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College Is Future Focused on Sustainability

🕒 July 2, 2019 (<https://today.cofc.edu/2019/07/02/college-is-future-focused-on-sustainability/>) ❤️ 1 👤 Dan Dickison (<https://today.cofc.edu/author/dickisond/>)

“Sustainability literacy” might be a mouthful, but it’s a phrase with a purpose – an important purpose. For the past three years, sustainability literacy has been the focus of the College’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) (<http://sustain.cofc.edu/>). It’s been the means by which faculty and administrators are working to empower students – and the wider College of Charleston community – to address 21st-century problems.

College leadership chose sustainability literacy as the institution's QEP – a requirement of the reaccreditation process that colleges and universities undergo every 10 years – in part from information gleaned from a student survey. That data indicated a dire need among students to better understand how environmental, economic and social systems interrelate.

According to religious studies and environmental and sustainability studies professor **Todd LeVasseur '97**, who directs the Sustainability Literacy Institute (<http://sustainability.cofc.edu/>) (SLI, the entity that administers the work of the QEP), this initiative is vital. He regards it as key to helping the College carry out both its strategic plan and its mission, and views it as a campuswide initiative, not one limited to his office alone.

“Preparing our students to succeed beyond college,” says LeVasseur, “is our highest priority, and that means preparing them to address specific, 21st-century challenges such as climate change, social injustice and food insecurity. The SLI has been going about this by ensuring that more and more of the courses offered at the College are sustainability focused or sustainability related. We’ve also been augmenting our students’ co-curricular opportunities so they become literate about sustainability. It’s imperative that we share this work by partnering with various departments and offices across campus to bring important speakers here and offer skills workshops, training events and development opportunities.

“We also work with faculty on building teaching competencies around the triple bottom line,” adds LeVasseur, referring to the concept that businesses focus as much on social and environmental concerns as they do on financial. “This recognizes that our shared goal is to redesign society for a post-carbon future that will be just for all, and that will allow the earth’s varied habitats to flourish. Data suggests that, as a species, we’re far behind on all of these counts.”

Exemplary of these opportunities is the Changemaker Challenge, a campuswide competition that the SLI staged for the first time this year. Students or teams of students from all across campus were invited to spend a good portion of the past year developing proposed solutions to specific problems pertaining to social justice and fair distribution (the SLI’s chosen theme for the past academic year). Twelve different

proposals were submitted, ranging broadly from helping students plan their financial future to generating awareness regarding the challenges faced by U.S. military veterans. A proposal to eliminate food waste in the Charleston community won first prize – and \$1,250 – for the three students who developed this solution.

“Changemaker Challenge is only one aspect of this initiative,” says management and entrepreneurship professor **Elise Perrault**, one of numerous faculty members who have embraced the work of the SLI. She says it’s important that the institute has motivated many of her colleagues to make explicit connections between their courses and sustainability.

“The SLI’s annual themes of water the first year and social justice this past year have prompted us to think about our subject areas in new ways and to identify points of intersection that are important, but may not necessarily be obvious or intuitive,” she says. “The entire College community is enriched by this approach, especially students.

They get to explore the many facets of sustainability through their varied courses, and this approach enables them to connect the dots in their own way and engage in creative reflections and actions that integrate sustainability into their personal/professional lives.”

Perrault teaches an upper-level course that focuses on the interaction between business and society. She says it presents many opportunities for her students to delve more specifically into how businesses can be a force for good with respect to society and the environment.

“I also teach a capstone course in business policy,” she adds. “Within that course, there’s an entire module about how managing social and environmental relations impacts a company’s strategy. Teaching these materials is exciting because my students are genuinely interested in finding ways to address and solve social/environmental problems.”

Political science professor **Matt Nowlin** concurs. He has participated in two SLI faculty panels and taught several courses that qualify as sustainability focused or sustainability related. With specialties in policymaking, environmental policy and energy policy, he’s upbeat about the opportunities that the SLI provides.

Left to right: Professors Elise Perrault, Matt Nowlin and Barbara Beckingham (*Photos by Mike Ledford*)

"I've received two mini-grants from the SLI to conduct summer research with students, and those experiences can be pivotal for my students," he says. "But also, as a scholar of environmental policy and politics, I feel fortunate to be part of an institution that places a premium on integrating sustainability into the curriculum. Promoting sustainability is vital for the College because it requires students to focus on the economic, environmental and social challenges that will shape their lives. In addition, it encourages them to think in terms of systems and integrate material from multiple classes."

Barbara Beckingham is another professor who's enthused about the SLI. As an environmental geoscientist, she specializes in human and ecological health risk assessment, sediment remediation and the impact of microplastics. She says that she's most excited about the synergies that have developed through the College's emphasis on sustainability literacy.

"A major assignment in my course, titled Water in the Urban Environment, was for students to submit a team proposal on an aspect of water sustainability to the College's ECOllective funding program," she says of the initiative offered through the Office of Sustainability. "It was fascinating to see how each team member contributed since the students came from different academic disciplines with different skills. Many told me afterward that they gained great appreciation for the level of planning and commitment needed to enact change. And that's just what they'll be confronted with after graduation, no matter what line of work they pursue."

Beckingham also participated in the SLI's faculty panel discussions. "That experience connected me to other faculty who are working on water issues from different vantage points, many of whom I had never met before or didn't know were working in this area of mutual interest," she says. "We've been in touch since to collaborate on ideas."

That kind of collaboration – that synergy – clearly demonstrates the value of sustainability literacy, says political science professor Brian Fisher. He’s been the director of the College’s Office of Sustainability since its inception in 2009 and now directs the newly established Center of Sustainability.

“The core engine of sustainability literacy is shifting how we see problems,” says Fisher, who specializes in global environmental policy. “Societal problems today are different than in prior eras because they are extremely complex and interconnected. At one time, problems were simple cause-and-effect dynamics. Today, those still exist, but they are often beset with chaotic yet interconnected layers that generate unpredictability and seemingly disconnected variation.

“Sustainability literacy,” he adds, “not only gives us the ability to see those problems in their many layers and spaces, but it also inculcates the capacity for us to address them through a holistic framework that attempts to rethink current systems built on hierarchy and domination, which breed conflict and violence. It is the latter that opens the door not only to solving 21st-century problems, but while doing so, shifts the interactive foundation for human civilization.”

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The College of Charleston Board of Trustees will hold a Special Meeting at 10:30 a.m. on Friday, Dec, 20, 2019, in the Randolph Hall Boardroom.

Join the Yaschik/Arnold Jewish Studies Program for Chanukah in the Square (<https://today.cofc.edu/2019/12/10/chanukah-in-the-square-2019/>)

Posted on December 10, 2019 (<https://today.cofc.edu/2019/12/10/chanukah-in-the-square-2019/>)

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