The Sustainable City Year Program: An Adaptable Model for Large Scale, University Engagement and Impact

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Key Questions:

How can we enhance long-term capacity to produce sustainable solutions, livable communities + resilient institutions?

How can we foster innovation in community engagement and cross-disciplinary collaboration in universities?
Resilient Communities Project

Connects U of MN, cities + community partners to advance sustainability and resilience through course-based projects

One-year partnership—RCP as matchmaker

Initial support from Institute on the Environment + Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA)

Initiated by Sustainability Faculty Network
How Does It Work?

Formal request for proposals
  Cities apply, define 15–30 projects, identify community stakeholders and resources

Community workshop to outline issues, assets, and needs

RCP identifies potential course matches

Scoping meetings with faculty, project lead, community partners
  → Formal scopes-of-work

Students complete projects

Final presentations + work products delivered to community
2013–2014 Partner:
City of North St. Paul
North St. Paul Projects

- Live/work housing
- Living streets and capital improvements
- Green energy initiative
- Neighborhood identities
- Public art
- Community identity and branding
- Downtown revitalization strategies
- Civic engagement and communication
- Environmental education
- Redevelopment-ready community
- Master redevelopment plan
- Silver Lake trail connection
- Community gardens and local food
- Staff development and retention
- Development of underutilized parcels
- Housing Conservation and Aging in place
- Energy conservation initiative
- Emerald Ash Borer Management Plan
- Bulk Waste Pick-Up Program Evaluation
- Documenting the RCP-North St. Paul Partnership
- Fiber optic network development

U of MN Departments

- Housing Studies
- Landscape Architecture
- Communication Studies
- Sociology
- Liberal Studies
- Graphic Design
- Gerontology
- Journalism
- Architecture
- Urban and Regional Planning
- Civil Engineering
- Law School
- Bioproducts and Biosystems Engineering
- Public Policy
- Environmental Education (UMD)
- Org Leadership, Policy and Development
- Environmental Science, Policy and Mgt
- Forestry
- Agronomy
- Social Work
- Recreation Resources Management
Environmental Education

**City Goal:** Capitalize on North St. Paul’s many unique natural features by creating opportunities for residents to learn about the local ecosystem and encouraging residents to reengage with their natural environment.
Environmental Education

**M.S. Thesis in ESPM** – use qualitative approaches to determine how residents understand, experience, and use parks and natural areas in the community

**DES 3131: User Experience in Design** – evaluate the user experience of Southwood Nature Preserve to inform an environmental education interpretation strategy for the park

**LS 5100: Re-Imagining the Arts for Public Parks** – explore opportunities for the arts to reconnect residents with the community’s natural heritage

**EnEd 5325: Environmental Issues Investigation** – design an education curriculum around Southwood Park for local schools
What Is Different?

Multiple projects over a sustained period

Efficient access to full range of U of MN resources

Centralized management and coordination of projects

RCP staff experience with community engagement + content knowledge in sustainability
Key Questions

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Enhancing Capacity

Communities
- Fostering internal/external collaboration
- Coproducing knowledge about sustainable solutions
- Creating impacts and relationships beyond the partner city

Universities
- Building experience in community-based work for students + faculty
- Training the next generation of sustainability practitioners
Fostering innovation: *engagement*

Facilitating sustained community engagement

Community-driven, not just “one-off”

Engaging public, private, and nonprofit community partners

Building long-term community–university relationships

Driven by broader goals of sustainability + resilience

More than engagement for the benefit of students + faculty, bigger than local projects
Fostering innovation:  
*cross-disciplinary collaboration*

Sustainability + resilience require cross-disciplinary solutions

Significant barriers in universities

  Tuition models, college focus, promotion + tenure

Calls for strategic investments that respond to critical challenges
Prospects and Challenges

Tremendous need + excitement among communities

Growing interest among faculty and administrators

Flexible, adaptable, scalable model

Emerging national network of programs – resource sharing, capacity building, project database, funding
Prospects and Challenges

Deepening public engagement approach – more *integrated*, more *collaborative*, more *advocacy-oriented*

Broadening sustainability focus – more *integrated*, more *real world*, more than just *environment*

Funding model – exploring *internal* + *external* sources

Capturing/documenting program impacts
Thank you!

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