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Courtney Dell'Agnese

Jill Rodrigues

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Students Leading Effort to Measure Sustainability at RWU

Creating a legacy of accounting for RWU's sustainability efforts, student-led initiative will help university track and measure progress



Meghan Ormsby (left) and Hallie Repeta presenting on RWU's water usage for the STARS report.

January 15, 2019 | By Courtney Dell'Agnese '19 & Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – With sustainability embraced as a university mission and campus culture, students are tracking and evaluating how Roger Williams University measures up in making greater strides toward sustainability from energy conservation to teaching concepts.

What started as a hands-on classroom lesson grew into a university initiative, thanks to the hard work of two groups of students from two different academic disciplines who were inspired to create change around the social justice issue of sustainability.

It began last spring with students in a public administration course in the politics and international relations program, who were tasked with finding ways to advance meaningful policy change on campus. According to Professor Steven Esons, instead of working on a case study with which they felt no personal connection, he wanted his students to become steeped in learning how to advocate for leadership decisions for a community they hold dear.

Recognizing that sustainability is interwoven in everything at RWU, from landscaping to farm-to-table dining options and teaching sustainability concepts in courses, the students decided to find a way to measure and celebrate the university's efforts. They identified an international sustainability rating system, called the Sustainability, Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) program, and brought their idea to former RWU President Donald Farish. President Farish, who led efforts at the university to promote sustainability as a core principle during his tenure, adopted the idea and gave the students his approval for having RWU join the STARS program before his passing in July.

"The students really took the initiative getting in contact with the President and getting people on board, convincing them this would be a good thing for the institution," said Professor Esons. "This is going to help institutionalize the program and will create a culture of sustainability – a culture that will become criteria for making future decisions."

The next group of students took up the work the following semester. This fall, students in Professor Esons sustainability studies minor capstone course, Working Towards Sustainability, began the time-consuming legwork of collecting the data to report to the STARS program. They had to connect with administration and staff across the

university to gather data in various categories like academics, water use, energy, food and dining, buildings and more, compiling as many years of information as possible to demonstrate progress over time.



Students take questions and feedback from the audience.

While there is still much more data to gather, the students gave a preliminary report to administrators and faculty on Dec. 5. About a dozen students, representing a wide range of academic disciplines from biology to construction management, explained the diverse set of measurements in the sustainability reporting framework and presented their findings that RWU has made significant strides in its efforts.

Among the efforts students highlighted are the campus Green Zones (where grounds receive no fertilizer and are allowed to grow naturally), the student-led Food Recovery Network and Conservation Corps, replacement of lighting with energy-efficient bulbs, and the myriad courses that incorporate sustainability concepts into the curriculum. In addition to talking about what the data shows, the students offered ideas to improve sustainability efforts in many areas.

“The STARS report is a good way to realize how sustainability plays a part in every single piece of life on a campus,” said environmental science major Rachel Nadolny. “I’ve learned a lot of the nitty-gritty details that can improve our sustainability as a school, but it’s information that can be taken back to your home life as well.”

Architecture major Loukas Varas said that all students, regardless of major, should play a part in creating a sustainable university and future.

“Even business majors or dance majors or law students should have sustainability become a part of their courses, because then we can talk about it as one unit,” Varas said. “It brings people together and allows everybody to be a part of it. And being a part of something as a whole university can make this grow really fast and become really successful.”

Data will continue to be collected during the spring semester, with the goal of filing a completed report in March. At that point, RWU will be eligible for receiving a STARS sustainability rating and have the annual reporting shared by *Sierra* magazine’s Coolest Schools ranking and *The Princeton Review’s Guide to Green Colleges*. To date, more than 850 institutions around the world have registered to participate in STARS, which is administered by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education.

“These students have gained a lot of knowledge in their sustainability courses, but now they’re practicing in taking that knowledge and transforming it into action,” said Professor Esons. “They’re giving something to the institution that will last and keep going, and they’re leaving their own legacy at Roger Williams.”

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