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Engaging and Contributing Professionally in a Global Sustainability Honors Course

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Abstract: Science and Global Sustainability provides honors students with opportunities to engage with field professionals working toward sustainability and to participate in the production of various academic publications across disciplines. Interconnected concerns of social, environmental, and economic factors are considered when assessing the sustainability of any plan of action in the world. Opportunities for mentorship in multiple professional contexts are discussed.

Keywords: student engagement; field practice; faculty/student research; mentoring in education; interdisciplinarity

In the spring 2019 semester at Oral Roberts University, a Christian liberal arts university in Tulsa, Oklahoma, John Korstad, Professor of Biology, and Jeffrey Lamp, Professor of New Testament and Instructor of Environmental Science, co-taught a course in the honors program called “Science and Global Sustainability.” The course is designed as an interdisciplinary exploration of scientific considerations in the study of global sustainability and is co-taught every other year by Korstad and Lamp.

In 2019, the course began with the instructors defining the term “sustainability” and placing it in the context of the Christian theological ethos of the university. The working model of sustainability adopted for the course consisted of the intersection of three overlapping spheres of human activity identified by the construct “people-planet-profit.” This alliterative construct represents the interconnected concerns of the social, environmental, and economic factors that must be considered when assessing the sustainability of a course of action in the world. Balancing the concerns of each of these spheres

of human activity optimally results in an overlapping area, conceived in terms of a Venn diagram, that represents the concept of sustainability. Where the interests of each of these spheres is represented is the most sustainable course of action.

Most of the semester consisted of presentations by twenty-nine guest speakers who work in fields that relate to the people-planet-profit construct. The speakers were chosen from a variety of sectors representing academia, industry, business, science, social issues, government, the community, and environmental concerns. While the content of the presentations from speakers was high quality, the highlight of many class sessions was the interaction between the students and speakers. The instructional intention of these sessions was to expose students to the complexities that various enterprises encounter when trying to balance their interests with the wider and often unique considerations of sustainability.

The most exciting prospect of the course was the major assignment for assessment. As the instructors, we presented the students with the opportunity to work on writing projects in which we were involved. Students enthusiastically agreed to this suggestion. Students ranked four topics in order of preference and were divided into groups. The groups deliberated the shape of their papers and worked closely in consultation with the instructors to produce the final manuscripts. The titles for the papers were: “A Christian Defense of Creation Care”; “Case Studies on Dead Zones—Watersheds around Large Rivers That Empty into Oceans or Seas and Create Growing Patches of Hypoxia”; “Case Studies on Cultural Eutrophication—Watersheds around Lakes That Contribute to Toxic Bluegreen Algal Blooms”; and “Phytoremediation and the Issue of Fracking in South Africa.” The final papers will be included in two textbooks of which Korstad is a co-editor and an academic journal published by Oral Roberts University of which Lamp is the managing editor. At this time, all the papers have been reviewed and accepted for publication and are in the process of editing for inclusion in their targeted publications.

The two-pronged approach to this course—exposure to experts across several disciplines and collaborative work with instructors to produce professional publications—provides honors students with opportunities to explore potential vocational paths and to engage in substantial research with professors. Students are afforded opportunities for mentorship in multiple professional contexts. Via these opportunities, students develop traits that prepare them to become leaders in their chosen fields, a valued outcome in

BRIEF IDEAS

honors programs. We encourage other honors faculty to consider developing similar scholarly pursuits as they mentor their honors students.

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