

Research Summary

Student-Involved Campus Sustainability and Social Justice Initiatives in Canada

What is this research about?

Student activism and volunteerism often leads in the creation of initiatives, such as campus food banks or community gardens, that require resources in order to sustain themselves long-term. This research examines student-involved social justice and sustainability initiatives on Canadian post-secondary campuses in order to determine best practices for their establishment, operations and financial stability, how they can best be aided by educational institutions and what benefits they bring to the university community.

What did the researchers do?

A comprehensive survey was sent out to 164 student-involved initiatives and 399 student organizations. 52 responses were received. The survey asked questions regarding student involvement, finances, structure, space, benefits, conflicts, difficulties, ideology, and university and community relations.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that student initiatives on campus brought numerous benefits to the university community, including experiential and educational opportunities, access to resources, improved quality of life, reduced cost of living, reducing inequity and creating a greater sense of community. Further, student initiatives are cheaper to operate than university-run services and more reliable than on-campus businesses.

The success of student initiatives related to a number of factors. Contextual and local factors play a role, as the policies and processes at each university vary in terms of space allocation, access to resources and student levies.

Broader success factors included strong organizational and decision making structures. Student initiatives that could provide quality training and opportunities for collective goal setting and connecting with others had greater success in alleviating issues of volunteer reliability, succession and turnover. Inadequate student awareness was consistent problem for student initiatives, especially those on larger campuses.

What you need to know

Student-involved social justice and sustainability initiatives should be supported by post-secondary institutions, as they provide multiple benefits to the campus community.

How you can use this research?

As a student involved in a social justice or sustainability initiative, this research can be applied to improving the structure and long-term viability of initiatives.

Formalized structures that minimized hierarchy and used consensus-based decision making had greater success and survival rates, as they better ensured responsibility, succession and oversight, which in turn, boosted the confidence of university administrators, while maintaining student self-governance. Positive experiences were also critical to ensure ongoing student participation.

Resources are critical to student initiative success and longevity, most important of which is securing space and a student levy. University administrators and faculty can best aide such initiatives by providing resources and mentorship.

University relations and how student groups frame issues within cultural contexts is important as to whether or not

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university administrators will support the initiative.

About the Researchers

Michael Kenny is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at York University. Michael serves as Executive Director of Regenes, a university/college focused environmental organization.

ecomike@yorku.ca

m@regenes.is

Sayyeda Ebrahim is a graduate of York University in Sociology.

Seema Syed is a graduate of York University in Law & Society. She is a practicing paralegal.

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