

Improving environmental education at Carleton

BY DANA KRAUS

Whether or not we admit it, most Carleton students are in the process of choosing a career and developing the values, worldview, and lifestyle habits that will define us for a good portion of our adult lives. Many of us yearn for a lifestyle and a career that will allow us to address the social, political, economic, spiritual, and environmental problems we hear about everyday in our classes and from our friends. But, often it is not entirely clear how to bridge the gap between what we learn about in the classroom and our post-Carleton lives.

Helping students learn how to address societal and environmental problems through their career and lifestyle choices should be just as important to Carleton's campus sustainability movement as conserving energy, reducing waste, or constructing green buildings. Speakers at the Campus Sustainability Day webcast and banquet challenged Carleton and all institutions of higher education

to take on the responsibility of helping students become leaders in solving our society's problems and creating a sustainable future.

Carleton is renowned for the quality of teaching and learning it

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offers. Undoubtedly, we are all learning good and important things in our classes. And some of us learn how to take action against societal problems through extracurricular groups such as SOPE, MPIRG, the Carleton Conservative Union, the Multi-Cultural Affairs Office and others. I am suggesting that students demand to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to create a

sustainable future in our classes as well. In collaboration with like-minded faculty and staff, we need to start dreaming about what teaching and learning at Carleton would be like if we were being

well-prepared to create a better, more sustainable future.

To start the discussion on how education at Carleton could be better, I suggest that Carleton classes do the following three things better: be more interdisciplinary, integrate practical aspects of how our college operates, and include more service learning opportunities. Some classes at Carleton already do these things,

but many more classes could.

The problems our generation faces are interdisciplinary. Problems like the energy crisis, global warming, inequality, and dysfunctional political systems cannot be addressed by one perspective alone. In order to be successful problem solvers, we will need to learn how to integrate ideas and perspectives from different disciplines. Our classes at Carleton should help us learn how to do this. The Carleton Interdisciplinary Science and Math Initiative (CISMI), led by Professor Trish Ferrett, is already addressing this need to a certain extent. Students should support this Initiative and let faculty and the administration know that we want more interdisciplinary coursework.

Creating a sustainable future will involve creating practical solutions to practical problems. We need to learn to think very carefully about the food we eat, the dorms we live in, the cars we drive, the appliances we use in our dorm rooms, and the various types of fuel we

use to power our lives. Many of us do not even know where Carleton's electricity and heat come from, much less the environmental and social values we express as individuals and as a college as we go about meeting our everyday needs. Learning to consider these practical aspects of our daily lives and their larger meaning is essential to the creation of a sustainable future, but very few of our classes address these things. St. Olaf professor Jim Farrell, teaches a course called Campus Ecology that is a perfect example of the type of coursework we need offered at Carleton.

It is not enough to learn about more problems and issues in our classes, if we are not taught how to take action and make positive change. Learning about problems without learning how to solve them makes us feel depressed and overwhelmed. We learn to be cynical and/or passive. By including service learning experiences in more classes we would learn to think of ourselves as capable of making positive changes. We

might even be able to translate these learning experiences into our lives beyond Carleton in the form of civic and political engagement and perhaps in our careers. Jen Everett's Environmental Ethics class is a good example of how professors can incorporate service learning into their curriculum

Right now, faculty and staff are leading the way in advocating for education that will prepare students to be leaders in creating a sustainable society. People like Trish Ferrett, Director of CISMI; Richard Strong, Director of Facilities; and Jen Everett, Assistant Philosophy Professor, are making great progress to incorporating this type of education into our curriculum. It is time for students need to enter the conversation as well by discussing with professors, staff, and friends what we think would help us become leaders in the creation of a sustainable future.

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