

Overview of the South Metropolitan Higher Education Consortium's Sustainability Summits

Founded in 1992, the South Metropolitan Higher Education Consortium (SMHEC) fosters new and enhanced educational services and programs to citizens, businesses and other institutions in the Chicago metropolitan southland region. Through institutional collaboration, the Consortium focuses on programs that promote college readiness, support college completion, enhance educational opportunities and identify economies and efficiencies that result in streamlining and cost savings.

SMHEC is a unique partnership of 11 higher education institutions; diverse in types and missions, extending geographically from the south side of Chicago, west to beyond Joliet, south of Kankakee, and east to the Indiana border.

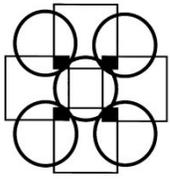
Led by a Council of Presidents, in 2009, SMHEC was charged with the creation of a sustainability committee to spearhead consortia and institutional efforts to develop highly sustainable campuses and produce educational programming for students, faculty and staff.

Since its inception, the committee has come together to share best practices and resources; collectively pledged to achieve the goals within the Governors Sustainable Universities and Colleges Compact II with great success; execute a joint electricity contract, resulting in significant savings for the participating institutions; host a variety of events for students, faculty and the community; and most recently is collaborating on a joint solar effort.

As a result of the great work happening on the campuses of SMHEC institutions, in September of 2012, the sustainability committee hosted its inaugural Student Sustainability Summit at Governors State University. Since then, an additional six summits have been hosted at SMHEC institutions, including, Joliet Junior College, Moraine Valley Community College, Prairie State College, South Suburban College, and University of St. Francis. While the format, the student attendees and location have all changed, the one thing that remains constant is our goal to **empower students to become leaders through sustainable change.**

The first student summit was planned by the SMHEC sustainability committee which consisted of both faculty and staff at SMHEC institutions. Elena Maans, Sustainability Coordinator at Dominican University, was the conference's keynote speaker where she discussed her transition from a student interested in sustainability to the first sustainability coordinator at Dominican and how she created that position.

A panel of student leaders including from Governors State University, Joliet Junior College, South Suburban College and the University of St. Francis discussed how they started sustainability efforts on their campuses and had suggestions for how attendees could do the same at their institutions.



The breakout sessions were led by students and covered topics such as: green lifestyles, using campus lands to promote and maintain biodiversity, sustainable tourism and food, appreciating nature, and student leadership on campus. And, in the final session of the day, students from the Moraine Valley Community College Intensive English Language Program presented sustainability initiatives from around the globe in an interactive museum-style workshop.

The first student summit reached more than 75 students, was a zero-waste event with a sustainable, locally-sourced, organic lunch and set the bar for the next six summits to come.

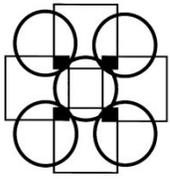
Following the conference, the sustainability committee pulled together a select group of students to serve as the planning committee for the next year's summit hosted at Prairie State College. The summit featured, Chad Pregracke, a Heartland Community College graduate and founder of Living Lands and Waters as the keynote speaker. Chad motivated the audience with his story: a young clammer who lived and worked on the Mississippi River in the Quad Cities area. When he saw how full of debris and garbage the river had become, he established a 70,000 volunteer strong non-profit to clean up American rivers. His story of overcoming lack of resources and bias toward his age with a fervent passion for his cause resonated with the audience.

Once again, the summit highlighted student work through a variety of breakout sessions where topics addressed: general sustainability, GIS for sustainable recreational planning, prairie preservation, the food system and GMOs, and the EPA's Campus Rainworks Challenge.

During the lunch hour, students for a second year in a row from the Moraine Valley Community College Intensive English Language Program presented sustainability initiatives from around the globe in an interactive museum-style workshop. Students again participated in a zero-waste lunch and feasted on a sustainable menu of gluten-free, organic, and locally-grown items.

With over 110 attendees, the second student summit was a rave success and the SMHEC sustainability committee was asked to make this an annual event.

The third annual summit, "I Am Sustainable Because" was hosted at Moraine Valley Community College and underwent its first format makeover to provide students with an opportunity to continue their learning in sustainability. During this summit, in a photo booth style session, students were asked to tell all why they believe they're sustainable by filling in the blank "I Am Sustainable Because..." Examples of why students believe they're sustainable included: "we don't believe in destroying the earth," "I recycle plastic," "It's the right thing to do," "I want a future where we have wildlife," "I care about future children," "green is my favorite color," and "it's my only option."



The morning session featured a presentation on the environmental, economic and social aspects of our food system followed by breakout sessions designed to help students digest what they heard. During and after the lunch hour, college round table discussions, led by each institution's sustainability professional, occurred to help students learn how to advance sustainability on their campuses.

Following lunch, Dr. Eban Goodstein, Director of the Bard Center for Environmental Policy, keynote speaker, addressed the audience.

This summit reached over 140 students and once again featured food specifically chosen to reduce environmental impact.

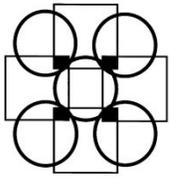
In 2015, the fourth student sustainability summit was hosted at Joliet Junior College and boasted the theme "What's Your Next Opportunity?" This summit featured keynote speaker, Steve Buchtel, Executive Director of Trails for Illinois, where his infectious energy resonated with the student audience inspiring them to operate with his same high level of integrity and enthusiasm.

This summit also featured SMHEC's first ever "Share-Fair," where local organizations were invited to host a table to share information on their organization as well as volunteer, intern and career opportunities for students. More than 75 students attended the summit at Joliet, in addition to more than 40 faculty, staff and members of the business community.

The summit focused on getting students "Career Ready," and providing them opportunities to network and get involved on their campuses. Once again, the students enjoyed a locally-sourced, organic lunch.

With five successful summits under our belt, and after reaching just under 400 students, the 6th student summit underwent another makeover. After much consideration, the sustainability committee made the decision to partner with the National Wildlife Federation's Ecoleader program and invite a select group of students to a smaller, two-part summit focused on leadership skills. The first part of the summit took place in the fall of 2016, where students were given leadership, project development and NWF EcoLeaders training. The second part was held in the spring of 2017 where students presented on their EcoLeader projects.

The seven summits that SMHEC has hosted have been a result of the hardwork and dedication of the SMHEC sustainability committee, our students and our sponsors. Through the daily work that SMHEC's sustainability committee does on their campus, they were able to identify a select student population that would benefit from sustainability and leadership training. It is this population that we reach out to annually, inviting them to attend our summits and then return to their campuses to employ sustainable change.



Two of the challenges the committee faced in planning and executing the student sustainability summits included working with and depending on student participants, and educating campus food service providers on purchasing local and organic foods and implementing zero-waste events.

Working with Student Participants

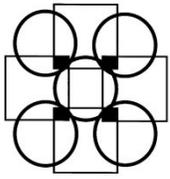
The challenge of working with student participants is - students are busy! Many feel overwhelmed at the thought of committing to one more extracurricular activity. Because the student summit has not been integrated into any type of course work at the SMHEC institutions, the students that participate in the summit and resulting projects are doing so in addition to a full class load, a job, and in some situations, a family to take care of.

It can be difficult for sustainability professionals to engage students when not working directly with a faculty member. Many times, sustainability professionals reach out to student groups/clubs, but again, this method engages those students involved in an extracurricular activity and sometimes students are not able to prioritize their participation at the summit.

Many times, we see extremely engaged students attend the first summit, but they quickly become overwhelmed by a family situation or academic challenge. With a focus on their classwork, many times their sustainability project is the item that has to fall of their “to-do” list.

The upside, however, is when we have a student that is engaged and committed, the resulting projects and changes made on campus are truly impressive. For example, a group of Moraine Valley Community College students organized their first annual Swap-A-Thon as their Ecoleader project. The results were astounding. Seven Go Green! Club members partnered with two other clubs and organizations to involve more than 15 student workers or volunteers who worked together on this project. They advertised and collected unwanted, but still usable, goods from the campus community. Things like school supplies, clothes, linens, media and other items were collected in boxes placed around the campus for a month. The students then retrieved the items from the boxes, organized and categorized them, and displayed them in a common area on campus for one day. The campus community was invited to come, peruse the items, take what they want and leave what they don't. Almost all of the items were taken. The rest were donated to local charities who provide goods and services free of charge to those in need. Go Green! Club students really wanted to embrace the three tenets of sustainability in their project. This effort diverted hundreds of pounds of material from the landfill (environment), helped people get things they could use for free (economic), and supported local charities in their work to help the less advantaged (equity). The project was so successful; the Club is doing it again this year.

A student from Kankakee Community College (KCC) wanted to collect bottle caps that would be recycled and turned into a bench that would be placed on campus. Her goal was to collect 400 pounds of plastic bottle caps to make one bench. After her outreach to the campus



community, she collected a total of 2,000 pounds resulting in KCC receiving three benches to place around campus. In addition to KCC benefiting from this project, at least two other colleges began a bottle cap collection as a result of this student's presentation.

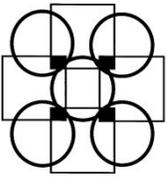
Working with Food Service Providers

The summits can be hosted at any SMHEC member institution and there is not one food service provider for all 11 institutions. *What this means* - we have to educate each one about the value and benefits of providing locally-sourced and organic foods. We have to educate them where and what to buy, and the difference between organic and non-GMO or vegan and vegetarian. For large scale food service providers such as Sodexo, this is an easy feat, however, with the smaller, family-owned food service providers this can be challenging. It takes time to prepare a seasonally appropriate, cost effective menu. The sustainability committee has provided vendor lists to various food service providers, but sometimes the provider wishes to stay loyal to their current vendor.

The Impact of the SMHEC Student Sustainability Summit

Since the first summit in 2012, SMHEC students have been making a positive impact on their campuses and in their communities.

- More than 400 students were exposed to new ideas and opportunities to create sustainable change, as well as having the ability to strengthen their leadership and presentation skills.
- At least four students were offered internships or full-time positions upon graduation as a direct result of attending one of the student sustainability summits.
- More than 20 students participated in the Ecoleaders program through the National Wildlife Federation's Ecoleader program.
- Three projects were replicated at four institutions as a result of learning from student peers. The projects included the building of a solar picnic table, the collection of bottle caps to make a bench and the conducting of water audits.
- Students made and donated four "plarn" mats for the homeless. The "plarn" mats were made out of 3,500 plastic bags that were collected, shredded and turned into a ball of "plarn."
- Moraine Valley Community College Go Green! Club students organized a campus and community wide event called Swap-A-Thon. For several weeks, the Club invited anyone from the campus or community at large to donate unwanted, but still viable items (clothes, linens, media, toys, etc.), in boxes around campus. Then, they sorted and organized the items on tables, in a common area on campus, and invited anyone to come and take what they thought they could use. Several hundreds of pounds of materials were diverted from the landfill. Leftover items were donated to local charities that would give the items to people in need (or animals- animal shelters). To embrace social equity in sustainability, the Club ensured any receiving charity would not sell the



- items and only redistribute the items for free- just as they had received them. Over 250 people participated in the event by donating items and taking items. It was so successful; the Club has adopted Swap-A-Thon as an annual event.
- Seven students from Joliet Junior College and University of St. Francis conducted campus water audits as a result of a presentation given by a student intern at Moraine Valley Community College.
- USF is now participating in a food recovery program with assistance from Northern Illinois Food Bank. To begin, Sodexo (USF's food provider) met with the students from the Enactus club on campus. That meeting was followed up by another one with Colin Mossup from Northern Illinois Food Bank, who was able to coordinate the weekly pickup with the local recipient: Daybreak Center Homeless Shelter in Joliet. Says Janine Hicks of the USF Sustainability Committee, "It's important to note that careful thought goes into our daily food production and we are only donating product that we cannot use at the university. If we all reduced food waste by 15% it would help cut hunger in half!"

After seven successful student summits, SMHEC students continue to ask for more. The sustainability committee plans to continuing offering this learning opportunity to students, annually.

Regulatory Compliance

The South Metropolitan Higher Education Consortium and its members are not subject to an environmental enforcement action or notice of violation from the U.S. EPA or Illinois EPA.