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Developing Faculty-Staff Collaborations to Foster a Culture of Environmental Justice

Andrew M. Wells

As science and society better understand the challenges of global climate change, colleges and universities must prepare students to be environmentally just actors. To prepare tomorrow's leaders, today's educators must foster a culture of environmental justice on college campuses through independent efforts and collaborations between faculty and staff. This article examines the potential for student and academic affairs to collaborate to enhance students' learning about environmental justice through liberal arts education. The author also provides examples of pro-environmental work done in student and academic affairs and introduces opportunities for collaboration between staff and faculty.

Institutions of higher education have the capacity to contribute to future attitudes about the environment, both through the intentional development of college students, and in the teaching and research conducted by faculty. In the student affairs realm, practitioners' work directly impacts the experiences and development of the students they supervise, mentor, and coach (Creamer, Winston, & Miller, 2001). These student-practitioner relationships may influence students' attitudes toward the environment. At the same time, faculty members enjoy the protection afforded by academic freedom to integrate environmental issues into the classroom, regardless of the instructor's academic discipline. This potential for greater education about sustainability is timely given recent developments in the global understanding of the nature of climate change and the importance of sustainability in response to this issue (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2013). Coupled with the science of climate change, staff and faculty members' ability to promote environmentalism empowers educators to enhance students' holistic education by incorporating literacy about environmental justice into the educational experience. This article explores the opportunities for collaboration between staff and faculty to promote a culture of environmentalism and sustainability on campus

The impact of global climate change necessitates an ethic of environmental justice – an understanding that systems of power and privilege promote a system in which the poor of the global south are both disproportionately impacted by global climate change, and disproportionately unable to curb the engines that create that climate change (Anguelovski, 2013; Hens & Stoyanov, 2014). Student affairs practitioners should seek opportunities for collaboration with faculty in order to support faculty members' efforts at educating

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students about global environmental justice. Additionally, staff can identify opportunities for faculty to be involved in student affairs practitioners' efforts to educate students. By combining these groups' knowledge, skills, and resources, staff and faculty can pursue a collaborative effort internal to the institution with the result of promoting a culture of sustainability on campus (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Sustainability benefits from interdisciplinary thinking and collaboration, with the benefit of institutional support, faculty and student affairs administrators may find that a collaborative approach to environmental justice is mutually beneficial (Martin & Samels, 2012). As explained below, the specter of global climate change warrants the inclusion of environmental issues in educators' social justice work.

Social and Environmental Justice

Promoting environmental justice is not just about marketing to environmentally conscious recruits or liberal fads. The world is increasingly globalized; our increasing interconnectedness confronts us with the global impacts of our local behavior. A recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stated that not only is global climate change happening, but also the threats of rising ocean levels, more severe weather patterns, droughts, and the international conflict that follows these issues will disproportionately affect people in developing nations (2013). Global climate change is happening; it is influenced by human behavior, and only an intentional change in this human behavior can reduce the likelihood of future catastrophes (IPCC, 2013). This report demonstrates the environmental and social justice ramifications of global climate change. It is incumbent on institutions of higher education to promote environmental consciousness in our students so that they may make more informed and environmentally sound decisions as consumers and citizens. The culture of environmental

justice advocated here is consistent with the elements of liberal education that best prepare today's college students for the challenges of the future.

Environmental Justice and Holistic Education

Environmental issues touch many disciplines, affect all of us and warrant the attention of both administrators and faculty. The practice of sustainability is also applied as a holistic approach that advocates for environmental justice, while pointing to the feasibility of incorporating sustainability in navigating economic, environmental, and social spheres (Elkington, 1999). Educators would do well to ensure graduating college students are aware of the importance of environmental justice, in order to better equip them to make informed decisions as they move forward in their lives. To that end, environmental justice links directly to the call to enhance holistic education. Students graduating from institutions that prioritize holistic education about environmental justice will be better prepared to meet the challenges of the future, to navigate the job market, and to combat climate change.

Student Affairs Practitioners' Roles

Undergraduate students learn and develop both in and outside of the classroom, and this development benefits from student affairs practitioners' guidance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These practitioners need to consider the implications of their work for social and environmental justice (Dunn & Hart-Steffes, 2012; Longerbeam, 2008). Student affairs professionals are uniquely situated to link institutional values with educational experiences in the co-curriculum that are designed to promote sustainability (Schroeder et al., 1994; Kerr & Hart-Steffes, 2012). Practitioners will help students understand the global climate change in their local context, by educating student leaders about sustainability and environmental justice.

Inasmuch as sustainability and environmental awareness inform some student affairs practitioners' work, these administrators already promote elements of environmental justice on campus. At some institutions, residence and dining halls are laboratories for students and administrators to explore opportunities to introduce sustainable dining options and housing facilities (Pursehouse, 2012). In the University System of Georgia, some campuses such as University of Georgia (UGA) and Kennesaw State University allow students to garden on institutional land. In some cases, the food grown in these gardens is even served in the dining halls. In the UGA residence halls, "EcoReps" are student volunteers in the Residence Hall Association who plan and implement social and educational programs that inform undergraduate students about sustainability.

Students can also drive the move toward sustainability independent of the inputs of administrators and faculty. Student interest in environmental issues led to the creation of the Office of Sustainability at UGA. Faculty and administrators at University System of Georgia campuses can use existing student attitudes toward the environment to develop cultures of environmental justice (Pryor et al., 2008; Eagan, Lozano, Hurtado, & Case, 2013).

Faculty and Academic Administrators' Roles

Many faculty members already play a part in promoting environmental justice through research and teaching about global climate change. Our understanding of climate change today is thanks to the scholarship of these researchers (Cortese, 2013). Even in courses not inherently focused on climate science and its social implications, faculty have the prerogative to include the lens of sustainability in their teaching; in doing so, they also contribute to the culture of sustainability on campus (P. Yager, personal communication, January 9, 2014).

Beyond their individual responsibilities for teaching and research, faculty may find themselves collaborating across disciplines to advance sustainability. An example from UGA is the Georgia Initiative for Climate and Society (GICS). The GICS is an interdisciplinary committee of faculty throughout the institution who have the support of the Vice-President for Research to explore avenues for unique collaborations that promote awareness and action on issues related to the climate (GICS, n.d.). These faculty members combine their diverse academic backgrounds with the goal of exploring opportunities to educate their peers, students, and the Georgia citizenry about human-influenced climate change (P. Yager, personal communication, January 9, 2014).

Given the modern understanding of the nature of global climate change, administrators in education should understand environmental literacy to be a tenet of a holistic liberal education (Pittman, 2012). Keeping in mind the student affairs practitioners' role in promoting a holistic liberal education, this is a key opportunity for academic and student affairs to collaborate. Instructors across disciplines are able to identify and explore the relevance of environmental justice in their respective fields; student affairs practitioners should reach out to these faculty members to invite them into collaborations that are relevant for their research and teaching agendas, and which also contribute to the campus culture of environmental justice.

Enacting Collaboration

There is no question that both academic and student affairs administrators are willing and able to embrace sustainability and environmental justice as an important factor of a quality liberal education (Pittman, 2012). Given that both sides of the proverbial house are working to promote awareness of environmental issues in their own ways, the challenge now is to identify where there is room for the two to collaborate. This collaborative approach to infusing

environmental justice into the holistic educational experience merits support both from senior leadership, as well as mid- and entry-level practitioners and faculty. Collaborative efforts at developing a culture of sustainability will benefit from engaging those energetic students, and connecting them with student affairs resources and faculty expertise. By matching the skills and expertise of junior administrators and faculty with the approbation and financial support of senior officials, collaborative approaches that promote environmental justice can even endure transitions in staffing and funding that might otherwise spell the end of such a project (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

Student affairs practitioners know that faculty members have considerable expertise both within and outside their disciplines, and that when their expertise is mated with that of student affairs, student learning is enhanced (Kezar & Lester, 2009). The adage that two heads are better than one certainly applies in the endeavor to promote a campus' culture of environmental justice. Educators and administrators already collaborate to enhance students' learning and development. At the University of California, Santa Barbara, student affairs practitioners collaborate with faculty in the Introduction to the Research University course to improve students' transition to a research institution. Schroeder, Minor and Tarkow (1999) articulated the value of Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) in promoting students' retention and satisfaction. Study abroad and service learning are also important and celebrated collaborations between academic and student affairs practitioners (Brejaart, Battit, & Dowal, 2009; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2013). In all of the aforementioned examples, the motivation to invest in collaboration is derived from the faculty and administrators' belief that these initiatives enhance undergraduate students learning experiences (Kezar & Lester, 2009). As faculty and administrators accept that today's college students need to be educated for a future threatened by global climate change, a campus culture

that embraces and enhances sustainability will become increasingly central to the educational mission.

Collaboration in Action

Collaborations between faculty and staff can take many forms. The FIGs and freshman seminars discussed above are strong examples of current collaborative efforts that may be altered to incorporate a lens or focus on environmentalism. Similarly, service-learning programs may provide opportunities for faculty partnering with student affairs staff to capitalize on students' interest in service by incorporating environmental awareness into the curriculum. Service-learning is a perfect example of collaborations that promote sustainability. Students are exposed to issues of environmental justice (e.g., food scarcity, poverty, pollution, deforestation, etc.) in a learning environment that promotes active, solution-oriented engagement with the issue (Anguelovski, 2013). In many parts of Georgia, food deserts and poverty are fodder for exploration of environmental justice issues through service-learning or even undergraduate research. The educational experience can inform students about national and global issues, in addition to the examination of environmental justice in local contexts.

On a macro level, senior campus administrators may choose to solicit the participation of faculty and student affairs staff in campus-wide efforts at promoting sustainability. These may involve task forces or working groups that examine the campus culture broadly. These might also involve green initiatives that promote campus greening through educational campaigns, outreach, or marketing efforts.

Staff and faculty throughout the state university system can capitalize on the nature of the campus cultures, academic disciplines, and resources available to develop campus cultures of

environmental justice that exemplify the conservation of resources inherent in sustainability by focusing on adapting existing programs and services and incorporating this sustainability lens.

Conclusion

Collaborations between faculty and staff are not infrequent – student affairs administrators have significant experience collaborating with faculty in advising and teaching undergraduate students. Many colleges and universities offer freshman seminars, living-learning communities, and service learning, all of which are informed by student affairs administrators' expertise. Oftentimes these programs arise from the need to enhance student learning, respond to accreditation processes, or to accommodate students' interests. Germane to environmentalism, many undergraduate students come to campus with existing pro-environmental attitudes, and even a belief that the federal government should be actively combating global climate change (Pryor et al., 2008). In addition to these students' established values, many faculty and staff have interest in or knowledge about global climate change and the need for environmental justice.

The task for today's administrators, faculty, and student affairs practitioners is to develop collaborative initiatives to capitalize on these existing student attitudes in order to achieve the goal of a campus climate that generates and sustains students' ongoing awareness of global climate change and the importance of environmentalism.

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