Green Careers and the Community College: Embrace the Possibility

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Abstract: This article identifies emerging green themes and describes the green career paths that exist for students who have completed community college level coursework. It also explores the green employment opportunities, future trends, job titles, and salary ranges expected in these positions. It questions the community college’s higher education role, especially going beyond sustainable declarations with national organizations, incorporating green certificates, and becoming a leader in providing sustainable education.

Keywords: community college, sustainability, green careers, associate degree, green certificate

Universities have taken the lead in offering sustainable curriculum, whereas community colleges have been slow to participate. The high cost of energy, as well as consumer pressures to be environmentally responsible, has challenged companies and organizations to look for more affordable and sustainable practices. Companies are implementing these sustainable measures, to increase profits, cut costs, help manage risks, improve public reputation, meet changing regulations, retain employees, and contribute positively to the community (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012).

Finding data about existing types of sustainable career paths and jobs remains challenging. Many sustainable jobs do not post under the heading of sustainable because green job components exist but are not the main focus (Wright, 2002). Others jobs are easily identified with titles such as Sustainability Manager, Environmental or Industrial Managers, Recycling Coordinators, and Civil Engineers. This lack of clarity in green job titles contributes to the confusion colleges and students encounter when trying to find a green career path and job. Some companies employ a sustainability

Nationally and internationally, non-governmental organizations, foundations, industries, governmental associations, and public and private companies are in need of environmentally literate employees (McFarlane & Ogazon, 2011). Higher education can be instrumental in developing environmentally literate leaders for today and the future.
professional, whereas others train existing employees or hire consultants to complete certain projects and practices. New types of green equipment, procedures, materials, and tools are needed. Industry stakeholders seek people with education, training, and experience, along with credentialing for the green labor market (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012-2013).

What are the main green career areas? According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012-2013), 10 typical occupational areas are green-based, 9 of which have specific job titles, educational requirements, and median salary range (see Table 1). The 10th occupational area, Energy Auditors, inspects buildings for leaks and energy waste. The U.S. Department of Labor did not provide this occupation’s specifics, so it is excluded from the table. Within the 10 occupational areas, there are 20 specific job titles, demonstrating the viability of sustainable programming at the associate degree level.

Universities have incorporated green components in their mission statements, general education...
requirements, and sustainability degree programs (Shephard, 2010). Although many community colleges have signed a national declaration incorporating institutional policies of sustainability, they have not incorporated greening at a curriculum level. Could recruitment and retention issues, financial limitations, an outcomes focus, lack of inquiry and service-based learning, and lack of faculty training and values be an issue? Community colleges have faced many financial challenges, including a reduction in federal monies as well as new rules on providing graduation rate tracking and outcomes. Certificates often have limited enrollment and federal financial aid monies, leading to problems with cost, retention, and poor outcome rates. There is a way to increase retention in a certificate program: Develop the certificate so it becomes applicable (interdisciplinary curriculum) to the 20 career programs/employment areas. Certificate courses could thrive in an online format if they encompass all of the green career paths. The working student could have access to new sustainability-based educational certificates. Students from around the world could enroll, learn and network with other students in an online course format which would teach sustainability concepts specific to their career area.

By utilizing inquiry and student centered/driven curriculum, students will incorporate green employment practices, using the soft skills of social justice, citizenship, and leadership. Community colleges can start greening the curriculum by incorporating sustainability into their mission statements, providing the impetus for change at the student, faculty, and administrative level. The green career paths and employment opportunities for associate degree students exist and will only get better as we move forward in a world challenged to develop sustainable resources and practices. Community colleges need to recognize and embrace this socially responsible and lucrative opportunity to provide new and future-oriented curriculum that will directly benefit the community and planet.

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