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While in general sustainability seems to be becoming more and more popular as a topic these days, one thing that needs to be understood is what kind of sustainability we are talking about. There is no secret that the definition itself varies among people and among institutions. Some prefer to focus on small issues – like switching to local-grown food and going “trayless” in the commons, some decide to “go bigger” and replace grass on athletic fields with artificial turf made of recycled tires or turn to alternative energy sources for different campus needs. Regardless of which particular actions we are talking about, the end goal seems to be the same for all – minimizing the environmental impact of human activity.

Ripon College’s sustainability program is in its early stages, and is currently mostly limited to the “baby steps” mentioned above. One big step in the direction of sustainability was made two years ago with the introduction of the “Velorution” program (<http://www.ripon.edu/velorution/>). Under this program incoming freshmen were offered an opportunity to receive a free bicycle if they promised not to bring a car on campus in their first year. One can easily see the sustainability implications of this program. First – less vehicle traffic on campus, less pollution and fuel consumption. Also fewer cars means that fewer parking spaces are needed and thus fewer green areas end up being covered with asphalt. Secondly, and this is not what commonly is thought about as sustainability – a potentially healthier campus population, and thus smaller burden on the society’s resources in a large number of areas. Add to this the fact that more mobile students are now more active around the community, visiting local business, etc., and one may understand that the effect of this program goes well beyond the traditionally considered environmental impacts.

While no formal initiative is in place, faculty are trying to do their part in becoming more environmentally-friendly by moving assignments, handouts and course information to online portals rather than using traditional paper-based methods. Sustainability issues are directly or indirectly addressed in a large number of classes throughout the campus.

As an economist I deal with sustainability issues on many levels of my teaching and research. In introductory classes we talk with students about externalities (including but not limited to pollution) and the Tragedy of the Commons (overuse of commonly-owned resources). These issues get carried over into more advanced classes, with some classes specifically focusing on environmental issues and natural resource use. One key thing that we economists focus on is the study of costs and benefits of human actions, clear understanding of those and development of mechanisms that will allow the resources to be used efficiently. All things considered, your typical cynical economist would be the last person to define sustainability as having a “zero carbon footprint” or completely switching to local and organic produce or wind energy, as most of these will simply be inefficient.

I have done a significant amount of research in the areas of sustainability and social arrangements to promote efficiency, and I believe some of the workshop participants can benefit from the theoretical and field knowledge that I possess. I am looking forward to obtaining information that will help me incorporate sustainability issues in class beyond the levels of simple examples and basic experimental activities.