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The Impact of Academic Faculty on Campus Sustainability Initiatives

Aurali Dade

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Introduction

The 4,000+ Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) in the United States train future professionals and have a great deal of influence on the environment and communities in which they reside (Lewis & Hearn, 2003). IHEs historically appear to be slower to adopt sustainability than other types of institutions (Stinberg, 2002). Academic faculty members at IHEs may have a major influence on adoption of campus sustainability initiatives. They have frequent interactions with students, have a major role in the shared governance of IHEs, and make decisions for laboratories, one of the most energy intensive locations on any campus.

Previous literature has focused on case studies and surveys of individual institutions. This study fills a gap in the literature through the use of a multi-institutional evaluation of attitudes about and involvement in sustainability by faculty with laboratories. It also evaluates the sources of information used by faculty with laboratories and the level of commitment of their department and IHE.

Methods

The method used in this study was a pilot survey (to ensure reliability) followed by a proportionate stratified random sampling of the entire population of accredited IHEs in the United States. The strata were the six regional accreditation agencies; this ensured a representation from all parts of the country.

Once an IHE was selected, a Bing® advanced search was utilized to identify Deans/Chairs of science colleges/departments as well as directors of operational units. Six hundred Deans/Chairs were e-mailed a request to forward to their faculty for inclusion in the survey. Survey responses were collected on SurveyMonkey™ and fell into a database for further analysis.

Results

A total of 158 individuals from 111 different IHEs self-identified as faculty with responsibility for laboratories responded to the survey request. The majority of respondents were tenure track faculty with thirteen percent of respondents from non-tenure track positions and twenty-two percent of respondents at the Dean level.

Faculty respondents were asked a series of questions related to campus sustainability. These questions included how they define sustainability, the importance of campus sustainability, their prioritization and involvement in campus sustainability, sources of information for sustainability decision making, and the level of commitment and involvement of their department and IHE in campus sustainability.

The majority of faculty were able to define sustainability in a manner consistent with the study definition and felt that campus sustainability initiatives are important and beneficial.

Faculty respondents on average reported a minor role in campus sustainability activities. Only a few faculty rated campus sustainability as much more important than other work priorities, the majority rated sustainability as equal to or less important than other work priorities.

Faculty respondents were compared with respondents who were directors from operational units at IHEs (facilities, purchasing, and environmental health and safety). Faculty respondents, as compared to director respondents, rated department and campus involvement in sustainability as lower even though all groups of respondents were drawn from the same IHEs.

Conclusions

Faculty were able to define sustainability and thought that campus sustainability is beneficial and important. They did not believe that sustainability is a core responsibility, ranked it equal to or less important than other work priorities, and did not participate in many of the campus sustainability activities or decisions. The majority of faculty did not believe that sustainability was a priority to their department or their IHE.

Faculty respondents were typically the least positive about and least involved with campus sustainability when compared with all survey respondents. Thirty percent of faculty respondents indicated that they never participate in decision making about campus sustainability and nearly as many never attend meetings where campus sustainability is discussed. Also, although all respondents were drawn from the same pool of IHEs, faculty had a significantly lower opinion than operational directors about how their IHE prioritized sustainability.

One interesting trend was that faculty felt that they had more expertise and were more likely to rely on faculty for information about sustainability than any other group. Director respondents rated faculty involvement low and were extremely unlikely to rely on faculty for information about sustainability. These results indicate a lack of communication and/or trust between the academic and operational departments at the respondents’ IHEs. Although many of these IHEs have science, engineering, business, and other academic departments that would conceivably have a high level of expertise about sustainability, this resource is clearly not being relied upon for typical operational respondents.

Based on this research, it is recommended that sustainability coordinators carefully define what the meaning by sustainability, involve all stakeholders with expertise without making arbitrary divisions, and publicize their successes to all parts of campus.

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For further information

Please contact aurali.dade@unlv.edu. Visit the UNLV School of Environmental and Public Affairs: http://urbanaffairs.unlv.edu/ and UNLV urban sustainability initiative: http://urban21.unlv.edu/ for further information about sustainability research at UNLV.

Literature cited


Figure 1. Example of College of Sciences Website and Dean contact information from Bing® advanced search

Figure 2. Type of faculty respondents. Total n=158 from 111 different IHEs.

Figure 3. Example of survey question measuring faculty reactions to campus sustainability initiatives.

Figure 4. Example of survey question measuring faculty prioritization of campus sustainability. The majority of faculty rated campus sustainability as equal to or less important than other work priorities.

Figure 5. My college/university includes campus sustainability in the mission statement. Faculty respondents compared to respondents who are directors of operational units.

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