2011 Oikos Winter School Report
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Conference Description

Oikos is a student-driven organization focused on sustainable economics and management. The organization aims to be a leading reference point for the promotion and development of social entrepreneurs. The OIKOS Winter School on Sustainable Entrepreneurship ran from November 6th – 12th, 2011 in Berlin, Germany. It consisted of a weeklong series of workshops, lectures and networking activities focused on social enterprises. The goal was to empower students to pursue their project/start up ideas in the field of environmental and/or social sustainability. The lectures and workshops covered a wide range of topics including future trends, social media marketing, strategic planning, decision-making processes and innovative design thinking with the purpose to develop problem solving perspectives and shape visions of change.

Personal Feedback

In general I believe that the school provided a great platform for students to foster skills, develop knowledge and share/receive feedback as they begin to develop their initial ‘sustainable enterprise’ project ideas. For the workshops, Oikos invited numerous social entrepreneurs from the Berlin area to speak about their ideas and their experiences. Most of the presentations were extremely engaging and helped guide participants in developing ideas on how and where to pursue their projects further. The speakers also discussed concrete topics such as developing business plans, fundraising, and general suggestions about how to get started. At the same time, other speakers focused more on discussing general economic and social future trends. Some of the workshops were hands-on and interactive while others followed the style of a typical lecture. In general, I appreciate this type of diversity in delivering and sharing knowledge and ideas.

A highlight of the school was its venue: The iqconsult “Impakt Berlin” Lab, situated in a typical Berlin-style warehouse building. The lab warehouse is filled with workshop rooms and open workspaces for upcoming or already operating social entrepreneurs to use. It offers a wealth of support for them to get started and develop themselves and their ideas. For me, it was wonderful and inspiring to be learning about social entrepreneurship in an environment filled with people who are working tirelessly to pursue their ventures and try to make a difference.

The main highlight for me was interacting with the Oikos participants and the organizers. It was an excellent group of creative, enthusiastic and innovative individuals who had some great project ideas. I gained the most from their feedback, advice and support (one
particularly creative group member even decided to design a logo for me to use for my venture).

A drawback of the program is that it did not stick with the original agenda. Many of the events/speakers initially planned had to be cancelled for one reason or another. However, at the same time, the fluidity of the agenda meant that the participants had more of an opportunity to influence the direction of the sessions. It also meant that we had more time for feedback sessions and to learn from our peers.

Outside the “classroom”, the organizers took us all around Berlin. We ate our meals together, either at restaurants or cooking together in our apartments. The accommodations were fantastic - we were split into groups of 7-8 people per apartment, all located in a building in central Berlin. It was a great way to get to know the other participants, who literally came from all over the world.

Learning Outcomes

In general, those who benefitted the most from the winter school were those who prepared for it in terms of developing their project ideas and presentation materials. The school provided some excellent opportunities for the participants to develop momentum with their projects, however, the ones who were able to take advantage of this the most were the ones whose projects were the most detailed. Therefore, I recommend being as prepared as possible. At the same time, there were some individuals who did not have fully developed project ideas but still participated heavily. They focused more on helping others with their plans and were quite fulfilled doing this.

All the participants had to give a 3-minute elevator pitch about their project idea. They also had the chance to lead a 5-10 minute feedback session to discuss the challenges they are facing and seek advice from the group. After this, all the participants had to vote on the five best projects. The selected five participants then gave 10 minute presentations about their venture in front of a panel of experienced professionals/entrepreneurs who selected the top project. Being one of the five selected participants, I benefitted significantly from this experience. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to prepare and deliver a presentation about my project and to get some honest feedback and direction from the panel. I also learned a great deal from the project winner, who had an incredibly innovative approach to design thinking and public speaking. In general, the school was a great platform for me to develop my creative side and my presentation skills. I left the winter school with a much more concrete idea on how to proceed with my project.
Photo 1 - Oikos participants in front of Impakt Berlin

Photo 2 - Participants were divided into small group feedback sessions
Photo 3 Design Thinking Workshop led by Dark Horse

Photo 4 Dinner on the last night