

OREGON PLANNERS' JOURNAL

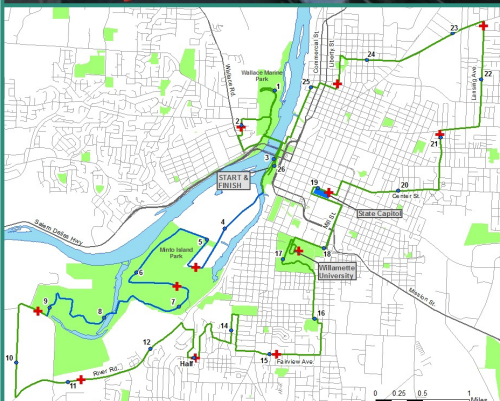
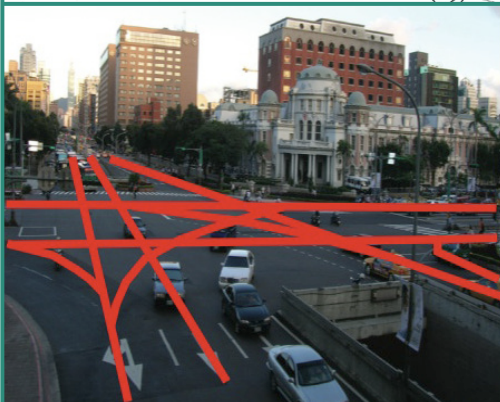


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Making Great Communities Happen

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The Sustainable City Year Program at the University of Oregon

500 students dedicate 80,000 hours of coursework to study planning and urban design issues in the City of Salem as part of the Sustainable City Year Program through the University of Oregon. [> Go to Story](#)

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Five new visions for Salem's waterfront.

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History, Humility, and Prudence

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The Sustainable City Year Program at the University of Oregon

BY CHRISTOPHER JONES, PROGRAM MANAGER, SUSTAINABLE CITIES INITIATIVE, UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

What would you do if you had 500 students in 10 different disciplines taking 28 courses and dedicating 80,000 hours of coursework to study problems in your city? The City of Salem found out last year, when it became the second city to experience the Sustainable City Year, a project spearheaded by the Sustainable Cities Initiative (SCI), a multi-disciplinary organization at the University of Oregon. SCI promotes sustainability through education, service, public outreach, and research on the design and development of sustainable cities. It is a startup organization that has been quickly expanding for the last 24-30 months, and has been recognized by the University of Oregon as one of its “Big Ideas” – a focal area for the institution.

Download the full reports

The two University of Oregon-authored articles on the following pages are condensed versions of reports that were submitted by each Sustainable City Year class to the City of Salem. Full reports for all of the classes are available from the Sustainable Cities Initiative web site. <http://sci.uoregon.edu/salem-reports>

SCI has created a program called the Sustainable City Year (SCY), in which students' academic work in more than 25 courses in ten disciplines is directed to the benefit of a single city over a full academic year, with a focus on city-identified sustainability-based projects.

SCY is a simple, yet radical re-conceptualization of the public research university as catalyst for helping communities move toward sustainability. On August 23, 2010, the New York Times published an in-depth article on SCY, calling the program “...perhaps the most comprehensive effort by a U.S. university to infuse sustainability into its curricula and community outreach.” SCY's innovative community outreach model helps cities transition to more sustainable city frameworks. The program is much more than technical assistance; it is direct engagement, knowledge transfer, and visioning.

Most cities and public agencies lack the capacity

– both in expertise and personnel – to meet the new demands of livability and sustainability. Communities often employ outdated problem framing and have a shortage of professionals with livability knowledge. As a result, the public is unable to envision what may be possible within their communities. SCY addresses this gap through a multi-disciplinary effort to assist partner cities with their sustainability and livability goals.

The SCY program is fulfilling the Sustainable Cities Initiative's mission to enhance the livability of cities and address the critical needs of climate change and human health. SCY's university-based approach is critical to advancing the range of conversations that cities can have with residents about promoting active, healthy, and sustainable communities.

SCY is a program that is both simple in concept and yet radical enough that we believe it warrants

replication in universities and communities across the country. In this model, existing faculty teach their existing courses in their existing ways, but direct student work to real projects in the partner city, with a focus on city-identified sustainability and livability projects.

Through the SCY program, students obtain a deep and broad education in sustainability by working with city staff, university faculty, local professionals, and community residents on sustainability and livability projects. Through this close collaboration, all partners gain a deeper awareness and knowledge about sustainability issues. City partners improve their ability to make informed environmental decisions and take responsible actions at a citywide scale. SCY creates opportunities for the broad application of the most current research on sustainability.

SCY City Partners: The First Three Years

The SCY program began in 2009 with a successful pilot partnership with the City of Gresham, Oregon. Based on the success and popularity of this partnership, SCI was able to recruit the City of Salem for the 2010-11 academic year through a competitive application process. The City of Salem was selected for this partnership because they demonstrated a commitment to the program at the highest levels of city staff and elected officials, and because of the broad array of sustainability projects they identified for student course work. In 2011-12, SCI is partnering with the City of Springfield for our third Sustainable City Year.

During 2010-11, the SCY partnership with the City of Salem, University of Oregon provided more than 80,000 hours of coursework by more than 500 students in 28 courses across 10 disciplines. Students worked on 15 sustainability and livability projects linked directly to Salem City Council goals.

The SCY program does not limit its scope to a single environmental issue. Instead, we focus on an integrated and multidisciplinary approach; the program is driven and defined by the needs of

each particular partner city. Disciplines involved in SCY have included architecture, landscape architecture, product design, interior architecture, planning and public policy, journalism, law, arts administration, civil engineering, and business.

Many SCY projects integrate course work and research across multiple disciplines. For example, this year in Salem, the city asked students to develop a plan to revitalize an area of the city adjacent to the downtown core. Students in a planning course analyzed zoning codes, economic development opportunities, and transportation routes. Students in an architecture studio developed multiple urban design options and designed potential buildings of various types that would contribute to the development of the area. Law students then followed up on the planning and architecture students' ideas, analyzing the city's municipal code and proposing revisions to regulations that would enhance water quality by encouraging on-site stormwater treatment.

Other projects have directly addressed the city's need to reduce energy use, increase bicycle and pedestrian transportation options, improve the availability and sustainability of affordable housing, and increase the city's engagement with its residents, especially underserved populations.

Benefits of the Sustainable City Year Program: For Cities

Universities have resources, and cities have needs. Early feedback indicates that our program is exceptionally effective at linking the two. SCI has won awards and received positive feedback from cities, students, and faculty. In an April address to the City Club of Salem, Linda Norris, Salem's City Manager, said this of the work by students in the SCY program: "It really has been successful – beyond my wildest dreams – I've been so pleased. I know we're going to be using this work for years and years to come... We're going to make as many of these projects happen as we possibly can."

One of the SCY program's main advantages for cities is expanding the conversation. Cities often end up "stuck" when trying to address civic,

social, economic, and environmental problems. SCY helps them get “unstuck” by expanding the conversation around these problems. SCY students take on city projects without preconceived notions about what is possible within the historical and political environment of a city. As a result, students present a wide array of ideas, often including ideas that would not be politically palatable if presented by city officials. Our partner cities benefit directly from bold ideas that propel fresh thinking in new directions, improve livability for residents, and invigorate city staff. The robust proposals offered by the students often spark community and staff discussions, broaden conversations around projects, and get “stuck” projects moving.

Universities are a hub of innovation, excitement, and creativity, and local communities are well-served by the SCY projects that initiate conversations and push local leaders to think about and employ sustainable practices. Linda Norris, Salem’s City Manager, said that “[SCY] really has helped energize city staff, helped us think of our issues in a new way, and it has helped us ... appreciate all of the natural amenities of Salem.”

SCY courses deliver content and models for best practice directly to city staff in the form of site analysis, research, design guidelines, architectural renderings, planning documents, GIS reporting and analysis, and other products that provide foundational information to support our city partners’ movement toward sustainability. For cities, the innovative ideas and strategies outlined in these deliverables are of particular value during this economic downturn, when smaller budgets create a need for a focus on development of more sustainable communities.

Benefits of the Sustainable City Year Program: For Students

The SCY model improves the educational system by teaching future leaders how to work across disciplines and infuse sustainability into the planning and operations of communities worldwide. Students leave our program with

knowledge of techniques that can be used to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, conserve energy, protect natural resources, and promote active transportation. They gain experience working with real clients. They learn how to collaborate with practitioners who work in fields different from their own. Through these projects, students see the tangible benefits of their work.

Students hunger for coursework that combines the theoretical with the applied, and desperately want to contribute their work toward real sustainability goals. In SCY, students work on real-world projects that the program provides. While building professional skills and gaining confidence, students work hands-on with city staff and local professionals, developing an understanding of real-world processes and the implications of their applied work. Connecting their regular coursework to projects and needs identified by city staff is incredibly motivating and satisfying.

Benefits of the Sustainable City Year Program: For the University

Many faculty engage in community work, but such work is often isolated, resulting in missed opportunities that may be captured through more coordinated, integrated, cross-disciplinary efforts. SCY enables these synergies to happen. For the University of Oregon, SCY is attracting high-quality faculty and students and advancing the UO’s mission of serving the public good in its position as a public institution of higher education.

The Sustainable Cities Initiative has aggressively broken through not only academic silos, but also the barriers between academia and large-scale, cross-disciplinary, on-the-ground implementation. This visionary program is training the next generation of livability experts while helping cities improve sustainability, prosperity, and quality of life for all residents.

Real-World Outcomes

Impact on SCY partner cities is still being measured, but reports from both Gresham

and Salem indicate a new sense of momentum, civic engagement, and possibility around city sustainability agendas generated through the partnerships. Tangible results such as increased community involvement (via public meetings and presentations) and the increase in capacity to move “stuck” projects forward are key outcomes of our work. In Salem, for example, a difficult traffic circulation problem was solved by engineering students to the delight of city staff. (This solution has not yet been implemented, but the city intends to move it forward.) Other impacts that Salem anticipates from the work performed so far include improved zoning and development codes, applications to HUD for sustainable affordable housing, an improved bicycle network, and increased civic engagement of underrepresented populations.

In January 2011, the Salem Business Journal noted the financial benefit to the City of Salem, comparing the project to the hiring of consultants: “We’ll invest just over \$300,000 to support a one year research and design project that will leave Salem \$12 million richer! ... [S]tudents ... will expend more than 80,000 hours into Salem’s SCY package. Consider the ‘normal’ cost for that kind of consulting and you see how quickly the value mounts into the millions of dollars.”

Next Steps and Replication of the SCY Model

It is clear from the accolades of our peers, cities, and the press that the SCY model has ignited interest and excitement across a wide spectrum of audiences. Our work provides value to local communities and future leaders, and contributes to the larger conversation around sustainability. We hope to improve and disseminate this model to other institutions so that they, too, can improve their students’ educational experiences and motivate local communities to think about sustainability in a whole new context.

We believe that the SCY model is compelling and valuable. The SCY model is readily replicable to other universities across the nation and world. It

is a transferable model of service learning based on maximizing the output of existing university resources, and it does not require a significant administrative overhead. SCI is compiling a set of documents, best practices, budgets, timelines, and insights, with the goal of creating a toolkit that will enable other universities to develop similar programs.

The SCY model is flexible and scalable, as it takes advantage of existing university expertise and existing academic courses. The program is administratively streamlined, as no new administrative processes or overlays are required, and it is culturally appropriate, as local university expertise is applied to local needs.

In April 2012, SCI expects to convene a small conference of representatives from universities who are interested in replicating and adapting the SCY model of large-scale, multi-disciplinary service learning at their own universities. There is an urgent need in communities across the country to tangibly address issues of livable and sustainable community design, yet there is a fundamental lack of knowledge and capacity within cities on how to move forward on these issues. Universities from San Diego, California, to Dalian, China have contacted us with an interest in implementing similar programs at their home institutions. Universities who want to use this idea should not have to reinvent the wheel; we want to provide them with the materials and tools to seamlessly adapt our model to their own communities.

Universities who are interested in adapting the SCY model, or who have any other questions about SCY, are welcome to contact the author through the University of Oregon’s Sustainable Cities Initiative web site, <http://sci.uoregon.edu>. The web site also contains information for Oregon cities that are interested in becoming next year’s Sustainable City Year partner city.

Chris Jones is a Program Manager for the Sustainable Cities Initiative at the University of Oregon.