

## **Living Routes Findhorn Program Assessment, March 17<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup>, 2008**

### **Assessment Team:**

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### **Executive Summary**

Living Routes (<http://www.livingroutes.org>) is an educational non-profit that partners with the University of Massachusetts to run semester, summer, and January-term programs based in ecovillages around the world. Every program undergoes regular internal and external reviews in order to build upon successes and address shortcomings. External on-site reviews for each program are conducted at least once every five years and involve five steps: (1) Review of existing information; (2) Survey of sending schools and alumni; (3) On-site visit; (4) Review of report; and (5) Report follow-up. A full description of Living Routes process for program reviews can be found at [http://www.livingroutes.org/downloads/LR\\_Prog\\_Rev.pdf](http://www.livingroutes.org/downloads/LR_Prog_Rev.pdf).

The following comments reflect the Assessment Team's observations on key categories (see subheadings) based on our on-site visit. The overall assessment is positive – the Program is intensive, immersing students in a primarily hands-on experience supported by classes that engage different learning styles. Students clearly gain considerable knowledge and experience. For some, the whole experience of the Program, including communal living and working through personal issues, is life-changing. The challenges this Program faces fall primarily into three categories: 1) Meeting expectations of program content; 2) Managing students with varied academic backgrounds; 3) Balancing academic (i.e. theoretical content) with experiential and applied learning.

The Assessment Team received the Academic Handbook for Spring 2008; the Student Handbook for Spring 2008; Fall 2007 student evaluation results, in quantitative and qualitative formats; Fall 2007 Final Report from the Program Director; Spring 2007 student evaluation results, in quantitative and qualitative formats; student Summary Statistics, 2005-2007; contact information for four recent program alumni and one study abroad administrator; URLs for Living Routes' Findhorn program weblogs and the Findhorn Foundation in advance of our visit, as well as guidelines for the assessment of the Program. Once at the site, the Team met with the administrators of the Findhorn College Program, Program faculty, and all but three of the students enrolled in the Program this semester. The Team was given access to some of the student housing, viewed several of the work sites/departments, and was present at community meals.

Additionally, we reviewed the course materials for the Consciousness and Worldviews course, sat in on a session of the Applied Sustainability course, and were present for an evening community meeting/seminar in which students and Findhorn community members participated.

We also had on-site access to Findhorn College employee, Stacie Whitney, and to contact information of past program participants.

The Assessment Team, overall, judged the access to resources, relevant to our evaluation of the Program, to be appropriate and readily available. To facilitate the completion of the final report, the Team submits that a formal, final meeting of some duration should have been arranged among Findhorn faculty and staff and the Assessment Team to review the Team's preliminary report; certainly, we recommend that such a meeting be formally integrated into future on-site evaluations. Such a meeting would provide the necessary occasion for clarification and elaboration of information pertinent to the report.

The report below is organized with general summaries of each category followed by some specific comments. Where applicable we have listed positive observations (+) and concerns (-).

### **On-site Administration**

The site is administered by the Findhorn College staff: David McNamara (Program Director), Mari Hollander (College Focalizer), and Stacie Whitney (Coordinator for Student and Community Life). All are relatively new in these positions but have been members of the community for many years. Following, we review these key staff that interact with the LR program.

- David McNamara (Program Director): From our standpoint, as Program Director, David seemed interested about the welfare of each student and was fairly connected to the needs of the group overall. For instance, he, as well as other faculty and staff, seemed to anticipate students' complaints (detailed below) and in most cases had made changes or were considering what might be done. In terms of his views of LR administration, David explained that he has a good working relationship with LR and has few concerns with how the LR program is administered. Noting that most concerns were being addressed, he nonetheless mentioned three areas of discussion: 1) A more detailed assessment of student mental health in the admissions process. David mentioned that he has a form that he believes would be useful for these purposes; 2) Admittance of minor-aged students. Findhorn College prefers to admit students aged 18 or over, but staff understands the need for LR to assess admittance of minors on a case-specific basis. David feels that this concern has been expressed and dealt with; 3) The timely transfer of application information from LR to Findhorn. Again, David noted that this has largely been accomplished.
- Mari Hollander (College Focalizer\*): Mari's duties were not as clear to us as David's and a clear description was not readily available. From what we gathered, Mari runs the logistics for the College and holds the Human Resources aspects of the College. We were not clear on her relationship to the students in the Program. She seemed to be the resident historian and was knowledgeable about every facet of the Community and the College. Mari, too, said that she has a good working relationship with LR. She has been part of Findhorn for many years, although she is new to this position with the College.

- Stacie Whitney (Coordinator for Student and Community Life): As an assistant focalizer\*, Stacie seemed to be a combination of facilitator, logistics person, mentor, counselor, and community liaison. She worked closely with the students (they were to call her or David with any problems or needs). She was in her second semester with the College program and comes from a holistic educational background. She did not work as closely with the administration of Living Routes as the others, but seemed satisfied with the relationship between Findhorn and LR.

\* A focalizer is generally defined by the staff at Findhorn as the person in a group who holds the responsibility of focusing the energy of the group. It is a way of describing leadership without thinking in terms of power or control, but rather channeling/focusing the energy of the group; the leadership is in being able to draw from each person's strength and ability to create a unified and aligned group.

### **Evaluation summary**

- + All administrators believe they have a positive relationship with LR staff
- + All are relatively new in these positions, but have history with Findhorn
- + All three staff noted that the definition/description of the Findhorn College Program on the LR website needs to be updated.
- + David shared examples of issue resolution with LR to demonstrate a good working relationship (see above).
- Needs to be clearer communication around application deadlines (mentioned by Mari and David). David noted that this is for the most part resolved.
- Need to address transitioning students from one LR Program to another. David noted that he has discussed this with Daniel, and if students continue to move from one LR Program to another, some transitioning measures should be cooperatively implemented.

## Academic Coursework

The Program comprises four courses: 1) Consciousness and Worldviews with David McNamara; 2) Theory and Practice of Group Dynamics and Deep Democracy with Gill Emslie; 3) Applied Sustainability: Ecovillage Living at Findhorn with Jonathan Dawson; 4) Exploring Sustainable Living Through Creative Expression with Deborah Jay-Lewin.

Each course is scheduled to meet once weekly for 3 hours. According to the syllabi and based on interviews with each faculty member, the courses strive to integrate theoretical based learning with experiential, and applied education as part of the overall course and also during individual sessions. As part of this approach faculty members organize field trips to local sites that are of specific interest to the courses. Additionally, a non-graded student-led learning component related specifically to Findhorn's philosophy of group and community living has been recently added to the Program.

### *Course Assessment*

- 1) Consciousness and Worldviews
  - Critical Reflection Papers (30%)
  - Daily Journal (35%)
  - Class Participation and Presentations (35%)
  
- 2) Theory and Practice of Group Dynamics and Deep Democracy
  - Reading (15%)
  - Participation (25%)
  - Presentation (30%)
  - Papers (30%)
  
- 3) Applied Sustainability: Ecovillage Living at Findhorn
  - Reflection Papers (34%)
  - Research Paper (33%)
  - Class Participation (33%)
  
- 4) Exploring Sustainable Living Through Creative Expression
  - Reading Assessments (10%)
  - Portfolio (30%)
  - Group Collaboration (30%)
  - Participation Assessments (30%)

On average, students expressed enthusiasm for course content and direction. When looked at individually, however, student satisfaction of course content varied; this satisfaction seemed largely guided by a given student's academic and personal background, academic and social interests as well as his or her preconceived notions of the courses. Some students communicated a desire for greater emphasis on theoretical learning, others felt that the courses were already

weighted toward theory and wished for more experiential opportunities, still others were contented with the courses as they were being presently conducted. Despite these differences all students with whom we spoke were eager for more in depth research experiences, both theoretical and experiential.

The faculty conveyed the challenge it faces in evaluating a student's performance, academically, in the light of the integrative and holistic nature of the Program. While the faculty values and promotes the academic rigor of the Program, members are concerned that a focus on grades can detract from and impede learning. Thus, the faculty continues to review assessment criteria. According to Jonathan Dawson, the faculty is keen on further developing an assessment process that functions on a greater interdependence of peer-, faculty- and self-evaluations.

Each faculty member expressed his or her satisfaction with the quality of LR students.

### **On-site Advising**

Given that the faculty and administrative staff lives on site they are well situated to interact with and observe the students; this affords them the chance to anticipate potential problems. The joint staff seems genuinely interested in the maturation and well-being of the students as a group and as individuals. Additionally, community partnerships are arranged by Stacie Whitney (Coordinator for Student and Community Life) between each student and a Findhorn community member. This relationship exists to foster a quicker and deeper integration of the students into the greater Findhorn community.

From the Assessment Team's observations and conversations, it appears that the faculty is quite attuned to the individual and group concerns and interests of the students. The Team was first introduced to students in Gill Emslie's Group Dynamics class and the Team was present throughout one session of Jonathan Dawson's Applied Sustainability course. In these two instances the instructors were cognizant of individual and group interests. In keeping with a democratic approach to teaching and learning, such interests were, for the most part, assessed openly and dealt with as they arose and shifted. Given her field, Gill Emslie was especially adept at processing group dynamics. David McNamara, wearing the hats of psychologist, faculty member and Program Director, expressed his attentiveness to the mental health of the prospective students. He submitted that properly evaluating the mental condition of LR applicants is necessary to creating a healthful environment for all concerned.

Students were universally pleased with faculty and ancillary staff. They described the faculty as true mentors; they found them approachable, readily available, and quite well-versed in their respective fields. Students also appreciated the faculty's willingness and ability to address students' individual needs and to direct them towards other resources when appropriate. By and large, students were extremely pleased with their community partnerships; they thought the pairings were well-considered. The students were further praiseful of the social sustainability of the Program as cultivated through theory and practice.

## Academic Personnel

Jonathan Dawson: *Applied Sustainability: Ecovillage Living at Findhorn*

Deborah Jay-Lewin: *Exploring Sustainable Living Through Creative Expression*

Gill Emslie: *Theory and Practice of Group Dynamics and Conflict Resolution*

David McNamara: *Worldviews and Consciousness*

The Team met with each of the academic personnel, and found all to be experts in their respective fields. All seemed to care deeply about the students and the quality of their course and of the program in general. All faculty had taught their course for at least four semesters, and several had re-worked the design of the course based on student comments from previous semesters. Both qualitative and quantitative learning assessments had indicated that students were impressed with the background and knowledge of the faculty and this same sentiment seemed to hold true in our interviews with current students. Students expressed their appreciation of the responsiveness and sensitivity of the faculty, even as they (students) were critical of the lack of application in some courses of the theoretical content. Each of the teachers was aware that the students perceived a disconnect between the theoretical principles discussed in the courses and the application of those principles as part of the overall Program, but as expressed by Jonathan Dawson, the goal of the Program was to get students to see the “symbiotic relationships” among the theoretical, spiritual, economic, the ecological and community life.

*Class Observation:* The Team observed one session of Jonathan Dawson’s Applied Sustainability: Ecovillage Living at Findhorn course. The three-hour session dealt primarily with alternative/complementary economies and so was mainly lecture-style with two brief opportunities for group interaction. In the early part of the class Jonathan dealt directly with what he described as a “mutiny/rebellion” by students who did not turn in their reflection paper assignments on time or at all. He asked for student input into the definition of the problem and for potential solutions. The situation seemed to be easily resolved, with students giving a “thumbs up” to indicate their approval. Throughout the class, the students were somewhat subdued, although a few did respond when asked questions regarding the content of their ideas for application of alternative economies. A couple of the students were very enthusiastic about the possibilities of starting their own projects based on the lecture and their group discussion. A couple of others seemed to have difficulty staying engaged during the lecture.

*Other faculty interaction observations:* The Team did not get the chance to observe other faculty teaching, although we did participate in an attunement as part of Gill Emslie’s class. We also had the opportunity to observe Gill facilitate an extremely sensitive community meeting on gender and sexual identities with great skill and ease. The Team observed David and Deborah interacting with students in the informal setting of the Community Center and both seemed to have an easy and close relationship with the students.

*Guest lecturers:* Guest lecturers are a regular part of each class, and so it should be noted that students are exposed to and taught by a variety of experts in the topic areas represented. The team did not get the chance to meet with any guest lecturers.

## **Orientation: On arrival and post-departure**

We are not aware of a formal plan for post-departure orientation at this time. However, according to the Program Director, David McNamara, orientation to the semester is provided in a week-long, highly structured, introductory program known as the “Findhorn Experience Week”. This is the Findhorn Foundation’s core program, which has been quite successful over many years in introducing visitors to the ethos, organizational structures and practical needs of a visitor’s time at Findhorn. The “Experience Week” is rated as a high point of the semester program, providing a “landing” into community life. In response to student’s requests, an academic/holistic learning orientation is being planned for future semesters, beginning fall 2008. The goal is to provide continuity between the in-depth community-based “Experience Week” and the academic program.

## **Student Intellectual and Cognitive Development**

Students enter the Program with a wide range of social and academic experiences; consequently the knowledge bases and skill sets vary considerably among the student group. For example, The Team met students with backgrounds in education/psychology, creative writing, economics and environmental sustainability. Although this situation is not unique to LR and the Findhorn College Program, the situation is highlighted – and perhaps intensified – by a program such as this one where students are together throughout the semester in each of the courses. The structure of the Program in conjunction with the varied backgrounds and vying interests of the students seemed to cause a benign, but noticeable tension. A few students, some of who had completed the LR program in India the previous semester, stated that the Program was not advancing the applicability of their knowledge in areas of sustainability and permaculture, and had an expectation that such was the purpose of the Program. Other students felt that they were learning a great deal but wanted a stronger connection between in class discussions and the outside readings, as well as between taught theory and the direct application of it. Both faculty and students expressed some regret that there was not more time in the semester to delve more deeply into student-directed projects.

Administrators and faculty stressed that the intellectual and cognitive development of the students during the course of the Program was represented not merely by the acquisition and retention of knowledge but by the grasp of interconnections, alternative perspectives and an “activism for change”.

### **Evaluation summary**

- + Students indicated that faculty mentoring and expertise could lead them beyond what they got directly from coursework.
- + The majority of students mentioned that they were developing an understanding of social sustainability in theory and practice.
- + Students with little background in the content areas represented in each of the courses (consciousness, sustainable design principles, creative expression) seemed to be learning a great deal in their courses.

- + Students expressed the sense of connectedness they felt between themselves, their student group and the larger community and felt that they were learning about living communally.
- + Although it was not a point of discussion, the teaching staff seemed to tap into a variety of learning styles. They used visualization, linear conceptualization, performance/bodily movement, group facilitation and discussion as well as traditional lecture.
- + The (newly implemented) student-led learning component offered students the chance to work in pairs for each to teach a skill from their own background to the other students. This opportunity allows students to both acknowledge an area of their own expertise as well as to work on the skill of representing and teaching that knowledge to others.
- + Self-knowledge or self-learning was of primary importance to several of the students with whom we spoke. These students were clearly aware of the opportunity for growth that the program and community presented.
- + Several students expressed specific plans for putting the knowledge gained from the courses into practice in the near future. Some mentioned businesses in alternative energy, others mentioned starting complementary economies while others discussed sustainable designs they wanted to implement.
- + Some students expressed delight in their spiritual growth in the community, and appreciated the role of their fellow students, faculty, staff and community members in the process.
- +/- Students expressed that they were learning from their work sites/departments, but also felt that there was not enough time to really feel that they were accomplishing something in this area.
- Some students expressed the sense that they were only doing “busy work” in their courses, and wished either to do away with the academic work or to have it relate more closely with life in the Findhorn Community.
- One student mentioned that she did not feel intellectually stimulated in her courses at Findhorn, and wished for more academically challenging material, while others seemed to think the material was too abstract and highly theoretical.
- Some students said that they had received the indication from LR staff that Findhorn was more experientially advanced than the Auroville program and were disappointed to find out that it was not.
- Some students who had very specific goals for the Program (and application for the knowledge they would learn) were disappointed that they were not able to apply prior knowledge and/or skills.

### **Learning and Academic Support Facilities**

The Findhorn Foundation College is an integral part of the Findhorn Community, which is located on the north coast of Scotland. The Park campus is a developing eco-village, “a tangible demonstration of the links between the spiritual, social and economic aspects of life”.

Classroom spaces are spread throughout the community buildings, many of which include sanctuaries for meditation and attunement.

### **Evaluation summary**

- + The students enjoy lunch and dinner daily in the Community Center (CC) where meals are taken with the larger Findhorn community in a spacious, well kept dining room. The meals are vegetarian with alternatives for specialized diets, including vegan. Food is plentiful and tasty. The students work in the kitchen each week preparing meals and cleaning up.
- + The classes generally take place in the Park Building. This building houses a fairly well-equipped library and a light-filled classroom that is equipped for audio-visual devices. At this site, there is also a kitchen for tea breaks and a small sanctuary for meditation. There is student housing on the second floor of this building, which was clean and spacious.
- + The Creative Expression course is held in the Universal Hall. The Hall has facilities specific for the needs of dancing, art, music and guest presentations.
- + Wireless internet access is available to students throughout Findhorn Park.

### **Student Housing**

Students share single-story bungalows, caravans and flats within the eco-village. They have access to sanctuaries, open community spaces including meeting rooms, a hot tub, gardens, outdoor paths, including a seaside walking trail. Lunch and dinner are held in the CC, students prepare their own breakfasts in their living spaces. Breakfast foods are provided and are available from a community food storage building. In addition, there is an on-site general store, The Phoenix, where additional food choices are available for purchase.

### **Evaluation summary**

- + Laundry facilities are available on-site. Linens and towels are provided by the Homecare Department.
- + Internet access is provided in each dormitory as well as throughout the Park and other classrooms.
- + Generally, students seemed very satisfied with their housing.
- Issues of privacy were expressed by students who lived in the upstairs of the Park building as their bathroom is on the bottom floor, which is a public space.

### **Safety, Security and Well-being**

At Findhorn, students are expected to abide by the laws of Scotland and the rules of the Community. There is not an on-site infirmary or health care center. If a student has a health issue he or she has been instructed to contact one of the three administrators via cell phone, one of whom is highly experienced in first-aid (Mari Hollander). The local hospital is about 30 minutes from the Community. The administering of prescription medication is not specifically monitored by the on-site staff as students are over 18 and are considered adults. But as it is

advisable to keep information regarding student's general health and prescribed medications on-site, LR has provided the administrators with a spreadsheet of detailed information regarding health related items (e.g., allergies, health insurance providers, known prescription medications).

As the drinking age in Scotland is 18, students can legally visit the local pubs and alcohol is sold at the on-site store. Incidents of excessive drinking were reportedly not frequent and were handled by the staff. According to the Program Director, David McNamara, they have been clearly instructed that illegal substances and over-consumption of alcohol will not be tolerated; beyond this there is a tacit "don't ask/don't tell" policy regarding drinking and minor recreational drug use.

In general, the students reported feeling in good health and expressed a sense of comfort and safety as they continue to immerse themselves in the Community. Apparently there was some illness during the first week of the Program, which did not seem unusual to the students or the Team. There was only one instance that brought into question the preparedness and organization of the staff to respond to a student's health issue (please see below).

### **Evaluation summary**

- + First-aid boxes are located throughout the community buildings.
- + Students feel safe and well-cared for in the Community.
- + A plan to more thoroughly screen for mental health concerns is being implemented.
- + Program staff monitors students and provide opportunities to discuss any issues/concerns that arise. This was of high importance to the staff.
- + Students are each paired with a Community member for support and guidance. This allowed for a feeling of belonging and acceptance for the students. The students commented that it was wonderful how well-matched the pairs seemed to be. Another student commented that she felt "nested" within her group, faculty and the general community.
- + A student who hurt her ankle was very satisfied with the caring attention she received.
- + A tragedy occurred on one of the other LR campuses during our visit. We had the opportunity to see first hand the protocol for this type of emergency. The LR staff was able to communicate with each other (facilitated by the presence of Daniel Greenberg at Findhorn), UMass and on-site staff very effectively. It became apparent that a student at Findhorn would be personally affected by the event and the entire staff became involved in helping her to process the event.
- A student had a back problem and was unable to arrange appropriate transportation to and from the chiropractor. The Team suggests that students continue to be advised on the protocol and importance of getting assistance from staff throughout the semester.

## **Perceived Satisfaction of Students**

Student satisfaction seemed generally high, with a few exceptions. There seemed to be a great rapport among the students and among the faculty, students and staff.

### **Evaluation summary**

- + Students mentioned the hands-on training in relation to the lectures as important to their learning.
- + Students all loved “Experience Week”.
- + Students reported that the application process via LR was made simple and that LR staff (i.e., LR’s Director of Admissions, Gregg Orifici) was very responsive to questions.
- +/- Faculty is aware that transition from experience week to the academic schedule presents challenges. They continue to implement adjustments based on student input.
- Students felt that the LR website descriptions did not accurately represent the courses. They thought the Program was going to be more applied and less academic. They had difficulty articulating how this discrepancy could be improved. One student believed that his current experience with the Program could be readily obtained elsewhere.
- Students felt that there was not sufficient immersion into and integration of Scottish culture.

### **In Summary**

The program at Findhorn is well established, employs superior faculty and support staff and is a state-of-the-art ecovillage. Overall, student satisfaction is very high, both this semester and in previous semesters. Below is a summary of the salient concerns as recognized by the Assessment Team, for consideration by Living Routes.

- The LR website needs to be reviewed and updated accordingly in cooperation with the Findhorn College staff and faculty, especially as it is one of the mostly widely used forms of recruitment.
- Any LR staff (e.g., Daniel Greenberg, Gregg Orifici) that communicate with potential LR students should consider observing each of the courses offered through the Findhorn Program.
- As the trend to participate in consecutive LR programs may increase, a transition process should be reviewed. The three Findhorn students who came directly from the Auroville Program felt strongly that they had been led to expect a continuation of the knowledge and skills acquired in Auroville.

- LR and Findhorn College should consider developing an opportunity for independent study/internships that students can participate in as a follow-up to the semester-proper.
- Consideration should be given to expanding the Community Service Learning component of the program to include the local community. Both students and faculty expressed little interaction with or learning about the local culture, although one lecture on the latter was included as part of one of the courses this semester. Since intercultural learning is expressed as one goal of the Program, greater intercultural interaction for students would be helpful.
- As a number of students were concerned with cost transparency, LR should examine ways in which it could resolve this issue.
- LR should give thought to how it could promote a more diverse student composition in its programs. The students at Findhorn were decidedly white and for the most part shared a common economic stratum.