



PLANET BLUE STUDENT LEADERS UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Annual Report: 2021-22

Summary

Planet Blue Student Leaders are peer educators who promote a culture of sustainable living among U-M students while working in small teams to design and implement year-long sustainable behavior change campaigns. Throughout the year, PBSLs participate in weekly cohort-based dialogues and workshops to develop leadership skills and build the capacity of interdisciplinary project teams. For the 2022-23 academic year, Student Life Sustainability employed sixteen undergraduate students as PBSLs. The cohort is a diverse group of students representing a range of identities, backgrounds, lived experiences, and academic interests. PBSLs range from undergraduate first-years to seniors living both on and off-campus with concentrations in fields from the College of LSA, College of Engineering, the School of Public Health, and the School of Music, Theater & Dance. Two graduate student assistants from the School for Environment and Sustainability supported the program.

PBSLs develop direct peer engagement programs that support a people-centered culture of sustainability on campus through collaborative behavior change campaigns and new media content creation. Along the way, they develop their MLead competencies as leaders for social change and as DEI-oriented sustainability leaders while learning practical skills in community organizing and social psychology.

Every PBSL serves on one behavior change project team and one pod for multimedia content creation. At the beginning of the year, each project team was assigned a theme (off-campus, water, energy, and waste) and connected with a staff sponsor from Student Life, the Graham Institute, or the Office of Campus Sustainability (OCS) to advise throughout the year. Each team had one Project Lead that kept everyone on the team on track, one DEI coordinator, and two student engagement specialists. In contrast, the pod teams had less structure. Each pod was assigned a medium at the beginning of the year (podcasts, blogs, graphic design, and programs/events) and pod members were encouraged to creatively explore topics of interest to them through these formats.

During the 2021-22 academic year, PBSLs partnered with eleven campus units to engage more than 600 students in active, hands-on sustainability education. Indirectly, their outreach and awareness campaigns reached more than 2500 students. PBSLs provided peer-to-peer education on a range of topics, from laundry conservation behaviors to safe to efficient food storage to sustainable recreation in Ann Arbor to local perspectives on environmental justice. As a result of time spent in the program, PBSLs reported increased knowledge, skills, and abilities in facilitation, empathy, feedback, systems thinking, and future thinking competencies.

PBSL Peer-to-Peer Engagement

PBSLs worked in “pods” of four students to create multimedia campaigns focused on peer-to-peer culture change. Each pod allowed students to be creative and fun while they

incorporated sustainability in every activity.

- The Pod Pod produced season two of [the PBSL podcast](#). They wrote, recorded, and fact-checked each episode on their own while a music major and Student Life Sustainability intern edited the episodes. This season featured interviews with student sustainability leaders, graduate students with content expertise, and SEAS faculty. Topics explored include: an overview of student sustainability organizations on campus, tips for sustainable holidays, environmental justice, the magical world of composting, sustainable recreation and businesses in Ann Arbor, prescribed fires, and interdisciplinary solutions for the climate crisis.
- The Blog Pod wrote bi-weekly posts for the Planet Blue Ambassador blog. They researched and edited each post while working with PBA Coordinator Kelly Jones. The blog dug deep into specific sustainability concepts and also wrote light-hearted posts for balance. Topics explored include: [global perspectives on public transportation](#), [indigenous healing gardens](#), [talking with relatives who don't believe in climate change](#), [local farms](#), [vegetarian recipes from around the world](#), [green study spaces](#), and [a quiz about finding your inner sustainability mascot](#).
- The Comm(unications) Pod created posters, social graphics, and digital signs to promote PBSL projects and sustainability events around campus. They also created resources to support project teams (eg, the off-campus team's conflict resolution guide) and responded to student requests for designs (eg, a prompt for turning off light switches in off-campus residences.)
- The Prog(rams and Events) Pod worked to implement recommendations from the 2020-21 PBSL team projects, including hosting "where to throw" trainings for students, a water bottle decorating contest, and distributing window insulation kits for students living in drafty off-campus housing.

As a team, they also worked on some one-off sustainably behavior events including a candy wrapper recycling campaign called Trick or Trash. They distributed excess Planet Blue water bottles to residence halls and adopted a compost bin in the Diag, monitoring it for contaminants. PBSLs also supported several sustainability events including HarvestFest, EarthFest, and the Student Sustainability Summit.

Behavior Change Projects

PBSLs used a proven behavior change method based in data-driven decisions and social psychology to aid them in designing and implementing their projects. Community-Based Social Marketing (CBSM) is a five-step process that seeks to increase the benefits of and reduce the barriers to specific environmental behaviors.

Each project team selected a specific behavior to focus on based on preliminary data about the impact of this behavior on UM's campus and the likelihood that students would adopt this behavior. The off-campus housing team collaborated with Beyond the Diag to help students safely and efficiently store their perishable produce to reduce food waste. The energy team worked with OCS and focused on promoting laundry conservation behaviors in residence halls. The water team connected with Water Center at Graham to conserve water by reducing student organizations' reliance on fast fashion for brand recognition. Lastly, the waste team partnered with OCS to reduce compost contamination in residence halls. Project teams spent the fall semester conducting a literature review of their topic at other higher education

institutions, researching the barriers and benefits of that behavior, and planning the logistics of a pilot campaign to target their behavior. The winter semester was devoted to piloting their campaign, analyzing results, and identifying recommendations for broad-scale implementation of these campaigns based on data from their projects.

Off-Campus Team: Reducing Perishable Food Waste in Student Housing

The off-campus team found that 25% of U-M students living off-campus report that food often spoils in the fridge. They also discovered that, on average, people are not entirely knowledgeable on how to properly store perishables for better longevity. Their literature review revealed that most refrigerator organization guides and social media posts were intended for medium-to-high income households and linked to diet culture. It then became a priority to focus on how to deliver a pertinent impact on off-campus housing students for how to better store such foods without large upfront investments in storage containers. They decided to employ the CBSM strategies of prompts, communication, and social norms to increase the benefits of and reduce the barriers to efficient perishable food storage. They recruited participants for their pilot via newsletters, personal connections, and tabling at the Maize and Blue Cupboard. Nine households of various sizes participated in the three-week pilot. The team created educational refrigerator magnets and [detailed food storage infographics](#), and provided each participating household with labels and dry-erase markers to allow students in multi-person households to label their groceries. They also developed [conflict resolution guides](#) and language for roommate contracts for participating households based on training from the Office of Student Conflict Resolution.

Throughout the pilot, they sent weekly check-in emails each with a short list of questions (and links to fun fridge-organization videos on TikTok and YouTube.) They issued pre- and post-pilot surveys and found that 17% of participating households reported food spoiling often in the fridge after the pilot, compared with a 25% baseline. They recommend scaling up this campaign for more multi-person households of students living off-campus by continuing to distribute fridge magnets, conflict resolution guides, and information sheets during move-in canvassing with Beyond the Diag and at the Maize and Blue Cupboard throughout the year. They also recommend including some language about food storage in roommate contracts.



Energy Team: Improving Energy Conservation in Residence Hall Laundry Rooms

With their CBSM pilot, the energy team sought to discourage students living in residence halls from doing small, energy/water inefficient laundry loads. They wanted to change the behavior of individualized laundry and work towards a cultural change of living with shared common resources and spaces. For their pilot, they developed a campaign encouraging students to do get a “laundry buddy” to meet both their behavioral and cultural goals. They decided to focus

on East Quad residence hall, where one team member resided. They recruited participants on-site in the East Quad laundry room, as well as other common spaces in the residence hall. They used four CBSM strategies: convenience, social norms, incentive and commitment. Pilot participants publicly signed and posted pledge forms committing to only doing full loads of laundry. Recognizing the stigma of “dirty laundry,” they sought to make shared loads more convenient and less socially vulnerable by providing all participants with a branded mesh laundry bag, which allowed individuals to keep their laundry loads separate and providing a matchmaking service for people searching for a laundry buddy. They used BlueBucks as an incentive for participants to follow up, sharing photos of themselves using the “laundry buddy” mesh bags.



The energy team found that their methods were effective, but that the environment of residence halls and format of communications limited the campaign’s reach. For broad-scale implementation, they recommend targeting students living in off-campus houses or apartments. With this approach, they also envisioned switching from a local, tabling based marketing strategy to a moral viral and widespread one, such as using a newsletter, marketing via social media, etc. This would not only reach more students, but would also be more cost effective, as much labor-time would be saved.

Water Team: Reducing the Water Footprint of Student Organizations

On the weekends of the first two weeks of March, the water team collaborated on events with two student organizations, Ethical Investments and the Filipino American Student Association, to screenprint student org T-shirts by hand. They were interested in this topic because they found that student clubs and organizations often created and printed merchandise for their groups up to 3 or 4 times a year. They also learned how water-intensive creating new textiles is, with up to 700 gallons of water used per cotton t-shirt produced. They also learned that “swag” plays an important role in group cohesion and creative expression for many student organizations. They chose incentives, convenience, and social diffusion as their CBSM methods. As an incentive, they provided the merchandise that they created at no cost to participating organizations. To make participation convenient, they sourced second-hand cotton t-shirts, provided all screen printing materials, and prepped the screens with the student organizations’ logos. Social media was used by individual participants to share their experiences and spread interest in this project.



They found that the screenprinting events at the Residence College Printing Studio were fun, social bonding events for the student organizations, and the incentives and convenience of the project were powerful recruitment tools. As a result of their experiences, they made a [guide for student organizations to replicate their process](#). To allow for more student organizations to participate, they recommend that the Center for Campus Involvement could potentially provide or rent screenprinting materials, Cricut machines, or other t-shirt printing resources, as well as space for students to use this project. They also recommended a mini-grant or incentive program for student organizations that make merchandise from second-hand materials, potentially through Student Life Sustainability or the emerging central office for carbon neutrality. Lastly, they recommend broadening this project beyond student organizations, as procurement data shows that the University spends more than \$624,000 on t-shirt purchasing annually.

Waste Team: Reducing Compost Contamination in Residence Halls

The waste team partnered with OCS to design and implement a two-week pilot in Bursley Residence Hall to encourage residents to compost only compostable materials. They selected communication, incentives, and social diffusion as their CBSM strategies. This pilot consisted of three modes of compost education: eye-catching stickers available in the student lounge to incentivize and diffuse composting behaviors; flyers adjacent to the sticker distribution site communicating how to compost properly; and a TikTok that addressed common compost contaminants.

The waste team found that the stickers were popular among Bursley residents, suggesting that interest in composting increased via social diffusion. For future composting education programs, they recommended active composting education—especially demonstrating and tabling at events with a large proportion of first-year and transfer students such as zero-waste events or the Convocation Picnic. The team also recommends some additional flexibility in signage and decoration on compost bins in Residence Halls could increase student ownership of proper waste disposal processes.

PBSL Curriculum & Leadership Development

The curriculum for PBSLs offers experiential learning on designing and implementing a sustainable behavior change campaign on campus and strategies for living into an empathetic culture of sustainability on campus. All PBSLs attended a required weekly meeting on Fridays from 11am to 1pm throughout the academic year. Outside of meetings, they work independently with their project teams and pods. Friday workshops and trainings are designed to MLead competencies for social change (empathy, facilitation, building relationships, feedback, and authenticity) and UNESCO-identified competencies for Sustainable Development Goals (systems thinking, futures thinking, normative thinking) while learning practical skills in community organizing, communication, and CBSM.

Meetings focused on increasing PBSL's sustainability literacy (eg, Environmental Justice 101), specific training on the CBSM method with resources to work on projects in teams (eg, an impact evaluation workshop with logic model templates for teams to complete), skill-building workshops (eg, a presentation on navigating conflict with OSCR, a training on self-care practices for climate activists), and opportunities to explore other organization's tactics for

sustainability activism (eg, the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing.) These meetings provided an interactive and joyful way of exploring these topics outside of the classroom while creating space for students to apply their unique perspectives and academic knowledge to their work. Most meetings also included a peer-facilitated well-being break to build personal resilience for these sustainability leaders.

One example of the creative and theatrical PBSLS pedagogy is a “Funeral for a failed project” workshop. Together, PBSLs conducted a post-mortem on an unsuccessful PBSL project from 2017 that missed the mark on inclusion and social sustainability while advocating for eco-conscious behavior change. For the first part of the workshop, PBSL broke up into groups of coroners, epidemiologists, eulogists, and grief counselors to explore how the project failed, what social/cultural factors led to its demise, the aspects of the project worth celebrating, and empathize with those impacted by the project—both its organizers and the students marginalized by the campaign. During the second half of the workshop, PBSLs create a performance of the memorial services that includes: a press release from the coroners; a public health address from the University President; a funeral service; and a restorative justice grief circle. During this workshop, PBSLs can apply the knowledge and skills they have honed related to empathy, facilitation, feedback, and systems thinking. At the same time, they gain practical knowledge about possible roadblocks in their project and DEIJ considerations to weigh as they design their campaigns.

The Future of PBSL

The strength of this year’s PBSL program include the leadership and learning growth of the cohort, the DEIJ-focused lens of their peer-to-peer engagement work, the CBSM method for projects, and the relationship with project staff sponsors and other units within Student Life. During end-of-year reflections, PBSL highlighted in particular that they feel they’re making an impact on campus sustainability through different activities and feel much more confident as facilitators and communicators.

Looking into next year, the PBSL program has opportunities to grow its impact. Specifically, the impact of PBSL pilot campaigns could engage more students, the pods could benefit from more marketing and content support, and a more formal relationship with Residence Education, the Office of Campus Sustainability staff, and the soon-to-be central office on carbon neutrality.