

THE ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

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This paper addresses issues of environmental quality and ecological sustainability in relation to the educational mission of Santa Clara University as a Catholic, Jesuit institution. More specifically, it examines how these issues should be envisioned for a Santa Clara education. Then it addresses the task of integrating these concerns into the curriculum for both undergraduate and graduate students.

A foundation of this paper is the overarching paper on the mission of the University in a globalizing world. That paper's profound emphases on Santa Clara as a Catholic, Jesuit university genuinely in solidarity with those most in need on our planet are reflected in this paper's recognition that healthy and enduring environmental quality is a universal prerequisite to social justice and the alleviation of much human suffering. The overarching paper also reminds us of the vision of "*all* of creation as participating in varying degrees in the being that flows from God." Certainly unwavering recognition of the sanctity of life and nature must infuse all of the University's efforts toward enduring environmental protection.

Envisioning the Issues

In late 2003 a University task force appointed by Father Locatelli drafted "A Comprehensive Policy on Sustainability at Santa Clara University." The draft first defined "sustainability" as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs." The document then declared, "As a Jesuit and Catholic university, we have the responsibility to provide leadership in developing a more sustainable way of living. By embracing sustainability, the University furthers its mission to act as a voice of reason, conscience, and service to society." The task force emphasized the importance of "integrating sustainability into the goal of educating the whole person."

Catholic leaders have forcefully recognized that sustainability and environmental responsibility represent a major moral challenge and spiritual crisis. Similarly, secular intellectuals are calling for a new personal morality that challenges individuals to look beyond their own self-interest. Environmental morality now means a global morality and responsibility, and it must embrace an awareness of the connections between individual actions in one place and potential global degradation elsewhere. As the United States Catholic Conference has noted, "[M]any environmental problems are international in scope, and we are a universal Church."¹

With its foundation in faith, a Santa Clara education should address the immanent divinity of the natural world. As Pope John Paul II emphasized in his 1990 statement entitled "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," "Christians in particular realize that their responsibility

¹ Let the Earth Bless the Lord: God's Creation and Our Responsibility (Washington, D.C. 1996) p. 1.

within creation and their duty toward nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith.”² Furthermore, with its grounding in service, a Santa Clara education should prepare each student to serve others by making sure the global environment is shepherded to insure “the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” It has been wryly noted that “Pope John Paul II clearly teaches that our relationship with the environment is a moral question at the same level as our relationship with God, with one another, and with other created things that it should receive at least some preaching attention.”³ A challenge of this magnitude ought to receive great attention in any American institution of higher learning, and surely and most especially in a Catholic, Jesuit university. Each Santa Clara graduate – molded not only by academic courses but also by service opportunities, co-curricular activities, and a campus culture infused with commitment to environmental sustainability – should be prepared to be an agent of change toward sustainability and environmental morality in action.

Integrating the Issues into the Curriculum

As mentioned above, there has been a call for integrating sustainability into the education of the whole person at Santa Clara. Fortunately, the foundation for achieving this has been laid. Indeed Santa Clara is now probably best positioned of all Catholic universities in the nation to create a major, integrated environmental program. The cornerstone of such a program is the maturation of the interdisciplinary Environmental Studies Institute. The course offerings and research opportunities within the undergraduate Environmental Science and Environmental Studies majors cover a broad array of technical, political, artistic, philosophical, and other approaches. Particularly notable has been the emphasis on undergraduate research, resulting in numerous publications involving both faculty and students. The new Faith, Ethics and Vocation Project most clearly links environmental issues with core University emphases on spirituality and service to society. Similarly at the graduate level, course offerings in engineering, business, and law seek to ensure that professional training in those disciplines includes exposure to both the moral question posed above and its practical implications.

What remains to be done is to closely examine what has been built thus far, to make sure that gaps and weaknesses are addressed and, especially, to make sure that overlaps and linkages among programs and courses are nurtured for maximum student benefit. There are many opportunities for strengthening and integrating our courses across the curriculum and linking them to campus programs. Possibilities include coordinating undergraduate courses among various departments; integrating environmental classes into Residential Learning Communities, particularly the Cypress RLC; and fostering linkages between undergraduate and graduate environmental courses and programs. Another opportunity would be to link environmental curricular and service opportunities to the already existing programs of the established Centers on campus. Also, the importance of the University’s own actions as a responsible global citizen should not be overlooked, both for the example they set and for their academic significance. Thus, the University’s growing reputation and potential national leadership role in campus

² Reprinted in And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment (D. Christiansen, S.J. and W. Grazer, eds.) (Washington, D.C. 1996) pp. 215-222.

³ Rev. R.B. Kemp, “Homily Help: Preaching God’s Environment,” in Let the Earth Bless the Lord: God’s Creation and Our Responsibility (Washington, D.C. 1996) p. 11.

sustainability – particularly regarding new buildings and alternative energy supplies – also could be integrated more directly into our academic courses and other programs.

Santa Clara thus already has created a powerful array of building blocks in this realm. To successfully prepare our students to be effective and moral environmental citizens, professionals, and leaders, we need a concerted and coordinated effort to integrate these building blocks into a cohesive academic structure. Perhaps the current Environmental Studies Institute can be the principal vehicle for this effort, but perhaps some further evolution of that model is needed instead.

This effort also must allow for new ideas, courses, programs, and projects. Examples of such proposed innovation can already be found here, and these and other novel approaches need to be nurtured. One possibility would be a new University core requirement exposing all Santa Clara undergraduates to at least one course related to the concept of environmental sustainability. Within the School of Engineering, an Institute for Sustainable Engineering Systems is under discussion. Engineering also has begun to emphasize a special chapter on sustainability within the Engineering Handbook for all of its undergraduate majors, in order to inculcate in them a deeper understanding of the many levels of environmental responsibility of their work. Development of this type of orientation would seem to be equally important in courses and programs aimed at preparation of students for work in the business sector. Opportunities thus should be explored for students to be closely exposed to innovative sustainability efforts in Silicon Valley industry, through programs such as internships with local business organizations. Similarly, as the University already on various occasions has provided a neutral forum in which stakeholders with differing perspectives on environmental issues come together for constructive dialogue, this invaluable role should continue to be served here.

As shown above, it is not difficult to describe the necessity for environmental sustainability and a broad vision, firmly grounded in Catholic thought and values, of Santa Clara's proper role in educating in support of the moral force of sustainability. Making the curriculum work to successfully fulfill this role, and instilling a commitment to achieve this in all students, faculty, and staff, are the hard tasks yet to be done. The synergistic educational benefits of greater coordination and integration of our current strengths, plus the encouragement and exploration of new ideas, cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, if Santa Clara University can move beyond declaring what it envisions in this realm to fully implementing it, it will be the first Jesuit university to do so. This accomplishment would secure for the University an added measure of national prominence, and an enhanced leadership position in Catholic higher education.

Reflectors

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APPENDIX

The cornerstone of the University's environmental and ecological sustainability academic programs is the interdisciplinary Environmental Studies Institute. The course offerings and research opportunities within the undergraduate Environmental Science and Environmental Studies majors cover a broad array of technical, political, artistic, philosophical, and other approaches. Particularly notable has been the emphasis on undergraduate research, resulting in numerous publications involving both faculty and students. The new Faith, Ethics and Vocation Project most clearly links environmental issues with core University emphases on spirituality and service to society. Similarly at the graduate level, course offerings in engineering, business, and law seek to ensure that professional training in those disciplines includes exposure to the environmental challenge's moral dimensions and practical implications.