

Sustainability Conference “Essay”—Steve Martin, Ripon College

As a newcomer to the academic application of sustainability, I admittedly have a lack of knowledge of official College efforts related to sustainability. I do know that four years ago, Ripon College received some favorable national attention for its “Velorution” program. The College provided a free mountain bike to incoming first-year students in exchange for an agreement that they would not bring a car to campus. In part, this was a response to a perceived “parking problem” (there really was not a problem, though students liked to think there was), but it was also done with the environment in mind. The College also closed and removed several city streets that went through the middle of the campus. It is now a much nicer green space. It is aesthetically more pleasing and also safer. Importantly, it has discouraged students from driving from their rooms to classes (something that was silly to do in the first place, since walking to class is actually faster than driving anywhere on our small campus.)

Recently, a cooperative food garden has been started by College employees, but I do not know many details. I personally joined a local garden co-op myself in an effort to support better agricultural practices (it’s an organic farm) and to support my local economy. Plus, I remember as a child that carrots directly out of the garden actually have flavor! I am excited for the potential of the growing popularity of “local farms”. I also now purchase only local meats and other products, like eggs and honey, when at all possible.

One of the other professors from Ripon College who is attending this conference, Skip Wittler, does some preservation work with a prairie that is part of the College’s property. I do not know the extent of his work, but I know that he gives tours of the prairies and collects seeds from various plants, I presume to reseed other such grasslands in the upper Midwest.

Ripon has a growing Environmental Studies program, and I would like to offer a course in the future on the Rhetoric of Environmentalism/Conservationism. I teach about social movements, and I’d like to focus more on the environmental movement. So, to some extent, the conversation about sustainability is entering into the curriculum. However, Ripon’s main focus over the past five years has been about service learning and ethical leadership. Those concepts have taken center stage in terms of being blended into the curriculum. In a larger sense, of course, this focus on service learning and leadership will no doubt result in some Ripon graduates becoming active in environmental efforts beyond the classroom.

In the future, I also hope to continue a Maymester course at Ripon where I would focus on conservation. For twenty or more years, Bob Otis (now retired) has taken 12 students to the San Juan Islands to study orcas. I have fallen in love with these animals, who now are an endangered species. The biggest reason for their decline is the over-fishing of the coveted Chinook (king) salmon and the over-logging of the spawning streams of the salmon. We have not practiced sustainable fishing practices in the Pacific Northwest, and salmon “farming” is not an acceptable alternative to sustainable practices. I only hope it’s not too late to save the salmon and the orcas.

For at least a decade, there also has been a student-led environmental group on campus, EGOR (Environmental Group of Ripon). They have been instrumental in bringing about a lot of positive change on campus, such as more prevalent recycling,

reducing plastic water bottles (they sold stainless bottles as a fundraiser), eliminating trays in the commons, and many other beneficial changes.

I am attending this conference to see what other faculty do in their classrooms. As an avid angler and outdoorsman, I want to bring my experiences with nature to more students. Fewer children ever go camping or enjoy nature. They seem too busy texting someone on a cell phone. An appreciation and understanding of nature seems critical, in my view, to getting more people interested in sustainable living.

Last fall, I applied for an NEH grant, but was not successful. I am also hoping that this conference can provide with me more connections and knowledge to help in seeking out and successfully receiving grants to fund my efforts.