dr. John Gittleman, Dean of Ecology

2014-08-05 Meeting with Office of Sustainability Director Kevin Kirsche to discuss draft

2014-08-21 Submitted to Ralph Johnson, VP of Facilities Management for review

2014-09-22 Final report submitted
**Procedure**

Self-Study conducted by the Office of Sustainability was reviewed in detail.

Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders (see timetable above).

Review team discussed findings from the self-study and interviews and formed key themes and recommendations based on these findings.

**Charge**

The Associate Vice President of the Facilities Management Division (as designated by the Vice President for Finance and Administration) charged the review team and will receive its findings and recommendations. Findings will also be shared with the Vice President for Finance and Administration, Vice President for Student Affairs, and others as appropriate.

The written charge included the following:

The referendum instituting the student green fee recommended that UGA use the proceeds of the fee to establish an Office of Sustainability that would:

- Coordinate existing programs and establish new or more comprehensive ones as appropriate to reduce the University’s impact on the environment
- Increase the amount of renewable energy on campus, increasing energy efficiency, and reducing the amount of waste generated on campus
- Support student internships in the Office, student research/service grants, and environmental education initiatives
- Streamline sustainability efforts and coordinate such efforts across departmental boundaries
- Expedite the completion of projects and initiatives
- Coalesce operational and academic efforts
- Make public the progress of sustainability at UGA
- Serve as a public contact
- Seek to integrate students, staff, and faculty as much as possible into such efforts

In evaluating the success of the green fee initiative and the OoS in achieving these goals, the review team should address the following questions:

1. Does the OoS offer an appropriate mix of programs and initiatives to achieve the goals?
2. Should additional or alternative programs or initiatives be considered to better achieve the goals?
3. Is the current level of staffing adequate to achieve the goals?
4. Is the location of the OoS in the UGA organizational structure appropriate to achieve the goals?
5. Is the mix of support from UGA and the green fee appropriate to achieve the goals and for long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the OoS?
Summary of Self-study

The self-study for this review includes the following “Vision” of the Office of Sustainability:

Pursue a model for healthy living on campus and beyond. Develop a sustainable university that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Create opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to enhance the quality of life in their communities, both physical and scholarly. Establish a campus that functions as a living laboratory where sustainability principles are researched, taught, practiced, and continually refined.

Though such a vision is meant to be lofty and challenging, the Office of Sustainability has made significant progress toward the goals embodied in this vision in the brief period it has been in existence. The self-study outlines the key areas of progress achieved in each of the five aspects of university life (teaching, research, service and outreach, student engagement, and campus operations) as it works to meet the targets of Strategic Direction VII of the University's 2020 Strategic Plan.

The study is organized by the five aspects of university life listed above and notes both accomplishments and challenges for each. Under “Academic Initiatives,” the study highlights the work of the Committee for the Integration of Sustainability Across the Curriculum, established in 2011. Highlights include establishing a process for measuring the increase in the integration of sustainability across the curriculum, hosting breakfasts and workshops to facilitate interdisciplinary faculty engagement, creating resources and programs to assist faculty in integrating sustainability in courses (notably, a faculty development workshop that has included 54 faculty participants). For challenges, the study notes “unexpected barriers” in the creation of a certificate program, particularly in regard to the certificate's “ownership.”

The Office of Sustainability “strives to promote and support interdisciplinary sustainability research” in conjunction with a variety of partnerships. Key accomplishments include the creation of the SEC Student Ambassadors and Scholars program and participation in the UGA Sustainability Science Symposium hosted by the Center for Integrative Conservation Research, as well as the Campus Watershed Advisory Committee. As its greatest challenge relating to research initiatives, the study notes limited resources to identify and track the wide array of sustainability related research being conducted by over 660 faculty researchers on campus.

Key achievements listed under Service and Outreach are accomplishments in “branding” the Office of Sustainability, the significant level of service learning supported by OoS in collaboration with the Office of Service Learning, the numerous events hosted or supported by the office aimed at educating and inspiring UGA and Athens-Clarke County, and the crafting of sustainability reports, namely the Sustainability, Tracking, Assessment, & Rating System (STARS). Once again, the size of campus and the array of projects are noted as a challenge for tracking, reporting, and communicating effectively with limited staff.

Students have always been central to the work of the OoS and student engagement remains a strong suit. Accomplishments include a large and varied internship program, campus
sustainability grants, and ongoing partnerships with various student organizations. Maintaining effective communication and gathering feedback remains a “perennial challenge.”

Finally, campus operations continues to be a strong area in the work of the office, though there is always much to be done. The office has partnered with operations on campus to promote and track improvements in energy use, water consumption, water quality and watershed planning, waste, and transportation issues, and good progress has been made toward the goals of the Strategic Plan. The study notes as a key challenge “limited staff time to identify specific opportunities, barriers, and feasible solutions.”

In sum, the self study offers a remarkable array of accomplishments that the Office of Sustainability has achieved in its first five years, while it seeks to outline possibilities for improvements in all it undertakes. Several areas point to the challenges faced by the office's small staff as it attempts to coordinate sustainability on a large and incredibly varied campus.

Summary of Interviews

The review committee sought to interview individuals who could share a diverse set of experiences with the Office of Sustainability, commensurate with the office’s diverse mission and responsibilities. To that end, interviewees represent the following university groups: student, professor, dean, research, student affairs, outreach, and finance and administration. All eight individuals interviewed have played roles in advancing or supporting sustainability initiatives on campus within the past five years.

All interviewees were asked to rank the Office of Sustainability, with 0=no impact/no success and 5=100% successful, across nine general areas drawn from the review team’s evaluation charge:

- Coordinate existing programs and establish new or more comprehensive ones as appropriate to reduce the University’s impact on the environment
- Increase the amount of renewable energy on campus, increasing energy efficiency, and reducing the amount of waste generated on campus
- Support student internships in the Office, student research/service grants, and environmental education initiatives
- Streamline sustainability efforts and coordinate such efforts across departmental boundaries
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The office’s strengths were most evident to interviewees in its ability to support student internships, student research/service grants, and environmental education as well as integrating students, faculty and staff into sustainability efforts. The office averaged lowest ratings in its
ability to expedite the completion of projects and initiatives as well as to coalesce operational and academic efforts, though these categories still averaged ratings just below and above 3.

Several themes emerged from more in-depth discussions. Every interviewee consistently had high praise for OoS staff, lauded for having accomplished a tremendous amount of work for the 5-year time period in light of resource and other constraints. The practical, patient, ally-building approach of the office and of Kevin Kirsche was repeatedly cited and credited with the office’s successes.

The location of the office, physically and organizationally, was another common topic, with most interviewees noting the advantages for operational gains in sustainability and the challenges to progress on the academic and research front. Specific concerns were the lack of a high profile sustainability champion whose senior position could bring sustainability leadership across the three tiers of instruction, research, and outreach. Similarly, some noted the student-based green fee funding for the office could have the effect of limiting the sustainability focus of many efforts to the shorter-term goals and initiatives often associated with students’ horizon lines. There was mixed feedback on the office’s physical location, with some citing the need for a central, student accessible OoS home and others who viewed location as less key to visibility than more robust outreach materials.

Lastly, OoS was repeatedly praised for its campus engagement activities, particularly its internships and events. With greater resources and a higher profile, OoS should continue to build these positive engagement opportunities. Using semester sustainability celebrations as “Town-Gown” educational events, providing more support for interns, and pursuing a full-time sustainability grant writer were three suggestions all focused on building this strength and the capacity of OoS.

**Key Themes of the Review**

- In the five years since the inception of the office, sustainability on UGA’s campus has markedly improved. Kevin Kirsche and the entire office staff, especially considering limited budget and resources deserve considerable praise for both the quality of the work completed and the personal and professional leadership offered. Beyond the quality of the staff, key to the office’s success is its engagement with students, especially in regards to the internship program, sustainability grant program, and its willingness to interact and counsel student organizations.

- While the placement in FMD makes operational sense, the Office needs to have a greater presence in academics in order to bolster education, research, and public service and outreach. Though the review process did not uncover a consensus on how this might be achieved, more leadership from the upper administration seems essential.

- The physical placement in the Chicopee Complex is a challenge as well because it lacks physical visibility that would be beneficial to improving student awareness and interest in sustainability. Their distance from the academic side of campus has brought about a
perception that the office is a “behind-the-scenes support office.” The Office needs to have a greater presence on campus, in particular with students.

- With greater funding, more and varied opportunities to improve the direction of the Office and sustainability at UGA would be available, e.g., increased staffing to strengthen and expand the office’s presence, increased funding for paid internships and student grant programs, et cetera.

- Improving communication and networking across campus, particularly a more concerted effort to improve marketing and messaging about the successes of the office, will create greater synergy and may promote greater collaborations to improve sustainability.

Recommendations

The Green Fee and Office of Sustainability are valuable assets to UGA. To optimally advance the green fee initiative and Strategic Directive VII particularly in regards to instruction and research, the committee sees significant advantages in direct or indirect connections to a high level academic position in the University.

As a corollary to the above, the committee recommends a reevaluation of the office’s focus to encourage a greater depth of energy and investment in instruction and research. An enhanced focus on instruction and research can also impact campus operations as the “living laboratory” described in the office’s vision continues to develop.

Though the physical placement in the Chicopee Building has a number of advantages for the office, a higher level of campus awareness could be achieved by having some presence more centrally located.

The celebrations of the work of the office, particularly the Semester in Review, are wonderful examples of the office’s efforts in sharing the good work of sustainability with the campus and community. Efforts should be made to expand the breadth and reach of such celebratory programs to the campus and community.

The office should continue to develop liaisons (local sustainability champions) across campus to encourage sustainability efforts in all units. This may be accomplished through a clearly defined coordinating body or committee structure designed to encourage both strategic support and committed action.

The office should extend the work it is doing with satellite campuses to expand the awareness of sustainability across the state as well as the impacts on improved research and operations.
The office should continue to engage students to develop and pilot operational initiatives, and greater emphasis should be placed on garnering senior level support to institutionalize effective programs and maximize campus-wide positive impacts.

At the five year mark in the Office of Sustainability’s life, the director should review and refine the initiatives it supports, as well as the roles of staff supporting them.

Question 5 in the charge asks if “the mix of support from UGA and the green fee is appropriate to achieve the goals and for long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the OoS?” The review committee strongly believes UGA should be placing more resources into this initiative to supplement the student green fee to sustain the office and to advance UGA sustainability in general.

UGA has been supportive of sustainability initiatives, both through direct FMD support in supplying approximately \( \frac{2}{3} \) of the office’s operating budget as well as through capital projects and operating budgets that incorporate sustainability into policies, practices, and procedures. This support should continue and be enhanced with heightened priority on institutionalizing sustainability efforts and “establishing a leadership position in sustainability as a major theme for research, education and service” as called for in the 2020 Strategic Plan.

The committee recommends sharing the Office of Sustainability Review Team Report with the Office of the Provost.