There Are Jobs Out There! An Urban Sustainability Program Measures the Effectiveness of Curricular Innovation

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Antioch University Los Angeles
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CHESC Conference
MA in Urban Sustainability Program

- Designed to address problems at the intersection of climate change and inequality

- Learning goals
  - Systems thinking
  - Human rights framework
  - Practitioner skills
  - Collaboration
The Big Question Lab

- Curricular element that takes place at start of each semester
- Faculty create partnership with local organization
- Students given specific assignment
- Students work collaboratively in pre-assigned teams
- Students produce deliverable for organization
- All done within 6-day residency
Big Question Lab Goals

- 11 elements the Big Question Lab aims to develop
  - Problem solving
  - Community organizing
  - Collaborating/working in teams
  - Conducting research
  - Practicing systems thinking
  - Putting theory into practice
  - Strategic thinking and planning
  - Understanding group dynamics/teambuilding
  - Developing presentation skills
  - Developing curriculum
  - Developing a communications strategy
April 2015 BQL Example

- Work with Los Angeles Black Worker Center
- “Do you see me now?” campaign
  - Faith community
  - Business community
  - Celebrity community
- Student assigned to work on outreach to each of these targeted groups
- "Do you see me now" PSA
Impact of Big Question Lab

- Student experience
  - Residency evaluations
- Student use of skills
  - Capstone projects
- Professional application
  - Alumni survey
Residency Evaluations

- Reviewed student residency evaluations from April 2014 –October 2016 (6 semesters)
- First 3 semesters had rating scale 1-5 for several skills “How effective was this residency as a way to learn...”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>April 2014</th>
<th>October 2014</th>
<th>April 2015</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conducting research</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems thinking</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting theory into practice</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>4.79</td>
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</table>
Residency Evaluations

- Evaluated degree to which 11 goals of Big Question Lab were mentioned in narrative: “What activities provided the strongest learning experience/which skills were strengthened?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conducting research</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Systems thinking</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Putting theory into practice</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic thinking &amp; planning</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding group dynamics</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing presentation skills</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing communications strategy</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Capstone Projects

- Reviewed capstone projects from all students who had participated in at least one Big Question Lab (N = 25)

- Evaluated 11 BQL goals
  - Absent
  - Implied
  - Present
  - Strong
Capstone Projects

The diagram illustrates the presence and absence of various skills in capstone projects.

- **Problem-solving**: Absent
- **Community organizing**: Implied
- **Collaborating working in teams**: Present
- **Conducting research**: Absent
- **Practicing systems thinking**: Present
- **Putting theory into practice**: Strong

The chart shows the distribution of these skills across capstone projects.
Capstone Projects

- Strategic thinking and planning
- Understanding group dynamics
- Team dynamics
- Developing presentation skills
- Developing curriculum
- Developing a communication strategy

Legend:
- Absent
- Implied
- Present
- Strong
Alumni Outcomes

- Outreach to 25 Alumni who had participated in a BQL between April 2014 –October 2016
- Total of 12 Respondents
- Asked alumni to evaluate the 11 Big Question Lab goals through 3 lenses
  - Degree to which their experiences in the Big Question Labs contributed to their skill development in each of the 11 areas
  - Degree to which each of these skills were an integral part of their capstone projects
  - Degree to which each of these skills were used in their professional practice
- All rated as “Not at all”, “Slightly”, “Moderate Amount”, or “A Great Deal”
Alumni Outcomes

Degree to which skill used in professional practice
Alumni Outcomes

Degree to which skill used in professional practice
Alumni Outcomes

- “I learned a lot about the different ways people can be valuable members of a team. How we can look for where folks have strength and lean into that”
- “The labs were incredibly helpful in that they allowed us to look at real-world issues/problems and engage with them as opposed to working purely theoretically. The labs are a tremendous benefit of the Antioch program and teaching style”
- “It gave me opportunity to question my assumptions; experience synergy as well as conflict in group work. It gave me opportunity to learn a lot about myself while falling forward.”
## The Jobs Out There

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CalRecycle</td>
<td>Recycling Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Atlanta</td>
<td>Senior Recycling Program Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thunder Valley Sustainable Development</td>
<td>Sustainability Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REVSolar</td>
<td>Commercial Solar Development Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles Department of Water and Power</td>
<td>Management Analyst and Utility Services Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culver City Department of Public Works</td>
<td>Management Analyst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Job Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaia Development</td>
<td>Associate Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement Generation</td>
<td>Collective Member/Organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizmendi / Solidarity Research Center</td>
<td>Co-owner of a business / cooperative business development consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TESA Collective</td>
<td>Worker/Owner/Communications Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tree People</td>
<td>Senior Manager Environmental Education, Watershed Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code Pink</td>
<td>Campaign Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and Water Watch</td>
<td>Campaign Manager/Researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Conservation Association</td>
<td>Program Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ride On!</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
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</tbody>
</table>