

ACM Sustainability Workshop Essay

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There are several reasons for my interest in sustainability education.

Sustainability education complements the goals of a liberal education and the mission of Luther College in many ways. First, sustainability education emphasizes an interdisciplinary, systems approach to thinking about problems. It promotes an understanding of social and ecological systems, an awareness of their interdependence, and an appreciation for the complexity of our world. Second, sustainability education demands attention to the importance of place and community while simultaneously increasing students' awareness of cross-cultural perspectives and global interconnectedness. Finally, sustainability education helps students become informed, ethical citizens. The ability to assess empirical claims, think critically about alternative viewpoints, engage in political discourse, advocate change, and commit to action leads students toward a life of service and learning. As a teacher in a liberal arts college, I think it is essential to introduce sustainability concepts wherever appropriate.

Within my discipline – economics - the study of sustainability often creates an interesting tension. Normative economic questions about social welfare become much richer and more complex when students are forced to consider future generations and non-human interests. For example, questions about economic development are more difficult when considered alongside questions of climate change or species preservation. Weaving sustainability into the study of economics also forces the discussion to become more interdisciplinary. For these reasons, I have come to believe that infusing sustainability into the study of economics can help students better understand both sustainability and economics.

I am also interested in the mechanics of sustainability education because have been working on this issue at Luther for the past couple of years and have run into several significant difficulties. The first issue is finding a way to infuse sustainability into the curriculum without it feeling “tacked on.” I see sustainability primarily as a way of approaching problems or a “way of thinking” rather than a separate topic to be covered, but the former is more difficult to implement. The second problem is a perception that faculty and staff that promote sustainability are attempting to tell students what to think rather than how to think. This has created somewhat of a backlash and makes it more difficult to introduce sustainability ideas to students. I believe both of these problems can be overcome, and I am very interested in working with the conference participants to accomplish that.