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Sustainability Education at the University of Dayton

Writing Process

To prepare for this Researched Argument writing assignment, I completed a research proposal that involved drafting a research question and creating a general timeline for conducting research leading up to this project's final submission. I then analyzed ten different sources through creating an annotated bibliography that examined the credibility, content, and relevance of each resource in relation to my paper's topic. In addition to collecting resources, I personally attended SAP events and interviewed the SAP student leader in order to understand the innerworkings of sustainability education at the University of Dayton. I then composed a draft that was analyzed by my professor and reviewed by my peers before the project's final submission.

Editor's note: For this paper, the author received the English 200 Excellence in Writing Award (\$100 prize).

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Sustainability Education at the University of Dayton

Olivia LeBlanc

Due to the increase in environmental issues relating to human production and overconsumption, it is vital that younger generations have the knowledge, skills, and awareness to become more sustainable to reverse the negative impact humans have had on the environment. Sustainability, in broad terms, focuses on ensuring that the current population meet its needs without compromising the needs of future generations (Thomas 246). Sustainability education, particularly at colleges and universities, supplies students with a foundation of knowledge and the ability to consciously act to improve the state of the environment. At the University of Dayton, campus-wide sustainability efforts have been enacted through the Hanley Sustainability Institute in order to provide students with valuable experience and knowledge regarding both past and current environmental issues. In particular, the Sustainability Activation Program (SAP) at the University of Dayton educates and informs students through on-campus events, online modules, and the implementation of sustainability education into formal curriculum. Sustainability education at the University of Dayton provides the necessary resources for students to become more sustainable individuals through its use of effective educational practices, a commitment to community, and school-wide involvement.

The Hanley Sustainability Institute, founded in 2014, strives to educate students about sustainability through a “cross-disciplinary network of innovative people and projects, stimulating and supporting dynamic collaboration between the College of Arts and Sciences, School of Engineering, School of Education and Health Sciences, School of Business Administration, the University of Dayton Research Institute, and within the community” (“Hanley Sustainability Institute: About Us”).

Of the Hanley Sustainability Institute's many projects, SAP specifically focuses on educating students and faculty on the importance and impact of sustainable living on college campuses and the surrounding communities. Consisting of a diverse group of student leaders, graduate assistants, and faculty, SAP strives to encourage members of the Dayton community to learn about current environmental issues and spark an interest in conserving natural resources ("Campus Sustainability Education"). This program introduces simple and effective sustainable practices that can be integrated into daily life and provides an opportunity for students and faculty to commit to living more sustainably through living the program's three main goals: to care, commit, and conserve. Partnered with the AVIATE Program, which combines the university's residential curriculum with the housing assignment process, SAP hosts on-campus events entitled *Flyers Go Green* and provides online modules that award students points toward housing assignments.

In order to determine the effectiveness of SAP, the important aspects of sustainability education at the collegiate level must be thoroughly evaluated. Rather than utilizing common education practices found in a typical curriculum, teaching about sustainability must extend into students' daily lives and inspire them to act. Ian Thomas, an associate professor in undergraduate and postgraduate environmental policy at RMIT, a university in Melbourne, Australia, believes that problem-based learning, rather than teacher-centered approaches, allows students to develop stronger critical thinking skills (256).

Problem-based learning is vital in the present understanding of sustainability education because advanced and innovative solutions to environmental problems are necessary to solve current and future issues. Thomas states, "We will need people (academics, graduates, and students) who are able to think—in such a way that they can assess the usefulness of the processes and assess the options that may appear to offer a sustainable future" (256). Although the University of Dayton does offer formal sustainability education, such as the minor in Sustainability, Energy, and the Environment (SEE), SAP aims to teach students how to be more sustainable in a way that encourages active problem-solving and critical thinking. During the on-campus *Flyers Go Green* lessons, session leaders use multiple online interactive quizzes, videos, and activities to engage the audience, explain the severity of various environmental issues, and demonstrate how to implement straightforward solutions into their daily routines.

The University of Dayton is deeply committed to community. Since its foundation in 1850, the University of Dayton has adopted the identity of an institution that fosters respect, diversity, inclusion, and a devotion to the common good. It strives to create an environment that focuses on improving the lives of others through diligent service and awareness of the effects of one's actions. Alongside its multitude of volunteer programs and service opportunities, the University of Dayton is fulfilling its commitment to community through programs that advocate for the protection of the environment.

Steven Cohen, director of the Research Program on Sustainability Policy and Management at Columbia University's Earth Institute, states that the importance of sustainable living is often undermined by the average person's time for "leisure, learning and reflection" and the tendency to "take security from harm for granted" (Cohen). College students from privileged backgrounds are seldom directly exposed to environmental issues such as contaminated water, an abundance of waste, or food insecurity. Many individuals in the developed world tend to overlook the struggles of those in cyclical poverty because they never personally experience the direct effects of inequality or a scarcity of resources. In order to fully understand the severity of certain environmental issues, students must engage with underprivileged populations to understand the detrimental effects of overconsumption, waste, and pollution.

The philosophy of ecofeminism, which relates the oppression of women to the exploitation of the environment, advocates for systematic change to alleviate suffering from both groups (Mohsenin). Janet Moore, a research associate at the Centre for Sustainable Community Development in British Columbia, approaches sustainability and environmental issues from a feminist viewpoint in order to "challenge our current institutional hierarchies and power structures" (Moore 539). Ecofeminist approaches are vital in sustainability education in order to defend marginalized groups, such as women, children, and minority populations that face the negative effects of environmental issues more severely than privileged groups.

Because of the University of Dayton's devotion to serving the community, students are often exposed to impoverished populations and unstable living conditions through volunteer work and service in the surrounding Dayton area. This exposure, along with education from SAP, provides students with a foundation of knowledge and personal experience about the damaging effects of unsustainable living and human waste.

Janet Moore also thoroughly analyzed sustainability education at the University of British Columbia (UBC) through workshops and interviews. By facilitating dialogue at UBC about sustainability education, Moore was successfully able to identify seven aspects of higher education that either hinder or ignite learning about sustainable issues in college-aged students. Moore states, “To implement this overarching goal [sustainability as priority], the UBC needs to incorporate sustainability into the university mission statement and consequently into the goals and processes of the university” (330).

In order to understand if the University of Dayton meets this criterion, the mission statement was thoroughly examined to determine if sustainability is one of the central priorities of the university. The mission statement consists of many sections, highlighting Dayton’s Marianist and Catholic traditions, values, and commitment to community. Although there is no direct reference to the term “sustainability” in the mission statement, the following section references many of the aspects involved in sustainable living:

We are also dedicated to excellence in creating new knowledge, integrating this across disciplinary boundaries, and applying it creatively to meet human needs. We are responsive and serve the needs of our community and region. Our pursuit of learning and scholarship is characterized by academic freedom and professional responsibility. (“Mission Statement”)

Although seemingly broad, the University of Dayton mission statement touches on many of the important factors of sustainability education, according to Moore, such as cross-disciplinary and campus-wide university involvement. Moore also challenges the idea that sustainability is limited to students pursuing careers in science, suggesting that sustainability education must be offered and integrated into all disciplines of a university in order to be successful.

In her research, Moore found, “The current structure of the university [UBC] does not encourage faculty to teach outside of their departments, nor does it actively promote interdisciplinarity. There is a need for incentives to attract faculty members and departments to be involved in interdisciplinary research and teaching” (333). Compared to other universities, the University of Dayton has made an effort to promote sustainable living among students and faculty from all departments and disciplines. SAP encourages attendance and participation from

every student and explains sustainable issues without complex terminology. This is important in the manifestation of sustainable living for individuals who may possess no previous knowledge on how to effectively limit personal consumption and waste production.

Marigrace Moses, the education team student leader for the Hanley Sustainability Institute, works on outreach programs and education through the Sustainability Activation Program. Moses, along with the other SAP student leaders, writes most of the lesson plans, manages the representatives of the program, and collaborates with other organizations on campus to educate students on sustainable practices. She first became involved with the program because of the influence of a friend and peer mentor who introduced her to the importance of sustainability and pursuing topics that she feels deeply passionate about. When first examining other students' perspectives and knowledge on sustainability, Moses observed that "most students were just uneducated, not careless." She writes:

Over the past year I have been involved in the program, I have grown to have such a heart and passion for sustainability education. It encompasses people of any major and from all parts of the world. As I began to see all the issues I was familiar with through a human rights lens, I knew I couldn't keep quiet. Our actions harm people all around the world, and I knew I wanted to and needed to be a part of educating people on these issues.

When questioned about the effectiveness of SAP, Moses said she believes that the program is successful, despite the challenge of sparking interest in one topic among a group of over 8,000 undergraduates. SAP has been invited to classrooms, Girl Scout troops, youth mentorship programs, and faculty and staff trainings.

Moses expressed her excitement that the program's passion for sustainability is spreading into the community. "When teaching, there will also be people in the room that won't care or listen at all," Moses said. "To me, it's worth it to have just one student be moved to make a change. We are tackling large issues but have to think about it on a small scale sometimes. It starts with one person and one change." Moses's passion for both the environment and SAP demonstrates

how the University of Dayton provides the tools and resources for students to become deeply involved with sustainable practices.

The University of Dayton recently received a gold rating in the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education's sustainability tracking, assessment, and rating system, known as STARS. The University of Dayton is now among the highest-rated STARS schools in Ohio, the second-highest among Catholic universities, and the top 2 percent of all rated schools in sustainability (Tedford 32-35). Michelle Tedford, writer for the *University of Dayton Magazine*, writes that:

What to an outsider might seem as individual initiatives—a green roof planted here, efficient lighting installed there—form a web of innovations, from academics and research to operations and administration. These innovations are not only golden, but illuminate a focus on the University's strategic vision: to marry sustainability and human rights in the spirit of the pope's encyclical on caring for our common home and UD's mission as a Catholic, Marianist University (Tedford 29).

The University of Dayton has involved all aspects of the university and the surrounding community to become a more sustainable institution that provides the experiences, resources, and means to create well-rounded, knowledgeable, and sustainable individuals. Along with projects from the Hanley Sustainability Institute that foster and encourage environmental awareness among students, SAP has served as a major contributor for educating college students in an environment that cultivates learning and open communication.

In conclusion, SAP at the University of Dayton provides students with an opportunity to learn more about environmental issues and commit to living more sustainably. With sustainability and community as core values, the University of Dayton has taken up the challenge to educate its students, faculty, and staff in a way that fosters sustainable living and practices. SAP, along with the other Hanley Sustainability Institute's programs, has utilized a cross-disciplinary approach to involve all departments and fields in the effort to encourage sustainable living practices. The University of Dayton also provides students with experiences in the surrounding community through service, some of which exposes the firsthand effects of environmental issues. The passion and interest

surrounding SAP, as exemplified through its leaders, demonstrates how the University of Dayton provides abundant opportunities to students to truly become more sustainable individuals, even after graduation.

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