Introduction

On 2-4 November 2012, the University of Maryland, Robert H. Smith School of Business, Center for Social Value Creation (CSVC) hosted a weekend-long event aimed at creating new, practical ideas to advance sustainability and change the world. From Moscow to Tehran, São Paulo to Amsterdam, the ‘College Park Sustainability Jam’ (CPSJ) was part of an international movement to advance sustainability on a global scale using the principles of Design Thinking. As one of 58 locations worldwide, the College Park Sustainability Jam was facilitated by the DC-based innovation consultancy Peer Insight, and participants included University of Maryland students, staff, faculty, alumni, and local professionals. The CPSJ also welcomed contributions from the University of Maryland Office of Sustainability and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, both of which offered a view of local sustainability challenges and opportunities. Supporting Principle 3 - Method, the CPSJ introduced participants to a new framework for problem solving (the Design Thinking methodology), facilitated real-time ideation and prototyping, and provided hands-on learning for the development of leadership skills. “Jammers” (Jam participants) worked locally, but connected with others globally via Skype, Twitter and Facebook. The end result of the CPSJ was a set of four viable prototypes uploaded to an international database (see CityBeats, Urban Soul, PowerTower, and Pulse) and published to the world. The Sustainability Jam was considered a success by all involved, and the Center has already confirmed its participation for the weekend of 22-23 November 2013.

Challenge 1 – Building Demand for Weekend Programming

While interest in CSVC programming has proven strong, the CPSJ presented a new challenge: building interest and demand for a weekend-long activity that committed students from Friday evening until Sunday afternoon. This meant asking students to trade in valuable time typically reserved for part-time jobs, volunteer service, exam preparation, team projects, family and religious commitments, etc. in exchange for a new, extracurricular activity.

Actions taken – Key to addressing this challenge was building a core constituency of students and involving them in the planning and promotion process. Starting with just two students, the planning team quickly grew to a team of six. They helped plot, organise, and most importantly promote the event through word-of-mouth endorsement. Each student recruited 2-5 participants and leveraged peer/social networks, like fraternities, co-curricular programmes, and student organisations.

Results – The student planning team set a goal of 25-40 participants in the CPSJ. As a result of their strong support, the weekend-long event began with 48 participants, retained roughly 40 participants by Saturday evening, and closed the event with 25 active participants on Sunday afternoon. This was considered a solid success by all involved.

Author: Kimberlee Robertella
Challenge 2 – Recruiting Respected Third-party Content Expertise

In an effort to deliver additional value and new perspectives otherwise not offered within the classroom, CSVC planned to source content experts from outside the University of Maryland. The challenge, however, was that CSVC did not yet have strong professional ties to the Design Thinking realm.

Actions taken – CSVC surveyed its existing professional network looking for links to the Design Thinking space. It discovered an opportunity via Net Impact, which was in the process of planning its annual national conference. On the Net Impact conference agenda were several Design Thinking workshops; CSVC volunteered staff to help support the conference, and was able to secure a position helping to facilitate the Design Thinking workshops.

Results – As a Net Impact volunteer, CSVC gained first-hand experience with the Design Thinking process, and built a rapport with the DC-based design thinking consultancy Peer Insight. CSVC invited Peer Insight to participate in the CPSJ, which they accepted. Peer Insight was looking for new opportunities involving sustainability, and CPSJ provided such an opening. Since CPSJ, Peer Insight and CSVC have continued to work together, and will partner again on the upcoming 2013 Jam.

The role of PRME/sustainability principles

While the CPSJ is a strong complement to the curriculum (Principle 3 – Method), it is also in alignment with the following:

- Principle 1 – Purpose: The CPSJ was one of three US events tied to the larger Global Sustainability Jam movement. The Global Sustainability Jam connects “jammers” from around the world with the goal of skill building and advancing thinking and action tied to a more sustainable future.
- Principles 5 – Partnership: CPSJ highlighted the need for partnerships and cross-disciplinary cooperation in developing effective approaches to problem solving. Making the event a success requires input from students (ranging from engineering to journalism), and professionals from private industry, non-profits, and academia alike.
- Principle 6 – Dialogue: Central to the Design Thinking framework is the intention to foster positive, open, creative dialogue that is inclusive and builds off of others’ ideas. CPSJ participants were obliged to engage with outside parties and potential stakeholders in working through their sustainability ideas.