

Sustainability and Me

Curiosity brought me to sustainability, and it still keeps me interested. Many years ago, Alexander Wilson wrote a book called *The Culture of Nature*, a title that seemed so strange to me that I decided to teach it (which is what I often do to satisfy my curiosity). My first step was a course by that title in the first year writing program. My second was an interdisciplinary course on “The Environmental Imagination,” meant to introduce the Humanities as part of our Environmental Studies major. In both of those classes, I encouraged students to think about their own place, St. Olaf College.

One of those students, Elise Braaten, found these local inquiries so interesting that she said that you could teach a whole course on Campus Ecology. In the first semester of her senior year, she drafted a syllabus for such a course, and we team-taught it in the Spring semester. We read a lot, and talk about the readings in class, but we also tour the college power plant, cafeteria, LEED platinum Science Center, and natural lands, and we talk to staff who do sustainability in Residence Life and on the grounds. Assignments for students include reflective journals, plot projects, research on resource flows, annotations of the campus, and a chapel service. This year, the research was directed at revising the college sustainability website, and students also wrote profiles of college faculty, students and alumni/ae who live sustainability in one way or another. Campus Ecology began as a topical course in American Studies, but eventually moved to Environmental Studies, where it serves as a way of integrating and applying perspectives encountered in other courses to everyday life. It’s taught annually, and team-taught with a different student each year.

Eventually, my curiosity about college culture and the moral ecology of everyday life led to *The Nature of College: College Culture, Consumer Culture, and the Environment*, which traces the environmental causes and consequences of a day in the life of Jo and Joe College, and offers both individual and institutional opportunities for sustainable practices. The book examines the moral ecology of everyday life on college campuses, exploring why college students act the way they do, and why it matters. Even though they think they’re charting their own way in the independence of college culture, students are still subject to American culture’s powerful influences, including its consumerism and its consumer forgetfulness. And all of the elements of college culture—classes and labs, cars and clothes and the cafeteria, bathrooms and dorm rooms, TVs and computers, cell phones and iPods, beer and sex and parties, politics and religion—are shaped by the environmental values of American culture, and shape the environmental beliefs and behavior of college students.

In *The Nature of College*, therefore, we wake up with Joe and Jo College, check out their rooms and closets, get ready for school, eat in the cafeteria, watch TV and check Facebook, hang out and hook up, go to a party, and debate religion and politics. We consider both their expressed values (the ones they say) and their operative values (the ones they do), as we look at the moral choices of their lives. Looking at all of these facets of “the good life” of college, we wonder whether the good life might be better, both for people and the planet. And we show, in each chapter, the ways in which mindfulness coupled with practical idealism can make a real difference in the environmental history of a blue-green planet.

This last semester, one of last year's Campus Ecology students, Amy Kasch, put together an independent major on "Psychology and Social Change," and designed, for her senior project, a year-long orientation to sustainability for first-year students, to be implemented as part of the Residence Life program. Amy's major, and this project, are a good example of ways that faculty can respond to student interest in sustainability in innovative ways. Another example is a group independent study in English and Environmental Studies called "Green Reading," in which five seniors decided they wanted to read some of the classic texts of Environmental Studies—the ones everybody excerpts but nobody reads in full—not just as content, but as rhetoric. As part of their project, the group proposed a first-year "book club" for January, in which students would read and discuss Annie Dillard's "Seeing," and David Orr's "Human Ecology as a Problem of Ecological Design" and Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food*.

In 2003, the college formed a Sustainability Task Force, and I got to be on it. In that year, we worked on our Environmental Principles and the black & gold & green website (www.stolaf.edu/green), both of which I drafted for the group. I'll be working on the website, seeing what we can usefully share, this summer.

I've also been involved in AASHE (American Association for Sustainability in Higher Education), where I've been a part of conversations about sustainability across the curriculum so this project is a natural [note the weird meaning of "natural" here] for me. I'm hoping to share some of the weird teaching that I do, and to get ideas and inspiration from everybody else.