

Question, comment or story idea?

A Sustainable Education: Integrating Global Thinking Into Classroom Curriculum

By RHESA LEDBETTER • JUL 12, 2016



MENTALHEALTHVA.GOV

'Sustainability' is not just a buzzword. The resources on our planet are finite. To meet present needs and those of the future, implementing strategies with preservation and viability in mind is critical. But, how do we instill a mindset of sustainability in our culture and relay the interconnectedness between the environment, society and economy? Faculty across the country, including those at Utah State University, believe one way is through classroom education.

It's easy to link sustainability to many scientific disciplines as we think about integrating practices focused on water and energy conservation, but what about areas of study where a connection is not so clear?

"I see a great advantage of diversifying sustainability across all fields in the university. It's not just let's compost our garden waste. There is more to it than that," said Nick Flann, an associate professor in computer science at USU.

Flann and a number of other USU faculty are part of a team integrating sustainability practices into their courses.

Carlos Licon is an assistant professor who teaches design and planning courses.

"The idea in those courses is to understand the principles of sustainability and find ways to take those principles to shape a project or create a vision for a community," he said.

"It's about understanding the whole spectrum of what the design entails - from the developing concept, finding the site, recognizing the ecological and environmental impact, understanding the social and economic aspects, and then trying to integrate everything together."

USU is not the only institution pushing 'global thinking' within their courses. The university belongs to the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, which has nearly 1,000 members, the majority of which are higher education institutions. The association works with institutions to drive sustainability innovation by fostering leadership development and providing support for initiatives including sustainability curriculum.

Several USU faculty attended an AASHE meeting this past winter. The experience provided them the opportunity to provide a sustainability workshop for their USU colleagues.

"The purpose of the [USU] sustainability workshop was to build a community of faculty who are interested in getting sustainability out there to all our students in all different fields and at different developmental stages of their careers. One of our principal goals is to build something that will sustain among the faculty," said Flann.

Sheryl Aguilar is a professional practice faculty in nutrition and dietetics. She attended the USU workshop and is preparing to integrate her sustainability ideas this fall.

"What we are trying to instill in our students is that sustainability is not just a course you check off a list and then move on to other things, but that it incorporates a variety of different concepts that are applicable whether you are taking a natural science course or are involved in the humanities." -Ryan Dupont

“Right now, about 40% of food is wasted in the United States. I am interested in how to take food and grow it, use it, and teach about it in a sustainable way,” she said. “I want to teach our students how to teach others how to reduce food waste. That would include things like learning how to reuse the food they have already made. The second thing would be to learn how to preserve things, so that they don’t get wasted. The last thing would be to only buy what you need.”

These sentiments are well-intentioned, but do students really care? Aguilar has been told by recruiters that students find USU’s mission of sustainability very appealing.

“There is a huge interest in sustainability in the millennial group of students, but there’s not as much education as I would have thought,” she said. “They think it’s a cool concept, but they don’t really understand how it all connects to them and their career.”

And, what about those disciplines we wouldn’t typically categorize as looking out for the current and future needs of the planet? They are jumping right into the mix. History professors, for example, are teaching about lost arts- simple practices, like home canning.

Ryan Dupont, a professor in civil and environmental engineering and at the Utah Water Research Laboratory, said he was excited to hear that even those involved in theater are finding ways to contribute.

“You typically don’t think of theater as a focus for sustainability, but in reality those students are involved in the selection of materials to build sets and [they determine] how those sets are constructed. The use of coatings and adhesives have potential significant impacts on the people making the sets and implications in terms of people manufacturing them,” he said.

The USU faculty are excited about starting the upcoming semester with their newly designed curriculum and can’t wait to empower students to know that small changes can make big differences overall.

“What we’re trying to instill in our students is that sustainability is not just a course you check off a list and then move on to other things, but that it incorporates a variety of different concepts that are applicable whether you are taking a natural science course or are involved in the humanities,” said Dupont. “We are trying to incorporate ideas from different disciplinary perspectives, so it becomes part of modern life.”

If you are interested in getting involved in USU’s sustainability efforts or would like additional information, please contact: planetarythinking@usu.edu (mailto:planetarythinking@usu.edu)