An Outdoor Classroom to Improve the Student Experience and Connect the Community

Chelsea Malacara

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking_matters

Part of the Educational Methods Commons, Environmental Education Commons, Higher Education Commons, Natural Resource Economics Commons, and the Natural Resources Management and Policy Commons

Recommended Citation

This Poster Session is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Thinking Matters Symposium Archive by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.
An opportunity to learn outdoors unites students to their surroundings and closes the gap between human and nature. Outdoor spaces contribute to ecological literacy and are critical to a well-rounded education. The University of Southern Maine community places emphasis on environmental stewardship through classroom instruction and campus projects. The Gorham campus has 9 acres of wooded area plus unused green space. I am proposing the construction of an outdoor classroom. The proposal will include interviews from various stakeholders, a site assessment, and a digital and 3D model of the outdoor classroom that will be created per the Site Planning and Design Handbook (Russ, 2012) and to the ‘design with nature’ ideals of Ian McHarg. An outdoor classroom on the Gorham campus will enhance the learning experience, student connection to the community, and add to overall campus landscape and flow.

Abstract

An opportunity to learn outdoors unites students to their surroundings and closes the gap between human and nature. Outdoor spaces contribute to ecological literacy and are critical to a well-rounded education. The University of Southern Maine community places emphasis on environmental stewardship through classroom instruction and campus projects. The Gorham campus has 9 acres of wooded area plus unused green space. I am proposing the construction of an outdoor classroom. The proposal will include interviews from various stakeholders, a site assessment, and a digital and 3D model of the outdoor classroom that will be created per the Site Planning and Design Handbook (Russ, 2012) and to the ‘design with nature’ ideals of Ian McHarg. An outdoor classroom on the Gorham campus will enhance the learning experience, student connection to the community, and add to overall campus landscape and flow.

Background

The proposed outdoor classroom would be on the Gorham campus near the new apple orchard (Figure 1). This project is intended to provide students, faculty, and staff a space that enhances the student experience and connects the community. Four specific design goals:

• enhance the aesthetic qualities of the university landscape
• maintain biodiversity through sustainable development
• provide a “living classroom”
• preserve significant wildlife habitat and native plant communities

Methods

• Interviews were conducted with several faculty and staff members within the university to gauge their opinion on the construction of an outdoor classroom.
• Through the interviews, two ideal sites (a spot in the upland forest from the tannery brook in the hemlock forest behind the campus and a site near the apple orchard plantings) were selected to complete an initial evaluation to determine which site fit the four design goals best.
• The apple orchard site was selected and an environmental site assessment was performed using some of the guidelines developed by the American Society for Testing and Materials (Russ, 2009) (Figure 2).
• Using input from interviews and considerations from the site analysis checklist, the outdoor classroom model was conceptualized.
• A digital model was created using Google Sketch Up © (Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5)
• A 3D model was constructed from the digital model sketch

Discussion

Adding an outdoor classroom to the University of Southern Maine’s Gorham campus would improve the level of function in the landscape and enhance the student experience. The location offers space to plant native vegetation, add community gardens, exhibit storm water mitigation, and overall provide a “living classroom.” The site planning and design process provided three valuable experiences:

• Utilization of stakeholder input for the needs and obstacles of a site to conceptualize a site plan
• Applying research and design theories to the site plan and assessment
• Designing a space that improves the level of function of the university landscape while adding to local ecology.

Next Steps:

• Research cost of materials and labor to create a budget for construction
• Submit proposal to facilities management and university administration.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to USM faculty and staff that were willing to be interviewed for this project.

References
