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The Importance of Course Offerings on the Topic of Environmental Sustainability at The University of Rhode Island

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**The Importance of Course Offerings on the Topic of Environmental Sustainability at The
University of Rhode Island**

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Abstract:

For my project, I created a survey for University of Rhode Island students' exploring their experiences and interest in course offerings on sustainability. I am distributing it to students through different mediums such as email, Facebook and in person. Through my analysis of the results, I am seeking some evidence about whether or not students at this institute feel that our school offers enough courses on this topic and whether or not students are interested in taking courses on this topic.

As a business major, I have taken several courses where we learned about surveying and analysis of the results. To learn about this topic, I felt the best way to go about my project was to create a survey. My senior honors seminar was a course on Environmental Ethics taught by Dr. Thomas Husband. Not only did this course interest me deeply, but it opened my eyes and made me question whether or not the University of Rhode Island offers enough class options on sustainability. Taking ideas from each of these subject areas, I came to the topic of my honors project.

Through the results of this survey, I intend to give suggestions to relevant University of Rhode Island faculty as to how the science elective courses should expand or be updated to make the program stronger and more importantly, geared towards the students' interests in sustainability. This will include suggestions for specific courses students would like to take related to sustainability.

The process of this project began with some preliminary data collection into the current course offerings of sustainability and energy conservation. After that, I began constructing the survey. I kept the survey to one page so it would not look intimidating, thus discouraging students from taking it. Once all of the results are in, I am going to conduct a focus group to investigate the results a bit further. Afterwards, I will make some suggestions as to what the University of Rhode Island can do to better meet the students' interests.

My goal for this project is to put into practice what I have learned in several classes, and to investigate a subject area that I find to be very interesting and relevant to the University of Rhode Island. This project will help prepare me for my future in business, and the analysis of the results will give me some experience in an area related my career.

Full Text:

Environmental sustainability is a very important and relevant topic in today's society. It is crucial to our future that sustainability be recognized and addressed. One of the best ways to acknowledge this area of growing importance is for universities to offer sustainability education courses and programs. This will prepare tomorrow's future leaders in an area that continues to develop. I believe that the University of Rhode Island has the potential to be one of the leading institutions in the area of sustainability. Through my senior honors project, I attempted to understand the overall feelings of sustainability education, and if it is worth further implementation of programs.

When researching the meaning of sustainability, there were very many different explanations and definitions. The most relevant and straightforward definition that I found can be traced back to a 1987 United Nations conference, and it is to "meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs." This definition was found on the Washington State University website and points out the major idea of sustainability, that our world, especially the United States, needs to find ways to use alternative sources for everyday tasks without using up all of the resources that future generations will need. The idea of being sustainable can range from everything from the use of LED light bulbs to using solar energy. More and more companies and households are attempting to "go green" and it is crucial to our school and society that we make strides to educate the University of Rhode Island students on sustainability.

I first became very interested in sustainability last semester when I took my senior honors seminar, HPR411: Environmental Ethics, with Dr. Thomas Husband. During this class, we examined the relevance of sustainability and how it relates to each and every student at the University of Rhode Island. I was lucky enough to be able to take this course through the honors program, and I want other students to be able to get such opportunities as well. By offering sustainability courses to students here

at URI, I believe that it will definitely improve the student experience. I thought that if I were to research the idea of sustainability education, and the students' interest in the area, the numbers and the data I came up with would be much more powerful than just a thoughtful proposal.

Along with my interest in sustainability, I am also interested in surveying and data analysis. I am a student in the College of Business, and have taken many classes on survey creation and analysis. I put these two ideas together and decided to survey URI students on their thoughts of sustainability education. Through this project, I was looking to understand how my peers feel about sustainability, and whether or not it is worth pushing for sustainability courses and requirements. After coming to this decision, I was able to begin my project!

The first thing that I did in this process was research URI and other universities' sustainability programs to get a feel for how we compare to other institutes. Through this research, I learned that many other schools already have implemented and very developed sustainability programs. I also learned that URI has a sustainability minor, but it's not as developed as some of the other programs offered at different colleges. After I was able to grasp the current sustainability education efforts of URI and other colleges, I was able to begin the survey. I drafted some questions and distributed it to a few students to look for mistakes such as leading questions or grammatical errors. After Dr. Husband took a look at the survey, I was able to print the final draft. I distributed this survey both in person to students as well as online. I put the survey onto Survey Monkey, which is website to make the collection and analysis of the results convenient and straightforward. I was able to distribute the link to the online survey through social media (Facebook) and through email. After reaching my goal of reaching 60 student participants, I was able to collect and analyze the results and come to some definite conclusions.

Right now, there are three ways that URI can present sustainability courses; by offering a sustainability minor, by offering sustainability courses in the honors program and by making a

sustainability course requirement for all students. The first two ways are already implemented at URI but could use some major work. After talking to the sustainability minor faculty member, Judith Swift, I learned that there are only an estimated 20 students in the sustainability minor. The minor is not marketed well and there is a lack of student knowledge of the program. In addition to the lack of knowledge, some of the courses advertised on their website are not even offered each semester (or have a minimal amount of seats) so many students cannot even take advantage of the courses if they were interested. URI also already offers sustainability honors courses. This is great; however, not many students have a GPA eligible to be able to take honors courses. These issues limit the number of students that are able to take advantage of URI's already implemented sustainability programs. A solution to this issue could be the third way that URI could start incorporating more sustainability education; there could be a sustainability course requirement for each student. Sustainability education is very important and should not be overlooked, especially in today's society.

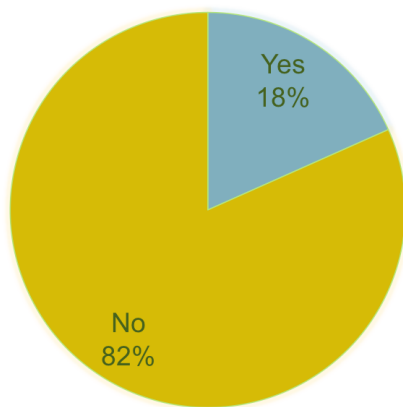
The world around us and the other universities in the United States are making strides to implement sustainability programs and initiatives. It is very important for URI to stay modern in relevant, especially because many students have such high expectations on green initiatives that should be put in place. By URI offering sustainability courses, it will prepare students to enter the workforce and be up on the current trends. This will improve the overall student experience, making their studies relevant and modern. Many students are even choosing their colleges with green education in mind, making it that much more important that URI focuses on their sustainability and different ways that URI can provide value to the students. Each of these steps will lead to the main goal of worldwide sustainability.

Through my survey, I was looking at two main questions; will students be interested in sustainability, and is there enough interest to make it worth changing curriculums. So I began the

survey by asking a qualifying question, asking the student if they have taken a course on sustainability. Along with this qualifying question, I also used dichotomous questions with simple yes/no answers, as well as Likert Scale questions which were important when trying to see the degrees to which students felt about certain situations. I concluded the survey with a little section of demographic questions so I could get a general understanding of the background of the respondents. In all, 60 students participated in my survey. 41 of them were completed online through Survey Monkey, and 19 were completed on paper. The demographics of the participants were varied, so there were many different perspectives put into the results. Below, I will go through each question on the survey, with the results.

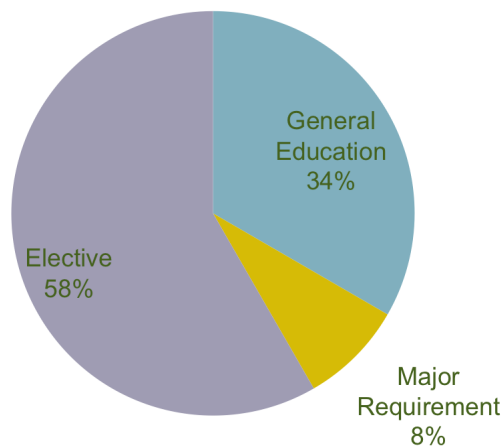
1. Have you ever taken a course on sustainability? (if not skip to question 5)

Responses



- 60 responses
 - 11 yes
 - 49 no

2. What type of course was it?

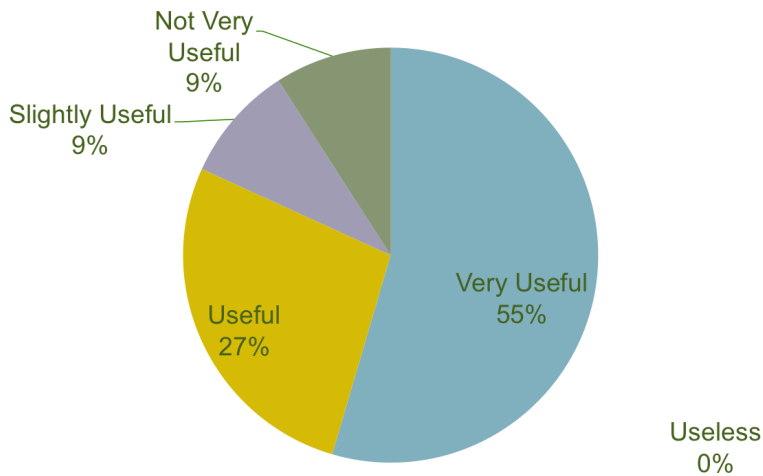


- 11 responses
 - 4 general education
 - 1 major requirement
 - 7 elective

3. What was the topics(s)?

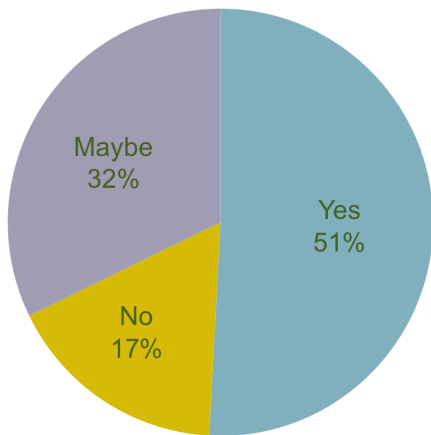
- Environmental Ethics (3)
- Century of Limits - Globalization and Sustainability
- Business Policies
- Global Climate Change, Controversies in Environmental Science
- Ethics and Economics of Sustainable Development
- General Sustainability in Various Aspects of Culture
- Honors Colloquium on Climate Change

4. Was it useful?



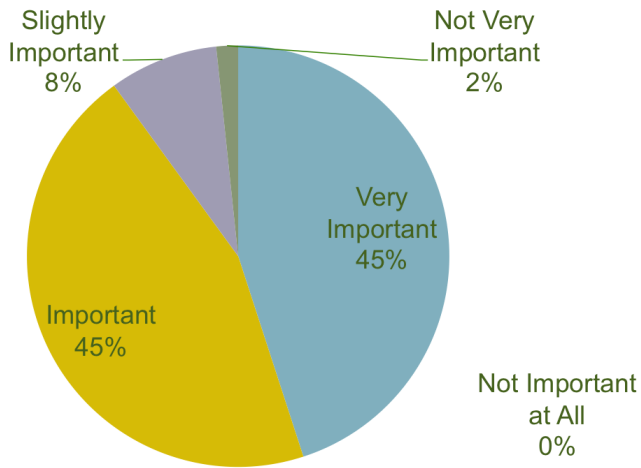
- 11 responses
 - 6 very useful
 - 3 useful
 - 1 slightly useful
 - 1 not very useful
 - 0 useless

5. Would you like to take courses (or more courses) on sustainability and energy conservation?



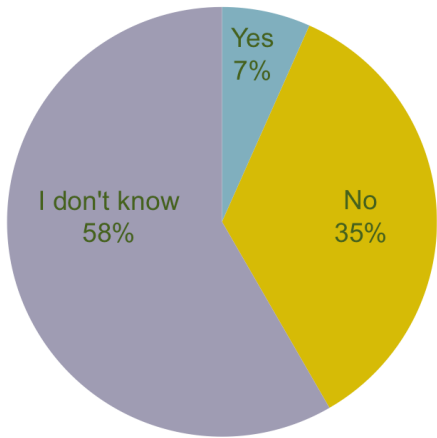
- 59 responses
 - 30 yes
 - 10 no
 - 19 maybe

6. Do you feel it is important that you learn how you can do your part to help the environment?



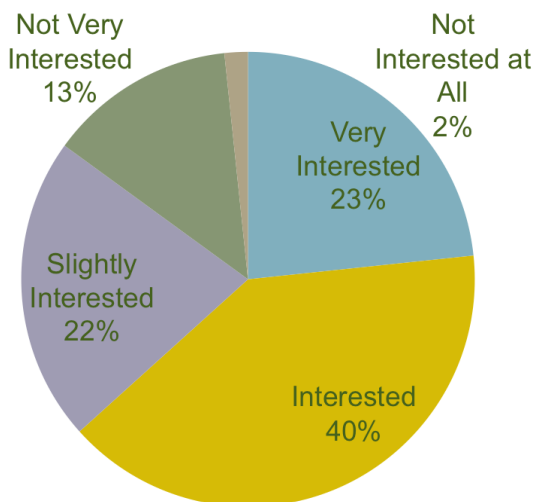
- 60 Responses
 - 27 very important
 - 27 important
 - 5 slightly important
 - 1 not very important
 - 0 not important at all

7. Do you feel that the University of Rhode Island offers enough courses on sustainability?



- 60 responses
 - 4 yes
 - 21 no
 - 35 I don't know

8. How interested you interested in learning more about how to conserve energy and help the environment?



- 60 responses
 - 14 very interested
 - 24 interested
 - 13 slightly interested
 - 8 not very interested
 - 1 not interested at all

- Most Popular:
 - Alternative Energy
 - Energy Conservation
 - Household Energy Conservation
 - Recycling
 - Personal Impact on the Environment

10. Demographics of Participants

- Gender and year responses
 - 35 females
 - 25 males
 - 4 freshmen
 - 7 sophomores
 - 8 junior
 - 29 senior
 - 4 graduate students
- Participants from 8 states in the U.S. (CA, CT, NH, RI, NJ, NY, MA, FL) and Korea
- Majors:
 - Communications
 - Education
 - Engineering
 - Political Science
 - Psychology
 - Business
 - French
 - Anthropology
 - Chinese
 - Nursing
 - Pharmacy
 - Sociology
 - Film and Film Media
 - Marine Biology
 - School Psychology
 - Speech Language Pathology
 - Public Relations
 - Human Development and Family Studies
 - Kinesiology
 - Computer Science
 - Biology and Micro Biology
 - Chemistry
 - Textile Marketing
 - Nutrition
 - Economics
 - History

As you can see from the results, the University of Rhode Island students are very interested in taking courses on sustainability. 90% think it is very important or important that they learn more about what they can do to help the environment. I also noticed that many people are unaware and do not know much about sustainability education or what URI already does in terms of this idea. The survey also showed that the majority of the students who have already taken sustainability courses found them at least somewhat helpful. I believe that the numbers from the survey results prove that it is worth the implementation of more sustainability education classes at URI.

After I received the results of the survey, I conducted a focus group to further understand the results. I met with 5 students we discussed the results. The conclusions the students came up with were: it is important for URI to recognize and address the need for sustainability education, URI should implement a course requirement for sustainability allowing the substitution of another general education requirement, and if sustainability course requirements are implemented, the subjects should be related to each major. During the focus group, the students built on each others' ideas, and were able to express their interest in sustainability education. This just further affirmed the results of my survey that URI students believe sustainability education is important and they would like to see it implemented.

One of the next steps that can be taken in the process of adding sustainability courses or to make sustainability course requirements are to show the URI faculty the students' interest in sustainability education. This can be done by proposing this idea to the faculty senate. They are a very powerful organization at the University of Rhode Island and I feel they can help speed up this process. Also, I will be contacting the Provost DeHayes and President Dooley with the results of my survey. It is important that they recognize the need for sustainability education. I will also continue to spread the word of this topic and to suggest to other students and faculty members the implementation of additional projects to further document the need for courses in sustainability. It is very important that the word of

sustainability courses is spread to URI students. This could be done by incorporating a sustainability module in URI101 classes, by creating and distributing a list of sustainability courses that are already offered at URI, or by asking student organizations to voice their demand to the URI administration for sustainability courses. Through each of these efforts, it will show the demand for sustainability education and surely gain the attention of the policy makers.

In conclusion, I have found that sustainability education is very important to students at URI, and students here do not believe enough courses are offered on the topic. I have also concluded that students will be interested in taking these courses, especially if they are related to their field of interest. Finally, I have learned that a place in the curriculum could be created for all majors by creating a sustainability course requirement within the general education program. Sustainability education is very important and the University of Rhode Island should truly consider the implementation of more sustainability programs.

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