Final Report
Programme name
Course Overview:

Lost Valley Educational Center is a 501c3 non-profit education and events center that puts on sustainability-focused courses for children and adults, hosts outside groups as a conference center, and has an onsite community of residents ranging from children to elders. The organization is currently the only one in the United States to offer the EDE certificate, granting 3-11 each year (depending on the size of the student group).

The fall 2019 Holistic Sustainability Semester was a 3-month experience in which students took classes three days per week in five sides of sustainability - personal, social, ecological, worldview, and economic. They lived in the 30-year-old residential aspiring ecovillage for the duration, experiencing what comes up as part of community life. Lost Valley runs one semester each year, and having student energy onsite is a highlight for the 30-40 year-round residents. Connections with the onsite community, as well as immersion in 35 hectares of lush Oregon woods, are a rich addition for students, part of what differentiates this program from most courses.

This particular semester went very smoothly and felt good to all parties involved (students, residents, organizer, and instructors). Most activities reinforced each other in a very synchronistic way - for example, a lesson on self-governance being supported by students ongoingly witnessing the sociocratic method of the community’s decision-making. There were 10 students in the full semester, plus 12 more commuting one day per week for the Permaculture Design Certification (PDC) subset of the program. Some instructors were onsite residents, some driving in from the city 30 minutes away, and some coming from further afield (including neighboring states) for one day of teaching. Most instructors do a great job and are consistent course-to-course. The same organizer has run all four recent EDEs, and will do so for the Fall 2020 semester.

Participants:
There were 10 students in the program, 9 of them living onsite. The majority of the group was white American women in their 20s, with a few men, some Latino background, one person in their 50s, and one person originally from a different country. The full age range was 17-59. All spoke English very well. Some were freshly coming into adulthood, and others changing directions in their professional life (around the age of 30).

Course rhythms:

Classes Monday, Wednesday, and Friday ran 9am - 4:45pm, with an hour break for lunch and a short warm-up to start the day. Once per week students gave verbal feedback to the organizer about recent class sessions/instructors, and once per week there was a facilitated group process to express how each student was doing in a substantive way. Students worked five hours in the kitchen on cook and clean shifts, rotating who prepared and cleaned up after shared meals. They worked in the gardens or land projects with a leader two hours per week. Totalled this came to 27 hours of structured time per week, much of it based in the classroom and some of it hands-on.

During other times they did readings for upcoming classes, worked on two group design projects during the second half of the semester, socialized with each other and residents, explored the area, had personal down time, and connected with their outside lives. Connections with residents were organic and seamless, and an outside observer would have trouble identifying which individuals were short-term students and which were long-term residents onsite.

Highlights & challenges of each dimension

Social Dimension

This dimension included the following classes: art of discussion, sociocratic governance, interpersonal connection, spiritual activism, power & leadership, service, Non-Violent Communication, forgiveness, intentional communities, ritual, music, and diversity. This dimension was integrated into the full student experience in the intentional community, helping the topics to feel less abstract and more lived. There was a thread of spiritual activism that fed a few service sessions and a class on activism (in a more conventional sense).
Instructor: Justin Michelson has been leading classes in the Holistic Sustainability Semester since 2016, particularly sections on reflective topics such as spiritual activism and ways of knowing. He is a local meditation instructor, and leads that section in the semester.

Quotes:
“The people are wonderful!”

Positive from survey: “The immersive aspect of the program and the exercises our group did in order to grow close to one another.”

Economic Dimension

This dimension included classes on: the global economic situation, alternative finance, Gaian values, sharing economy, monetary exchange, community legal structures, One Planet development, resource flows, economic leveraging, financial risk, site history, Community Improvement projects, bioregionalism, herbalism, food preservation, local economy, and social entrepreneurship.

A practical element of this dimension were Community Improvement projects that students carried out in two groups. These were centered around systems on site that could use new brains thinking about how to improve on them, such as the collective meal plan. This was a good exercise for students plus a helpful proposal for relevant staff/community members, though typically little is done with such ideas after the students depart.

This dimension is challenging to do in a hands-on way, as it is relatively abstract and harder to engage with than the ecological dimension, for example. Students appreciate alternative approaches such as regional integration, local currencies, and alternative finance, not dwelling too much on the unviable current model of global economics.

Instructor: Clare Strawn taught in the semester for the first time. She led nearly half the economics sessions, based on her experience with the local PROUT Institute and community development work in our nearby city and elsewhere. Students liked her accessibility and knowledge base.

Quote:
“I appreciate how different this is than conventional economics.”
Ecological Dimension

Classes in this dimension included: permaculture ethics & principles, patterns in nature, permaculture design, weekly garden work, agroforestry work, animals, water on the landscape, plants in permaculture, appropriate technology, energy, going forward in regenerative agriculture, zones & sectors, manual and digital surveying, forestry, food forestry, greywater, human nutrient recycling, natural building, aquaponics, biochar, designing for disaster and other biomes, and onsite edible plants.

The ecological dimension was covered by the Permaculture Design course on Wednesdays, which had 22 students receive their PDC certificate. This subset of the full semester went smoothly, and aligned with the curriculum topics set down years ago by Bill Mollison. There were some practical applications, but that was more so included in garden and agroforestry time 2 hours per week on non-class days.

Instructor: Brian Byers was the lead instructor of the permaculture subcourse. He taught 6 full class days and was present to assist on the other 6 days. This continuity was great for the course, and is the model we have used for all four recent semesters. He sees himself as a knowledgeable co-learner, not an expert behind a lectern. He also led other classes such as the Art of Discussion and perspectives on consciousness, as well as agroforestry work-parties on the land, which students very much enjoy engaging in. He anchored the permaculture design portion of the semester, as a permaculture designer himself.

Quotes:

“The course was educational, inspiring, and relevant to our current climates of all sorts. It was so magical to connect with so many different people locally who all see a different facet of the same truth. The instructors were all super loving and very helpful, and I am deeply inspired.” -- Matt

“I recommend Lost Valley place deeper effort on transitioning from grid-dependency to the eco village it aspires to be. Especially when hosting educational programs, I find it more aligned to walk more of the talk of the systems we’re learning of.”

“My experience has been generally very supportive in my innerstanding of a permaculturally based lifestyle. It touched me deeper than the topsoil! I’m feeling moved to continue foraging the fruits of experience in permaculture design! Thank you to all my teachers, past and present, for being guides on my journey back to natural humanness! Love and lovage, Madeline”
Worldview Dimension

This dimension has a lot of overlap with the Personal Sustainability dimension of the semester, which is not considered part of the EDE. Classes in those two dimensions included: personal identity, art, holistic personal health, indigenous perspective toward Earth & life, breathwork, nature awareness sessions, ways of knowing (epistemology), activism, personal future visioning, conscious creation, meditation/mindfulness, yoga, monthly ecstatic dance, qi gong, Emotional Freedom Technique with sound healing, personal evolution, ecovillages as microcosm, Council circles, parallel between personal/interpersonal/global treatment, Spiral Dynamics, expressive forum, approaches to consciousness, and systems thinking.

One part of worldview is perspectives on reality, changes in how a person sees themself, society, and the world at large. Permaculture itself provides one such lens, and living in an intentional community does so too.

A part of the weekly structure was a Reflection Connection period at the end of each week, after classes on Friday. There were a few different formats for this facilitated sharing of what’s happening in each student’s life. It was a transparent way to release tension and achieve healing, and a very positive experience for students.

Instructor: Jera Johnston has been a mainstay in the Holistic Sustainability Semester, as lead facilitator of our week-ending Reflection Connection activities. She leads expressive forums and sharing triads, and in general welcomes the realness students are looking to share. She is also a Non-Violent Communication trainer, brings a deep understanding of the human condition, and compassion for those experiencing tough things.

Quotes:

“I’m leaving this course with a new lens to see the world through. Permaculture isn’t just gardening; it is systems thinking. The instructors who taught this course brought such a wealth of knowledge & expertise; I was very impressed. I recommend taking this course in conjunction with the HSS if you want a super integrated and valuable download about permaculture.” -- Emily Lorena Contreras (“Birdie”)

“The resident community desires to move away from the current societal paradigm in a variety of ways, including communal/participatory governance.”
Design Dimension

There were two design projects as part of the semester. One was the Community Improvement projects outlined above. The other was a series of permaculture designs, falling under the ecological dimension. Students devoted many hours to each, and created quality designs.

Designing for sites or systems is the single most challenging class-related thing for students because they have to actively create a recommendation as a group, instead of being the recipient of information during classes. It is good training for later in life, and the designs are often immediately helpful in taking ecologically-minded steps in the development of an offsite property where commuting students live.

Instructor: Brian Byers was the lead instructor of the permaculture subcourse. He taught 6 full class days and was present to assist on the other 6 days. This continuity was great for the course, and is the model we have used for all four recent semesters. He sees himself as a knowledgeable co-learner, not an expert behind a lectern. He also led other classes such as the Art of Discussion and perspectives on consciousness, as well as agroforestry work-parties on the land, which students very much enjoy engaging in. He anchored the permaculture design portion of the semester, as a permaculture designer himself.

Quotes:

“The group I was in for the Community Improvement project was the best group I’ve ever worked with.”

“Overall good and fun. I’m glad there was a project like this at the end to creatively apply what we learned throughout class. Maybe more teaching about design layouts could be useful - whys and hows…”

“The facilitation, and incremental way to build the project as a result, was excellent. The experience was fine, but in retrospect I think the best would be to do projects for Lost Valley - it would allow for all of us to see the selected project areas.”
Design Studio Case Studies

Two designs were created for the Community Improvement projects (with 4-6 students in each group) -- one to explore improvements to the community meal plan, and the other for the renovation for a representative onsite cabin. This was helpful research for the community, if it chooses to make use of it.

Nine designs for permaculture sites were created, with 1-5 students in each group. All were located offsite except for one, and were for residential locations the students are connected with. The quality and depth varied; all were presented well during the final week of the semester.

Lessons Learned

The fall 2019 Holistic Sustainability Semester went so well there is little to improve on. Feedback from students and residents was very positive, with small refinements that can be made for future rounds. The main lesson from previous semesters is that students would like a higher ratio of hands-on class time to information-heavy time. This is difficult to make happen with topics that do not inherently have a hands-on component, such as local currency, aquaponics, resource flows, and permaculture ethics. We will continue to try to increase active modules while not sacrificing the substance provided by content-rich sessions.

Students had a wonderful learning experience, and go into the world with more clarity, direction, and self-awareness than before. Their bar has been elevated, and they are less willing to settle for mediocrity in their life. Their experience was very holistic, and scratched an itch most of them have never had itched in their mixed educational experience in life before this program. It is holding strong as the only EDE program in the United states.

Two of the ten students have become community residents, which is common - a fraction of students choose to stay here and not return to their somewhat unsatisfying previous milieu. Twelve additional students participated in just the Permaculture Design course, as local commuters one day per week - they had a very positive overall experience as well, and leave the course with a lot of inspiration.

Key trends from the Gaia Education evaluations
Here are the trends that emerged from the 9-10 students who completed the online evaluation:

- Expectations of the program that were common to multiple students were: live in an ecovillage; prepare oneself for the future; learn best practices; had few of them. These expectations were met well (4.5 / 5 ranking).
- Students would recommend this program to others at a 8.8 / 10 rating.
- Overall ranking of the program was 4.3 / 5.
- Of the dimensions, social was ranked the highest (4.7), while economic and design were the lowest (3.4). Economics is particularly difficult to teach well, and the design component is always the most challenging class element for students, I think because they have to create something themself, not just receive/participate in classes. Economics and design did rank higher in content and facilitators, though (about 4.0).
- Group check-ins were the highest rated single thing in the program. We did a short activity each morning, and a group process at the end of each week, and students found a lot of value in these.
- Student could use more down time; this came out in the survey and in person. Next semester I plan to cut down from two group design projects to one, so they have less work to do outside class time. The current commitment is 27 hours of structured time per week, not counting projects or occasional readings.
- In my evaluation, the facilities for the program are great (Ex. dorm, classroom, land), but this received very mixed ratings from students in the survey. In a separate evaluation of the Permaculture Design course (a subset of the EDE, with nonresidential classes just one day per week) students ranked the facilities 8.2 / 10.
- The organization of the program received high ratings.
- The main reasons cited for coming to this program are for the EDE (it’s the only one in U.S.), and for the Permaculture Design Certification. Secondarily students noted coming to push their edges, later develop their own community, and inform their positive work in the world.
- The majority of students (5 of 8) didn’t consider other programs. There is not much else like it out there.
- Common positives noted by students were: community immersion; instructors (ranked 8.8 / 10 in the PDC evaluations); interpersonal connection activities; and broad content.
- Also, from a check-in with students ⅓ of the way through the semester, they cited that the program is neither too heady nor to “woo-woo”, but a nice in between.

Summary of projects/activities participants intend to engage in, inspired by their attendance in the course:
The hardest part about this program is providing opportunities for students after the program. There are few angles for employment doing ethical and sustainable work in our society. Students also now have a higher bar for themself of what living & working situation they are happy to be in, so most options in our society tend to look especially unappealing.

Immediately after the semester most students spend Thanksgiving and Christmastime with family. Some students will be moving on to teach or participate in other educational programs, perhaps farm work, and whatever they figure out.

Concise financial information showing income/expenditure.

Total income for the semester was $42,500. Of this, $8800 went to cover lodging and site costs, $6300 to the kitchen for the full meal plan, and $27,400 toward the education itself. The education portion resulted in a net profit of $6400 after all wages, commissions, and other program costs were paid (not counting overall organizational administration).

Participant Quotes

Please include names and photos (send the photos as separate .jpeg files and properly captioned/named) – please make sure that the people in the photos have given their permission to be included.

Quotes from the Gaia Education Evaluations:

1. “The beautiful forest environment where the center is located is a very appropriate setting for this program and conducive to learn its contents.”
2. “The delivery of the program was balanced to respond to different learning styles.”
3. “Colin is crazy organized and was very supportive of us throughout the entire course.”
4. Positive: “The very eclectic and holistic curriculum, and the length of the program.”