

Kless Revolving Energy Loan Fund

Participant feedback on the post-approval process

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
KRELF BACKGROUND	
PROJECT PURPOSE	
METHODS	4
DISCUSSION	5
THEMES ADDRESSED	
BARRIERS	
Technical Knowledge	
Students' Timelines	
Post-Completion Social Recognition	
BENEFITS	
Financial Gain	
Progress Towards Sustainability Goals	
KRELF PRAISE	
ANALYSIS	10
CONCLUSION	11
APPENDIX A	
APPENDIX B	

INTRO

KRELF BACKGROUND

The Kless Revolving Energy Loan Fund (KRELF) was established at the University of Montana in 2009 to provide students the opportunity to develop energy saving projects on campus in order to help the University meet its 2020 carbon neutrality goal. KRELF projects are submitted bi-annually, once in the fall and once in the spring semester, and their approval is determined by whether they meet a quantifiable energy savings with a return on investment, quantifiable resource conservation, or have a significant educational aspect that promotes sustainability on campus (KRELF Bylaws 2009). The KRELF distributes loans as well as grants, the proposals for which are preferably developed by students with collaboration from faculty and staff. Once the KRELF committee has approved a proposal, funds are distributed to the relevant campus department through the University's Office for Administration and Finance.

Since the establishment of KRELF, over thirteen projects have been approved ranging from the purchase of reusable to-go containers in the campus's main dining hall to solar panels on numerous campus buildings and the purchase of a hoop house for the University farm. The projects have drawn involvement from nearly every sector of campus including University Dining Services, Residence Life, Facilities Services, the President's Office, and various academic departments, as well as students from a wide variety of majors and campuses. From a broader perspective, the KRELF involves all of the students who have decided to pay the fee that collectively has generated \$350,000 to put towards an ASUM Sustainability Coordinator position and the fund.

The committee that votes on funding for each proposal is comprised of a faculty chair, a student ASUM Sustainability Coordinator, two student senators, two students at large, two faculty members, one staff member, and the ASUM business manager. The committee meets three to four times per semester and reviews each proposal, provides feedback, and then determines whether revised proposals receive funding. After the funds have been allocated and proposal approval documentation has been sent to the Office for Administration and Finance, the projects essentially leave the hands of the KRELF committee. Whether or not the projects are completed is up to those departments that accept KRELF funds. Historically, the KRELF committee has done little to see projects through to fruition and has no formal process for reporting on project funds, project completion, or process assessment. This lack of follow-up and closure is something the KRELF committee feels can be improved upon, thus providing grounds for this research project.

PROJECT PURPOSE

The interviews conducted in this research project aim to determine what parts of the proposal process participants had trouble with, what could make those

parts go smoother, whether or not their projects were seen through to completion, and what their overall KRELF experience was in retrospect. Participants from all sectors of campus were interviewed in full confidentiality and those answers are compiled here to provide feedback to the KRELF committee in order for them to improve their methods, if the feedback suggests improvement would be appropriate.

As I describe more fully in the “Discussion” section of this paper, patterns emerged in the data regarding the types of projects, number of groups working on a particular project, and the final result. Generally speaking, the more campus groups that work on a project, the more difficult it seems to be to bring the projects to completion. Problems with communication, time constraints, student availability, and leadership became apparent. The feedback about the KRELF as an on-campus opportunity was overwhelmingly positive and as a whole was deemed a very educational, beneficial opportunity to have available to both students and the campus at large.

Hopefully this report can be used to improve the KRELF process to make it more user-friendly, and therefore more widely utilized, by making adjustments in the way the committee operates, altering by-laws, using new methods of communication, or changing the online resources available. Since the KRELF is built from an optional student fee it is important to maintain the integrity of the project by utilizing the funds available to their full capacity and ensuring that students’ contributions are being used effectively and for the intended purpose. The ASUM Sustainability fee, the fee that funds the ASUM Sustainability Coordinator’s position as well as the KRELF, is due to sunset this year making it an appropriate time for a review to be done and made public in order to validate the fee’s renewal.

METHODS

In order to begin this project I solicited approval for the research using human subjects from the University’s Institutional Review Board, which they ultimately determined was exempt from IRB restrictions. Data collection for this project began with the development of an interview guide designed to probe for participants’ thoughts on the role of the KRELF committee in the proposal development, submission, and project completion processes (Appendix A). Once the interview guide was complete, each potential participant was sent an email briefly explaining the project. Participants were selected based on their involvement with approved KRELF projects, with the goal being to interview one student and one staff or faculty from each. People who are also active members of the KRELF committee were excluded from the email and many people were involved in more than one proposal, resulting in a total of 15 emails. Their participation was voluntary and because of this the resulting interviews were conducted based purely on those people that responded to the email and were willing to make time in order to provide feedback. The email acknowledged the recipients’ participation in a certain KRELF proposal, described the reasons for conducting interviews, clarified that

there would be total confidentiality, and asked if the recipient would be willing to participate in a 20-30 minute interview.

Of the 15 emails sent, 10 people responded and eight eventually made time to meet with me and complete an interview. Of the eight interviews conducted, four were with staff members, three were students, and one was a faculty member. Over a three-week period, I met with each person privately and held interviews. Each person gave his or her permission to be recorded and I found them all to be very willing to provide enthusiastic feedback. After the interviews were completed I transcribed each one and combed through them looking for common themes, suggestions, and praise which are reported here.

DISCUSSION

THEMES ADDRESSED

The common themes produced from the responses are determined largely by the questions contained in the interview guide. In addition to providing me with detailed information on the proposals they submitted for KRELf funding, participants addressed project partners, the barriers in developing the proposals, the barriers in completing the projects after receiving funding, and their retrospective views on the overall experience. Within these topics I gleaned from the interviews certain repeating situations that either helped or hindered the KRELf process, which I will delve into in the following discussion. These themes within motivations were financial, educational, and personal-passion. On the topic of barriers to proposal development, common responses mentioned the lack of knowledge among students of technical language, student participants' timelines, and post-completion social acknowledgment. The benefits mentioned were mainly financial gain, and progress towards sustainability goals.

BARRIERS

TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE

As noted earlier, KRELf projects are intended to conserve energy and resource use in campus buildings for which a working knowledge of energy calculations and building engineering is helpful for proposal development. Many of the KRELf projects have to do with renovating elements of the buildings such as HVAC systems, installing solar panels, measuring wattage input and output, and it seems to present a hurdle for students that need to quantify energy consumption to determine savings and understand the transfer of systems. This barrier was brought up in two of the eight interviews, one a student and one a faculty member. From the student's perspective the difficulty of learning the technical language was intimidating but overcome with help from Facilities Services personnel. This

interviewee, participant G, stated, “I did not have any idea what an HVAC system was until I began the project. I think I am more aware of it now but I still, if I was to do it again I would definitely need help again.” This participant went on to say that the challenge of learning about the engineering aspect of her project was rewarding and did not deter her from finishing this or continuing to work on other KRELf projects.

In another interview I was told about a student who was working with language about inverters and electrical currents. Participant B, upon receiving a draft from the student, realized this knowledge gap and he used the opportunity to teach the student about this technical side of the project. Like participant G mentioned, Participant B also did not allow this barrier to halt the project but rather embraced it as a teaching opportunity. “It’s a win-win for me in that I get to really have the knowledge or lack thereof exposed to me right on the page so that’s a barrier but we’re in the academic business so that’s also an opportunity to educate.”

Fortunately for the KRELf committee these two faced the challenge as a learning opportunity however, it is possible that others have faced this, or a similar challenge, and allowed it to deter their participation. It is not common knowledge that there are members of the Facilities Services Department that are willing and able to assist with technical calculations, which is what participant G needed in order to continue working. If the availability of those people with technical skills was made widely known, the KRELf might see an increase in proposals from those that allowed the technical side to halt their involvement.

STUDENTS’ TIMELINES

My personal experience with student-run projects or groups has proven time and again that projects must have a quick reward and brief timeline. Two interviews I conducted addressed this problem directly and one referenced this issue as the reason the participant would not know about his project’s completion. In the interview with participant D this problem was mentioned in reference to a project that has been in the development stage for over a year. A combination of inter-departmental collaboration and student turnover has slowed the process. This particular project requires a solid foundation of research to determine the payback and each group involved needs to be fully committed to seeing it through to completion. The driver and main line of communication throughout this project has been one particular student. “Students come and go so when students have been working on a project and it isn’t finished yet, like (student name) is going to graduate and I’m like, ‘no! I have to try to get this finished up before she leaves’ because she’s been leading the whole thing so if she left then we’d have to pick it up again.”

The problem mentioned in the interview with participant A, focused more on the student’s perspectives of their own timelines. They feel the need to complete

projects quickly so they can see the results, putting undue pressure on the department they are working with. “These kids want to see it finalized in the semester and they’re coming to us with a short period of time and you can’t just snap your fingers and make that go,” participant A said. The student attitude seemed to deter this particular department from really pursuing larger projects because the student would not be able to see it to completion. Following the previously mentioned statement this participant A went on to say, “if they want to see end results they can’t be dreaming too big too quick. There’s a lot of money involved when they’re thinking really big, they’re not going to save the world in one day.”

From the student perspective the timeline was problematic as well. Participant H, when asked about involvement in the post-approval project implementation, mentioned that he did not know what was going to happen with it. The project was his senior capstone and although the timeline he had in mind brought the project to completion by early May, a hang-up in the purchasing process seems to have delayed it and he may never see the finished product.

POST-COMPLETION SOCIAL RECOGNITION

One of the reoccurring topics that was mentioned in nearly every interview was that of media attention. The public is very rarely informed about the projects that are seen through to completion on the University of Montana campus. A few interviewees mentioned sending out press releases and never receiving any response, others mentioned never hearing about other projects going on around campus, and it is often asked during discussion, where the sustainability fee even goes. This breakdown in the final piece of communication between the people working on the projects and the public who benefit from those projects seems to be a critical missing piece of the process. The goal of the KRELF committee is not only to reduce the University of Montana’s carbon footprint and help support sustainability on campus but also to, “promote...environmental awareness... on campus” (KRELF Bylaws 2009). Seeing as how all of the projects funded promote sustainability and a significant number of them have an interactive component, it seems critical that the University of Montana community be aware of the opportunities that exist for furthering sustainability education. Additionally, the validation of the KRELF funds, which are essentially donated, could come through a higher public awareness of where those funds end up.

When discussing some disappointments of the project participant C said, “I wish they would have (done a report) because we really didn’t get much of an announcement about our solar panels. The Kaimin had wanted to do an interview with me but they never showed up. They kept on calling and I said, ‘yeah I would love that’ but it never came out in the Kaimin. It was on the TV, the late news on TV, but that was about it but I wanted everybody to know we have solar finally on campus.”

Along the same lines, participant D mentioned that end marketing would be wonderful not only to recognize the students' hard work but also the university's steps in meeting its 'green' commitment. "I mean, just establishing an energy loan fund at such a big institution is huge. And I don't remember seeing that much press. The Missoulian maybe did an article on it but to me that's front-page news." This participant was clearly very passionate and proud about his work and validating not only their efforts but the contributions from the students as well by ensuring that media outlets acknowledge their efforts would help the KRELf in numerous ways. Not only would people who have participated feel appreciated but also it could garner more support from students, who might in the future choose to pay the optional sustainability fee. Additionally, people who may not be aware of the opportunities provided by the KRELf might become interested in submitting a proposal therefore giving KRELf more options for projects to fund and consequently the potential for a higher diversity of projects implemented.

Internally, media attention might help with KRELf by informing interested participants about projects already completed. One interviewee mentioned the reoccurrence of students hoping to install low-flow appliances and the frustration that comes with repeatedly having to explain that it's already being done. With media attention on the completed projects, students who are hoping to proposal projects would already be informed on what has been completed and a more engaging medium for communicating those successes could be accessed rather than the spreadsheet that is currently available online.

BENEFITS

FINANCIAL GAIN

During four of the eight interviews that I conducted, financial benefits came up in one form or another. Clearly, for buildings that have to run like businesses finances would be a high priority and so it is no surprise that the payback on projects was one of the most important aspects of a project. However, for one interview where limited finances were not a problem, the participant mentioned that the project completed with KRELf funds could only be completed because a financial gap was filled.

Participants A and F both mentioned finances in regards to the types of projects they are interested in completing. Sustainability did not come up as a high priority but their need to run a financially stable business within their buildings is incentive enough for them to take steps that also meet the University's sustainability goals. Participant A mentioned how pleased he was that a certain project met its payback goals and continues to save them money. It was financially so beneficial that he hopes to complete similar projects in additional buildings on campus without needing a KRELf loan.

Participant F also mentioned exclusively being able to do projects that provided a financial incentive and her pleasure with the projects that she has completed and seen financial paybacks. She mentioned her satisfaction with being able to meet her office's needs with low financial risk and even usually large benefits.

For some groups on campus they are only able to consider projects that provide a financial feedback however, one interview I conducted was on a project that will never be able to pay itself off however the person involved in proposing and managing that project still considered it to be financially beneficial. "Some of the cost of the high rising electrical prices, because our electrical prices are continually going up they're probably, what, \$20, \$2,500 a month for electric along this building? And so now we have solar panels kicking in a little bit, not much, but we've laid the groundwork." Even though the financial piece of this project was not large enough for actual payback, Participant C considered it enough that he had laid the groundwork for additional panels that could provide payback.

Yet another perspective on the financial gain provided by KRELf, Participant E mentioned that the project he was involved in was very near completion having received funding from a variety of sources but was short \$8,000. The KRELf was able to fill this gap in funding for what would have been an otherwise unfinished project. "there were all these other costs that they (KRELf) weren't going to be able to cover and so since it was directly related to an energy project it seemed like KRELf would be the perfect thing to fill some of that gap." The specific goals of KRELf made it the perfect fit for a project such as this and was able to meet the needs for a project that that had never been done on this university's campus before.

The KRELf's function as a revolving energy loan fund provides a perfect source of revenue for projects that do have a quantifiable, consistent, and reliable payback. If managed appropriately, KRELf has the potential to provide sustainability projects with funding indefinitely.

PROGRESS TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY GOALS

The ability to work towards sustainability, carbon neutrality, and environmental health through KRELf projects was mentioned in four of the eight interviews. Clearly being able to help push the overall university towards the carbon neutrality goal and a more sustainable campus is a priority for most people who become involved in KRELf.

Participant G, after extensive involvement in various campus committees felt that nothing big enough was being done and she knew that she could single-handedly make a quantifiable difference. "I really wanted to do something on the campus, I felt like I was just a student going through the system instead of influencing the system so I really wanted to do something bigger and I felt like that

(KRELF) would be it and I just think it's a great opportunity." This participant's sense of efficacy was directly related to her ability to create change, which KRELF was able to support. I can think of no better outcome for a student-fed fund than to re-enforce and support students' pursuit of their passions.

Participant D also became involved through his own personal passions. As a former student activist and a current staff Participant D mentioned his ability to use his position to help students, much like himself, move the university towards sustainability through KRELF projects and his assistance.

"I really had personal motivation to just be a part of it as an environmental student activist I really wanted to see these projects though...as a staff I realized that I had the capacity to be the insider that could really help and work things out. We have this sustainability focus so it made a lot of sense to try to work with student groups to kind of see that out and try to incorporate that educational aspect and be able to support the university in that way. Because it's even in our mission statement to support the academic success of students."

Participant B whose personal passion drives him to make sustainability and the KRELF a top priority in his classes gave a similar response. "[A]s a faculty member I try to say these are the projects that I'm interested in supporting, these are passions of mine."

From another side of it one participant seemed to want to be involved with KRELF purely to support the university, aside from his personal priorities. Participant C said that, "following the focus of the university, being green," was his top reason for becoming involved with KRELF.

KRELF PRAISE

I think it is essential to include the amount of positive feedback for KRELF these interviews received. Not only did participants mention the positive benefits of the KRELF process but their experiences interacting with the committee were also overwhelmingly positive as well as the ease with which they felt the process was completed. When responding to questions about their level of communication with KRELF committee members or other sustainability staff, everyone who had communicated with KRELF members paused the line of questioning to mention how, "without them nothing would have happened" and "the staff are... nice and refreshing, something you don't always get in the grant review process" and "great to work with." Certain members were mentioned such as "Tom Javins was amazing, really helpful" and Eva Rocke, Len Broberg were both given praise and appreciation. My personal experience working with these people, who have remained mostly the same since my involvement began in 2009, has been overwhelmingly positive and one of the main reasons that my involvement has continued is because I so enjoy spending time with the committee members. In regards to the overall process

participants said it was “streamlined” “straightforward” and “one of the easiest grant processes I have ever been involved with.”

ANALYSIS

I am very pleased with the overall responses to KRELf. While there are clear barriers and benefits, I find it very encouraging that people have walked away from their experience feeling like they were successful in their endeavors and some even come back for more funding. Having seen most of these projects from proposal to completion and after speaking with these participants I have a much clearer idea of how KRELf might run more efficiently. Students seem to think that nobody has thought of what they are trying to push through while staff and building supervisors are running into a funding roadblock time and again. That preconceived idea that either it hasn't been considered or there is no money limits people's furthered pursuit of an idea. However, when people are linked into the KRELf they see that, from both sides, it can be done with some collaboration. Sometimes it is merely a little push from a student or agreement and some calculations from a “higher up” that makes that connection. The problem of a limited timeline might be overcome with a working list of projects desired, their stage of completion and linking up students looking for projects with those works in progress that match up with the student's timeline. This may make everyone feel more in control of their process as well as better connected to the resources available. Making sure that the ASUM Sustainability Coordinator stays up to date managing such a list, as she has, and can act as the middle-man for communications, resource, direction, and management would help everyone stay on the same page.

After project completion, I think that having a predetermined post-completion requirement for projects that requires a media or public relations element would be beneficial. Making sure that projects receive the social nod they are due by making it part of the requirement for funding would benefit all parties involved without putting undue burden on any one party. Clearly, the participants have enough incentive to support sustainability either because it is a financial benefit or a belief they hold and I think a bit of added encouragement to notify media would not deter anybody from participating in the KRELf.

CONCLUSION

The KRELf, in only 4 years on the University of Montana campus, has managed to provide for projects in nearly every auxiliary building on campus, involving many different departments and offices and students in many different stages of their education. With its goals to “ promote resource conservation, waste reduction, and environmental awareness projects at the University of Montana, as

well as capture financial and energy savings, and foster student involvement and education,” are clearly being met and, in my view, even exceeded. There is no doubt in my mind that this fee deserves to be renewed after it sunsets this coming semester. Students voted to begin this fund under the above purpose and should rest assured that their intentions have been recognized and expectations have been respected.

The hard work of all of the faculty, staff, and students involved with the KRELf has lived up to their promises and been able to make leaps and bounds towards sustainability in the name of the University of Montana. As an invested member in the KRELf projects and major supporter of the goals the KRELf strives to achieve, I feel that my faith in these projects is well founded and my money is being used responsibly to achieve goals that I strongly believe in.

Thank you to Eva Rocke for the guidance and instruction throughout this project, she made it all possible!

APPENDIX A

Student Interviews:

1. How did you learn about KRELf?
2. What motivated you to work on and submit a KRELf proposal?
PROBE: Did you have any other reasons or motivations for wanting to submit a proposal?
3. Can you share with me a little bit about the proposal(s) you have submitted?
4. Did you solicit guidance from KRELf committee members or sustainability staff as you researched and wrote your proposal? Why or why not?
5. Were there any other people/groups you worked w/ on this proposal?
PROBE: Do you have any reflections on your work w/ those individuals or departments?
6. Did you encounter any barriers or challenges as you developed your proposal? How did you overcome those challenges?

7. Have you been involved with the proposal or project post-approval? To what degree?
8. Is your project currently being developed or completed?
9. If not, what are the main barriers, from your perspective, to the project being completed?

10. Is there anything else that we have not discussed that you would like to mention?

Administration/Staff/Faculty:

1. How many KRELf proposals have you been involved in developing? Can you share w/ me briefly what those proposals have involved?
2. How has your involvement in KRELf proposal development typically gotten started?
3. What are your motivations in helping students develop KRELf proposals?
4. What do you perceive to be the main barriers/challenges to developing KRELf proposals?
5. What do you think are the main barriers or challenges to seeing approved KRELf projects through implementation?
6. If your project was approved, is it currently being implemented? If not, what do you perceive as being the barriers to project success/completion?
7. What building was your project proposed for?
8. To what extent have you communicated w/ KRELf committee members or sustainability staff throughout this process?

9. Are there any additional comments you would like to make about your KRELf experience?

Thank you so much for your time and willingness to review your experience with me. If you have any further comments or questions please feel free to contact me.

APPENDIX B

Hello _____,

I am currently working with the KRELf committee on a review of the KRELf allocation process as part of my senior capstone. Your name is listed as the contact person for the _____ proposal and I am wondering if you would be interested in meeting with me to answer some questions about how the project was seen through to completion. All of the interviews will be confidential and I will only be presenting my final analysis to the KRELf committee.

Please let me know if you would be willing to help me out.
Thank you,
Alison Wren