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## Why Universities Need Celebrating from The (City) Rooftops

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Commentators who seek a big fix for society tend to say education, like all those other old institutions, is broken. But education is also fixing itself and sometimes it's doing a fantastic job. **Last week I got talking to Nico Larco and Marc Schlossberg of the University of Oregon. Marc and Nico founded the Sustainable Cities Initiative there.**

Wait! Wait, you say, another University with a sustainable cities project. And I said the same. What's new? But Nico and Marc have created the Sustainable City Year, SCY, and it is truly different.

SCY focuses the resources and ingenuity of professors and students across 10 – 12 departments on one city for one year, with the aim of addressing and catalyzing change across all issues that impinge on sustainability.

There are two results we need to share and think about. First though the program, in brief.

The program, run last year in [Salem](#), Oregon, takes city change on at an unprecedented scale. In Salem 500 students from 28 courses participated in the year long project along with 20 professors from ten disciplines. All in, they donated a total of 80,000 hours to the city.

“There's nothing like it in the world,” Marc told me. “And it's a simple model. We began by asking what if we could ask professors with

existing courses to point those at a single city over a single year and address issues that are within the existing curriculum. And do this with a sustainability focus. It turns out that cities are desperate to move into a new sustainability and livability model. But they are schooled in an old model and they are busy. We on the other hand have students who are like an ideas' machine and are being trained in these areas – sustainability and livability.”

Cities might want to try the sustainability route but as Marc implies, it is difficult.

“Cities face obstacles,” says Nico. “Like, who are the stakeholders? Do they trust the city? Is there capacity for the city to move forward? Is the full realm of possibility understood?”

So the SCY folks help with these issues and develop very concrete plans for the lucky city that get's a bite at it – by the way cities from as far as China and New Zealand want to adopt the model. That means creating new space use plans, or figuring out how to introduce new environmental technologies, or how to adapt the transport system, or even how to design a better building. If it has sustainability, planning, architecture, landscaping, business, journalism, product design, civil engineering, law, economics or other relevant skill needs, SCY will help.

So to the first impact. Clearly this is replicable, across problem-sets beyond sustainability. You could take any challenge that cities face and build out a similar swarm of resources. Also, and this is vitally important, it tells us we do have the resources to effect major change quickly, and they are not even locked away. So no more complaining about the big reset. Let's just get on with it.

The second impact of the program though is on the students and the educational environment. Young people, I've said elsewhere, are extraordinarily capable. They see a set of problems in front of them, caused by financial chaos, poor resource allocation and poor decision making. Heck, they are the ones studying this stuff.

Two things prevent them impacting on society. One is we try to stop them and we do it through the weight of inertia that older cynical generations apply to the challenges of change. The second is we stall

their enthusiasm for the years they are studying, the period when they are high energy and fearless.

The University of Oregon seems to me to be liberating talent but more importantly empowering capability. The talent is astonishingly prescient about what needs to change and how it can be done. The capability actually lies within all of us – many, many of us who look out on the world right now and bemoan poor political decisions. We all need empowering at the level we can contribute.

We should be celebrating our Universities for doing that for young people, and handing younger people the keys a whole lot earlier. SCY is a model for how to do just that.