

Education for Sustainability  
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How can I be a better teacher? How can I make my community and the world a better place through my work?

Perhaps I am hopelessly idealistic but I believe that all of my colleagues in education share the goals embodied in these two questions. At one level they are simple questions, reflecting desires to do good work and to make a difference. But anyone who has spent much time in the classroom knows that the answers are rarely simple and the work involved in answering these questions is never complete.

Over the past 15 years I have been increasingly drawn into the work of sustainability in higher education as one way to provide meaningful answers to these questions. Focusing on education for sustainability helps me to be a better teacher and also helps to make my work meaningful in ways that extend beyond equipping young people with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in contemporary society.

I have been at Luther College since 2002 and have been actively engaged in many of Luther's campus sustainability initiatives throughout the time. Richard Torgerson, Luther's president for the past 11 years, likes to say that his favorite word is 'accelerate' and he has helped to create momentum in addressing sustainability throughout Luther's operations. From local foods in the cafeteria to waste oil converted to biodiesel; from alternative fuel vehicles to a bike share program; from composting worms in the dorms to aggressive waste reduction efforts at move out time; from a 20% drop in electricity usage to a goal to cut our carbon footprint by 50%. The list of initiatives is long and growing, though the accompanying culture shift that will ensure that these changes are building blocks to larger changes is much slower and more challenging.

An even greater challenge is moving campus sustainability efforts – at Luther and other campuses – from college operations to the classroom. On this front, Luther has had much more limited success. As challenging as it may be to run an efficient recycling program, it's even harder to make any noticeable shift in curriculum. To anyone who has worked in higher education this will not come as a surprise. But finding ways to seriously address sustainability in higher education curricula is, I believe, one of the most important challenges that we must face. The challenge is multi-faceted and includes many questions including the following:

How do we rethink education to move our society toward sustainability? What models exist for successfully preparing environmentally literate graduates? How do we reshape curriculum to include the knowledge necessary for individuals to be good citizens of the biosphere? What changes are necessary in how we teach to move toward environmentally literate graduates? What philosophical underpinnings exist for rethinking education in light of sustainability challenges? What role should liberal arts colleges play in education for sustainability? What role do disciplines play in education for sustainability?

As a philosopher, I love big questions. As a concerned parent of young children, I need answers that work because I fear the alternative. I am very excited about this workshop and the ongoing work of this project as one way to arrive at some of these answers.