

**Project Title:** Social Sustainability: An Engaged Approach

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**Abstract:** Utilizing SOC381 'Social Dimensions of Sustainability' as a case study, this project proposes to develop teaching strategies and learning outcome assessments from an innovative course that requires experiential learning, in the form of civic engagement. This project centers on a 'Social Dimensions of Sustainability' course premised on the interconnectedness of social justice, the environment, and the economy. Since learning takes place beyond, as well as within the classroom, it is important for all students to effectively experience such learning opportunities. Civic engagement is a method for increasing the meaning and relevance of classroom-based activities for students. It can also build a sense of citizenship and increase their involvement in the community. Yet, such efforts have been slower to develop for online students. **The goal** of this project is to assess civic engagement learning for both on campus and online students taking the same course. The project will identify opportunities and challenges to incorporating civic engagement as a pedagogical tool to advance students' deeper understanding of the complex pillar of social sustainability.

**Teaching/Learning Problem and Question:**

Sustainability issues are dominant themes across campus and throughout nearby communities, including the relatively new OSU Sustainability Double Degree offered online and on campus. Increasingly, more colleges and universities, including OSU, are offering courses, concentrations, and certificate and degree programs in sustainability, often combined with larger institutional sustainability goals (e.g., <http://fa.oregonstate.edu/sustainability>). While much is written about ecological and economic sustainability, there is less research on social sustainability, as part of the 'three pillars of sustainability' (O'Flaherty and Liddy, 2017; Shephard, 2008). Similarly, pedagogical advancements in teaching related to sustainability have occurred within the realms of ecological/environmental and economic sustainability, while social sustainability education has lagged behind (Boyle, 2004; Cotton et al., 2007; Segalas et al., 2010; Sibbel, 2009). Yet, sustainability concerns are not just ecological; rather they involve social, cultural and economic dimensions.

In addition to the need for more education on social sustainability, experiential learning and civic engagement have emerged as important pedagogical goals (Torney-Purta et al. 2015; Wals, 2002). Civic engagement is a method for increasing the meaning and relevance of classroom-based activities, can build a sense of citizenship, and increase student involvement in the community. OSU supports this 'approach through the Center for Civic Engagement (<http://sli.oregonstate.edu/cce/about>) which "promotes a campus culture that inspires community engagement, civic leadership, and social responsibility, the CCE aspires for all OSU student and alumni to be empowered to serve as catalysts for creating more equitable, healthy, and sustainable communities."

**Addressing the Problem and Question:**

The Social Dimensions of Sustainability course was designed to address these two pedagogical needs: more education regarding social sustainability and increasing opportunities for experiential learning, in the form of civic engagement. Experiential learning encompasses two traditional types of activities: service learning and civic engagement. In general, service learning is a prelogical approach that involves 'learning by doing' where students participate in organizational or project activities through internships or volunteer experiences, as a means to learning about an organization and giving back to the

community. Civic engagement may involve service learning; however, the focus is primarily on connecting with community partners (local government or non-profits) to assist in creating a meaningful experience that is mutually beneficial. The collaborators work to find “a sustainable way to address their need and the experience serves as a common ground for students to enhance their scholarship, raise questions and explore alternative solutions with new social consciousness, not only in the classroom but as they move into the world as professionals.” (National Louis University). Civic Engagement can include service learning, but expands its reach to include several other factors related to ongoing connection and interaction, and supporting communities.

This project proposes to develop teaching strategies and learning outcome assessments from both campus-based and online learning environments. The campus based students are *required* to participate in civic engagement during the term (described in more detail below). However, such a requirement is more challenging when working with online students located throughout the world, and has thus far been an *optional* component to the online course. An untapped research component of our work to date is to formally assess the perceptions and usefulness of the civic engagement course requirement for students.

Research Question: To address the project goals, there is one primary research question to this pilot study: what pedagogical strategies can be developed by comparing on campus (hybrid) and online civic engagement in the same course?

The Course: The Social Dimensions of Sustainability (SOC381) course is an upper-level elective that is open to all undergraduate students. It enrolls primarily Sociology majors and is now a required course option for students seeking the Sustainability Double Degree. To date, SOC381 has been offered on campus three times and online four times at OSU, with average enrollment of 22 students. In this course we explore “the social forces driving current views of sustainability. Specific attention will be given to values and belief systems, as well as social institutions in shaping sustainability issues related to ecologically sound, socially just, and economically viable outcomes” (Catalogue description).

The cornerstone of the course is the civic engagement project that students complete either individually or in small groups (2-3). With assistance from OSU’s Center for Civic Engagement and Learning, best practices for civic engagement as a pedagogical tool have been incorporated, as well as local partner organizations identified. The assignment instructions include: “*The goal of the civic engagement component of this course is to support a learning-by-doing environment. Students are required to participate for a minimum of 10 hours of civic engagement during the term. This will involve volunteering and/or interviewing with a local or campus organization*” (course syllabus). Supplemented by course material, students work with local (on campus students) and web-based (online students) organizations to identify indicators of social sustainability, perform preliminary social sustainability assessments, and present results back to the organization, as well as a formal presentation in class.

For students who have completed the civic engagement project, they leave the course with a deepened understanding of social sustainability issues. The student evaluations for the hybrid campus course have been very positive, with students giving the civic engagement component of the course high praise. Examples from on campus students:

*“Going in to this course I think a part of me was dreading the civic engagement portion. I initially looked at it as just one more thing I had to do this term, with an extra requirement dedicated hours. However once I started volunteering with my organization I began to see what this project*

*was all about, and then in turn began to enjoy it. Through the process of volunteering I was able to observe some of the practices we had spoken about in class, and it put it all in perspective for me. Looking back now at the end of the term, the civic engagement project was my favorite portion of the class.” [On campus student, Business major, Winter 2015]*

*“I have to say so it was hard at first but the Civic Engagement project really pushed me out of my comfort zone and allowed me to get involved in something I would have never done by myself. I believe this class and the Civic Engagement project taught me to think more critically about things and to reach deeper than the surface of a topic, like I might have done with another course.” [On campus student, Sociology major, Winter 2015]*

*“I would say that my most significant take-away was learning what social sustainability indicators were and how to operationalize them. The increased awareness of what is actually occurring within social relationships and whether or not those practices or trends are sustainable will definitely help inform my decision-making process as a future engineer, an employee, and a citizen.” [On campus student, Engineering major, Winter 2015]*

*“Of the many ways we explored the idea of sustainability, it was through our volunteer experience in particular that I was able to fully appreciate the implications of the concept. My interactions with residents of Community Outreach revealed a great deal about the sustainability of our local markets and economy. In speaking with directors and support staff, I was able to identify mechanisms of sustainability that bound the people of the organization together. In observing the operations of Community Outreach from the conceptual framework of sustainability, I was able to see a complex network of ties connecting people, material resources, social forces and paradigms, and other important aspects. I look forward to exploring these ties as I continue to volunteer with the organization.” [On campus student, Sociology major, Winter 2015]*

*“I have always been interested in teamwork and working for the human resource department for a company or potentially working to find people jobs they are well-suited for. This class helped me look at organizations on a different level and in a different way than I did before, and it really helped me personally in the sense of being aware of a company’s practices and seeing if their values and operations reflect what I believe is important in a company too.” [On campus student, Business major, Winter 2015]*

For the online course, the assignment was modified to examine social sustainability of an organization, only students were not required to personally engage with the organization, rather they needed to do a content analysis of their website and any related articles regarding their social sustainability practices. Part of this proposal is to develop meaningful ways to enhance civic engagement for online learners. Dr. Jacobs has added this component as an elective option for this fall term and is already receiving positive feedback:

*“Attached is my signed agreement form for the civic engagement project! The meeting I had with Marion-Polk Food Share today went very well. I am thankful for this assignment because I have been wanting to volunteer there for awhile and to learn more about what they do, but it wasn't a priority between school and work. So here is my opportunity to make it a priority!” [Online student, Fall 2017]*

Project Methods:

**The Goal** for this project will be to identify opportunities and challenges to incorporating civic engagement as a pedagogical tool to advance students' deeper understanding of the complex pillar of social sustainability, especially for online students. To address this goal, we propose to utilize information from previous sections of SOC381 and future course offerings (winter, spring, fall 2018). The information from previous course sections will consist of secondary evidence (non-IRB related data, such as number of students enrolled and number of community organizations participated).

New data collection efforts, which will incorporate student data/perceptions, will not be collected until approved by IRB, and will include: a) a formal analysis of traditional learning outcomes for the course (ESets); b) focus group participation; and c) follow up survey.

ESets: In addition to existing ESet items, items specific to the civic engagement component of the course will be added (in consultation with IRB). These items will be consistent in both the campus and online courses to allow for both internal (within course) and between course comparisons.

Focus Groups: During each term students will participate in a focus group discussion regarding their civic engagement progress and experiences. These will take place during weeks four and eight of the term. For the Ecampus section, online discussion formats will be used to garner input.

Post Course Survey: Students in both the campus and online courses will be asked to participate in a follow-up survey approximately four weeks after the term. This will allow students to reflect on the civic engagement experience. Working with IRB, permission will be obtained prior to students leaving for the term, and after their grades have been turned in. The survey will be developed using the Qualtrics platform. Questions will center on overall experience, usefulness of the civic engagement approach to their overall learning of subject matter of social dimensions of sustainability; relevance of skills learned, and to identify aspects of the learning experience that worked well and opportunities for improvement.

**Project Outcomes:** Outcomes of this project will yield an additional tool for assessment of the learning outcomes for civic engagement projects related to social sustainability in a course that can be offered as either a campus (hybrid) or online delivery format. The assessment tool will allow for **ongoing** assessment and can be adaptable to other courses seeking similar civic engagement opportunities.

**Alignment with OSU's Strategic Plan:** By working with local organizations, this proposal is consistent with OSU's research goals of contributing to relevant research addressing solutions to the pressing needs of local and global communities, integrating transdisciplinary research that is basic and applied, and involving collaborative research with local communities. The topic of sustainability fits well with all of OSU's goals. This project directly addresses the strategic goal to "Provide a transformative educational experience for all learners." Results will improve offering civic engagement opportunities to online students.

**Expected future funding sources:** We anticipate submitting a grant proposal to the Spencer Foundation, whose mission: "is intended, by Spencer's direction, to investigate ways in which education, broadly conceived, can be improved around the world. From the first, the Foundation has been dedicated to the belief that research is necessary to the improvement in education. The Foundation is thus committed to supporting high-quality investigation of education through its research programs and to strengthening

and renewing the educational research community through its fellowship and training programs and related activities.” <https://www.spencer.org/mission>.

**Evaluation of Project Goals:** The project will identify opportunities and challenges to incorporating civic engagement as a pedagogical tool to advance students’ deeper understanding of the complex pillar of social sustainability. Evaluation will include assessment of student learning outcomes immediately following the course, and with a four-week follow-up survey. Data will be synthesized and themes analyzed, and recommendations for improvement identified.

**Sharing the Outcomes (Deliverables):**

There are three primary means we will use to share the outcomes of the research with the OSU community and external audiences: conference papers, journal articles, expanded funding opportunities.

*Conference Papers:* In January 2016, the Twelfth International Conference on Environmental, Cultural, Economic, & Social Sustainability convened in Portland, Oregon. We presented our comparative ideas to this international conference and it was well received. While the cost of this international conference prevented us from attending the 2017 meetings and the 2018 meetings in Australia, our enthusiasm to participate in such an international forum has only increased since our earlier participation. We anticipate networking with international pedagogical experts in the teaching sessions. We seek to participate in this conference in January 2019, which will be held in Vancouver, Canada.

In addition to professional conferences, we will propose to present our work at OSU Ecampus forums, such as the Ecampus Faculty Forum, which Dr. Cramer has previously participated and presented.

*Journal Manuscript:* This Sustainability Research Network organization publishes several journals, including The International Journal of Environmental Sustainability and The International Journal of Sustainability Education. Presenters at the conference are encouraged to develop manuscripts for publication to either one of these journals, and we anticipate submitting a paper to the latter. An alternative outlet will be the Journal of Education for Sustainable Development.

*Grant Application:* We anticipate submitting a grant proposal to the Spencer Foundation. This organization’s small research grant “program is intended to support education research projects... this program aims to fund academic work that will contribute to the improvement of education, broadly conceived. Historically, the work we have funded through these grants has spanned, a range of topics and disciplines, including education, psychology, sociology, economics, history, and anthropology, and they employ a wide range of research methods.” (<https://www.spencer.org/small-research-grants-program-statement>). This foundation has recently funded educational projects with environment/sustainability themes.

**Timeline:**

January 2018-March 2018 – IRB Approval, data collection with campus-based learners and organizations

March 2018-June 2018 – data collection with online learners and organizations, and follow-up survey with campus-based learners

June 2018 – September 2018 – IRB approval for undergraduate students, begin data analysis, submit abstracts for conferences

September 2018 – December 2018 – data collection with online learners and organizations, prepare presentation for conferences

January 2019 – present initial results at international conference

February 2019 – April, 2019 – finalize results, submit manuscript for publication, provide white paper for Ecampus Research Unit

May 2019 – July 2019 – submit grant proposal to Spencer Foundation, present research at spring Ecampus Faculty forum

### **Literature Cited**

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