

Creating a “Green” Campus

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Creating a “Green” Campus

ABRAHAM PARKER

The world is getting warmer, but that’s just the beginning. Glaciers will melt, sea levels will rise and flood coastal cities, hurricanes will increase in intensity, entire ecosystems will be lost—and humans carry most of blame. If we act now, however, and start living in a more sustainable fashion, there is still time to stem the tide.

These are the underlying themes of *An Inconvenient Truth*, former Vice President Al Gore’s documentary and its accompanying lecture series. Gore’s work of the past few years has brought human-influenced climate change and environmental sustainability into the spotlight, but it is by no means the only outreach effort taking place. The United Nations has designated 2005–2014 as the “Decade of Education for Sustainable Development,” with its overall goal “to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning...[and to] encourage changes in economic behaviour that will create a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic vitality, and a just society for present and future generations.”

Educational institutions across the United States, particularly colleges and universities, have recognized that they are in a unique position to address these issues. Not only are they the educators of future generations of professionals, they also possess the intellectual capacity and resources to effectively integrate educational initiatives into their mission and programs. To this end, students and faculty at several colleges and universities have undertaken efforts to make their institutions more sustainable, as well as to educate others on the importance of resource use and sustainable development.

One such program is taking place at Yale University, which in 2004 hired its first sustainability director, Julie Newman, and in 2005 established an Office of Sustainability. “A growing number of students, faculty, and staff were interested in understanding the university’s ecological footprint, and soon the discussion became ‘How can Yale become a sustainable institution?’” explains Newman, describing the origins of her office and position. While the office is charged with developing and implementing a sustainability plan for the university as a whole, focusing on energy use, transportation, and waste management, a major aspect of its mission is education and outreach geared toward students and faculty. In fact, according to Newman, all of the office’s programs and initiatives are education related: “All that is reflected in our operational decisions has an educational impact on the Yale community.”

These efforts are having a marked impact on the Yale campus. The university has embarked on an aggressive greenhouse gas policy that will reduce emissions to 10 percent below 1990 levels, and has implemented several forward-thinking guidelines for building design, construction, waste management, and transportation. On the educational side, the university’s Environmental Studies Department now offers an undergraduate course, “Sustainable Development and Institutional Change,” taught by Newman. The Office of Sustainability also works closely with the Student Taskforce for Environmental Partnership, a student organization dedicated to educating the Yale community about environmental stewardship and sustainable behavior. Together they sponsor several programs in the undergraduate residential sessions

on “green” resource use, recycling competitions, energy conservation workshops, and orientation sessions for freshmen and new students. This student-centered involvement has been a key element in Yale’s sustainability strategy: Each residential college now has two student sustainability coordinators, and student-run educational programs on green living and sustainability are an integral part of the residential college structure.

Sustainability offices and programs such as this have become a standard fixture on many college and university campuses. Over 300 institutions of higher education worldwide have signed on to the Talloires Declaration, a commitment made by university presidents toward sustainability, which states, “Stabilization of human population, adoption of environmentally sound industrial and agricultural technologies, reforestation, and ecological restoration are crucial elements in creating an equitable and sustainable future for all humankind in harmony with nature. Universities have a major role in the education, research, policy formation, and information exchange necessary to make these goals possible.”

Commitments and efforts such as these at local and global levels will, one hopes, create more globally minded citizens and future decisionmakers who will help mitigate the effects of global warming and move us toward a more sustainable world.

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