



20 May 2016

S.T.A.R.S. Program Review Committee of  
The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education

Dear Committee Members,

I am pleased to provide this letter of affirmation for the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's (UWM) candidacy for a S.T.A.R.S. Innovation Point relative to its leadership and culmination of the public engagement project entitled *Bidirectional Technology Transfer of Composting Operation with Harold S. Vincent High School & UW-Milwaukee*, also known as the *Compost Tech Transfer*.

The *Compost Tech Transfer* project period was January 2015-March 2016. It was administered through the Institute for Urban Agriculture & Nutrition (IUAN), a consortium of higher education institutions, community partners, and City of Milwaukee focusing on sustainable urban agriculture. The project was funded by a grant through the Healthier Wisconsin Partnership Program, and I served as the project director.

The Partners. The project partners included a diverse and innovative team of public and private organizations. UWM served as the originator partner, the basis of knowledge in sustainability practices, and especially in compost operations. Harold S. Vincent High School (VHS), an urban Milwaukee Public School with 90% of its student population from low-income communities of color, served as the recipient partner, receiving guidance and support in starting a waste-diverting compost operation. Of particular interest is VHS's four-year-old initiative to restart its agricultural-themed curriculum on which the high school was founded in the 1970s, as well as their kitchen operations which includes providing individual meal packaging for 12 other MPS schools. The third partner was ELYVE Organics, a Milwaukee-based social entrepreneurial company, owned and operated by men of color who served as mentors to the VHS students, and lead the on-the-ground work of the composting technology transfer.

The Goals. The goals of the *Compost Tech Transfer* were: a) to guide and support VHS in assessing its goals and capacity for diverting organic waste to a compost operation on their campus, b) advising facilities and grounds staff on physical requirements, c) coordination and planning with kitchen staff and campus leadership (principal and teaching staff), and d) to assess how the compost operation and other sustainability practices would be tied to student engagement and curriculum. These goals were achieved under a shared understanding that the project would embrace tenets of social, environmental, and



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economic justice with sensitivity given to racial disparities that prevail in Milwaukee and a severe lack of funding to VHS. Because each of these goals was achieved, I would identify this innovation project in STARS terms with these categories:

- Curriculum
- Public Engagement
- Dining Services
- Grounds
- Waste
- Coordination, Planning & Governance
- Diversity & Affordability

The Methodology. Teams were formed on each campus with core partners and additional stakeholders, each campus team meeting monthly. Core partners of each team also met separately on a monthly basis to share in planning, governance and periodic assessment. These meetings, as well as facility tours on each campus, uncovered a sharing of knowledge of practices, challenges and opportunities. These included the topics of regulations, academic culture, communications, physical space, student perception and behaviors, MPS governance and many more. This was not only a transfer of composting technology, but also a transfer of knowledge, culture, and goodwill. One of the many points of innovation on this project was the core partnership of ELYVE, an “outsider” who didn’t work for MPS or for UWM, and had the ability to express clear objectivity in his suggestions and solutions to both MPS and UWM.

A waste audit was completed at VHS that accessed variances in menu items, waste source (pre-consumer vs. post-consumer), and even grade level of students. (Freshmen were significantly more successful in sorting waste as compared to their upperclassmen.) The audit showed that there is currently a small amount of organic waste and the UWM/ELYVE team made recommendations regarding how to ramp up volume of waste, different methods of composting with varying financial investment, and suggestions for using the compost for grounds and fundraising.

The UWM/ELYVE team engaged VHS teachers by leading a Curriculum Retreat. The teachers were given a brief review of composting and sustainability practices and asked how they might incorporate these themes into their many teaching topics. Their responses were enthusiastic and included everything from English as a Second Language, Writing, Business, and Art, as well as the core topics of Science, Biology, Chemistry, etc.



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The Outcomes. The UWM/ELYVE team produced three deliverable documents. They are a Compost Manual that was customized for VHS facilities and capacities, a Waste Audit Report with full data included, and a Curriculum & Teacher Engagement Report that outlines the teacher-identified sustainability-themed curriculum. A professional designer created a branded cover for each document and formatted them for a professional, attractive presentation that reinforced the partnership of UWM and VHS. They were presented at a VHS Community Advisory Board meeting attended by VHS faculty and principals, and very well received. The principals' supervisor reviewed the Compost Manual and suggested that it could be used as a text book for the entire school to explore sustainability vocabulary and practices. Our team was quite pleased with this unexpected reaction.

Additional outcomes have been realized as a result of the *Compost Tech Transfer* project. VHS leadership had opportunity to share the three documents with MPS Superintendent. The Superintendent was impressed by the UWM/VHS partnership and outcomes of the project, and has recently placed VHS in her personal portfolio as an "action campus", investing funds for an additional faculty member and continued partnerships. This was another pleasing unexpected outcome.

Future Applications. Because the deliverables of this project, and the innovative partnership itself, have been so well-received, from MPS Superintendent all the way to faculty and students, the path has been paved for many new creative projects. Here are just a few that have been discussed.

- UWM will continue to partner in developing curriculum with the faculty.
- UWM literacy experts will assist students using the Compost Manual as a text book.
- UWM and VHS will explore a mini-farm on VHS campus, tying in student curriculum and jobs, with UWM Restaurant Operations a ready customer to procure the produce.
- UWM and ELYVE will continue to consult on composting operations as it gets tied into curriculum.

STARS Innovation Criteria. This project certainly fulfills the STARS Innovation Criteria. A few of those highlighted criteria are:

- (#3) This project has had extraordinary and uncommon outcomes for our region. MPS is notoriously difficult organization with which to partner. Many UWM projects have tried over the years with very limited outcomes. This project has gained notice of the Superintendent and President of the Board of Education, which is extremely unusual and already netting unexpected outcomes.
- (#4 and #5) The project period was completed March 31, 2016.



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- (#6) This innovative project originated with UWM's Office of Sustainability and IUAN.
- (#7) This is the first time this project will be claimed as a STARS innovative credit.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge the tremendous contributions given by Ms. Kate Nelson and her staff member Renee Frederick, without whom this project would not have been possible, nor would it have been as uniquely successful as it has been. Kate's leadership and creativity shaped and developed the project and its outcomes in a way that exceed the expectations for all the partners, and paved the way for new and extended innovations. To this end, I thank your committee for giving this request your thoughtful consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me directly for any further information at [halvors3@uwm.edu](mailto:halvors3@uwm.edu).

Most sincerely,

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