**PURPOSE**

In an attempt to engage students in the topic of Urban Environments we have created a teaching module that demonstrates how development focused in compatible uses of transportation, land use, design, and economic development not only fosters a vibrant community but addresses real life intersects between sustainability and their sense of place. The module can be taught within a variety of courses and can take as little as 1 week or up to 4 weeks of class time.

**What Makes a "Strong Town"?**

Sustainable Communities Through Walking Audits

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**MODULE COMPONENTS**

- **Media** – videos from the national media nonprofit Strong Towns provides students with a brief introduction to the financial realities and sustainable development imperatives facing American cities, towns and neighborhoods.
- **Classroom Presentation & Field Trips** – an interactive in-class presentation is given on Complete Streets and Low Impact Design.
  - **Campus Educational Tour/Guest Speakers** – a walking tour around main campus led by Student Naturalists or community professionals provides students the ability to see how their own University has implemented sustainable design.
  - **Urban Field Trip** – visiting urban-cores provide students with examples of how downtown or historic districts can act as economic hubs and cultural destinations through implementing redevelopment strategies, sustainable design, and multi-modal transportation infrastructure.
- **Sustainability Audits** – after engaging in the material, student take on the role of auditors as they record their observation while touring both the campus and urban environment. The audit topics focus on: design & public space; safety, health & recreation; transportation; art & history; business; mixed-use; green infrastructure; environmental quality & natural resources.
- **Reflective Journal** – utilizing the content covered throughout the module students are required to complete a reflective journal on sustainable development. Students can expand on their reflections but must address the following:
  - How do you define sustainable development? How has your definition transformed after completing this module?
  - How do the two urban environments you audited compare/differ?
  - What do you recommend these places do to become more livable & sustainable communities?
  - How could other places in Lee County incorporate sustainable features into their building codes?
  - What is one thing you can do to ensure the community you live in is more sustainable? How would you achieve this goal?

**RESULTS**

- Students were asked to define a "sustainable urban environment" before and after the module. A word cloud was created to visualize the frequency of the text as a weighted list.
- In the both the pre/post definitions, "environment" is at the forefront. The post word cloud demonstrates students used more robust terms to describe sustainable urban development such as: "natural resources", "community", "infrastructure", "efficient", "people", "future" and "future generations".
- On average, students’ post-definition was more descriptive and included key-terms used throughout the module.
- In conclusion, a majority of students began with a surface level understanding of what sustainable development entailed. The module helped students develop a better understanding of the topic and introduced them to new terms and ideas of what sustainable development is/embraces.

**FOCUS OF THE MODULE**

- **Building Sustainable Transportation**
  - Pedestrian vs. car focused
  - Multi-modal options
  - Access to job opportunities
- **Designing Complete Streets**
  - Public spaces
  - Safety, health & recreation
  - Accessibility for the disabled
- **Importance of Ecological Literacy**
  - Systems approach to development
  - Interface between natural and built environment
- **Fostering a Local Economy**
  - History & culture
  - Redevelopment
  - Small business
- **Creating ‘Sense of Place’**
  - Identity and characteristics of a community

**WALKING AUDITS**

- **WALKING AUDITS**
  - videos from the national media nonprofit Strong Towns provides students with a brief introduction to the financial realities and sustainable development imperatives facing American cities, towns and neighborhoods.
  - Student Reflection: "I have an entirely new perspective on urban environments and the way (LID) handles water run off in a responsible way (it built properly) or completely detrimental (if not)."
  - On average, students’ post-definition was more descriptive and included key-terms used throughout the module.
  - In conclusion, a majority of students began with a surface level understanding of what sustainable development entailed. The module helped students develop a better understanding of the topic and introduced them to new terms and ideas of what sustainable development is/embraces.

**Student Reflection**

- "The idea of soft engineering really hit home. The way (LID) handles water run off in a responsible way (it built properly) or completely detrimental (if not)."
- "My perception of urban environments has changed immensely. I was unaware of how much detail an audit goes into creating an urban environment."