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DE GUSTIBUS

Heaven Sustain Us: Environmentalists Have Taken Over the Dorms

By NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY
May 23, 2008

On Monday the trustees of the University of Delaware voted to approve a new yearlong residence life program. Undergraduates will be asked, in a reprise of "show and tell," to bring in one of their "favorite material objects" and explain why it is important to them. They will be instructed to discuss intrusive questions like "How do you define love?" and "Who are you voting for" with their dorm-mates. Finally, this extracurricular curriculum will ask students to "pick a metaphor that illustrates their view of sustainability."

If you have spent any time on a college campus recently, you will realize that "sustainability" is the academy's favorite new buzzword. There's the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE); a Sustainable Endowments Institute that publishes a College Sustainability Report Card; an Ivy Plus Sustainability Working Group, and another one for colleges in the Northeast. There are sustainability offices and officers at dozens of schools nationwide.

People unfamiliar with this subject might think that sustainability is just a fancy-sounding term for a smattering of environmentally friendly campus activities. But while it's true that the word does encompass recycling and higher-efficiency light bulbs, college administrations in recent years have started to give the term a more dramatic meaning.

More than 500 schools have signed AASHE's American College and University President Climates Commitment, which sets them on a path toward "climate neutrality." Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University and one of the document's signers, released this humble statement: "Colleges and Universities must lead the effort to reverse global warming for the health and well being of current and future generations."

According to Lee Bodner, president of EcoAmerica, an organizer of the pledge, the schools have two years to create a comprehensive plan for "eliminating direct emissions" from their campuses and for integrating sustainability into their classrooms. Efforts to accomplish the former include offering free bicycle maintenance, unplugging appliances, using French-fry grease to power campus buses, providing laundry racks for clothes drying and incorporating green principles into new construction. Many schools are also working with local communities to reduce emissions. Oberlin College, Mr. Bodner tells me, has opposed the building of a coal-fired plant near its campus.

If a school's efforts don't quite measure up, administrations can buy carbon offsets to help. And since academics like to travel to conferences almost as much as Al Gore does, Mr. Bodner and his colleagues have recommended such offsets to balance out all the pollution professors create with airplane fuel. So far the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine, is the only school to have achieved "carbon neutrality," buying

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As for the curricular advances, Arizona State has an entire cross-disciplinary program in sustainability. Houston Community College offers training in green building certification. According to Mr. Bodner, students there learn "practical marketable skills that are good for the community." Yale hasn't signed the pledge, but it has publicly promised to reduce its greenhouse gas levels to 10% below their 1990 level by 2020. And it already has 60 courses in which students can study issues of sustainability, according to Julie Newman, the director of the office of sustainability there. Graduate students can get joint degrees in "the environment and business and the environment and divinity school," and Ms. Newman hopes that such opportunities can be expanded to undergraduates soon.

Academic opportunities aside, Ms. Newman, excitedly touts the ways in which sustainability programs "are becoming part of students' everyday lives." But wait. Are these administrators gushing because students are, say, unplugging their laptops before leaving on winter break? Of course not.

The sustainability folks have a much bigger agenda. As Mr. Bodner explains: "Sustainability, broadly speaking, is creating the ability for people to live on a planet that can support the population in an environmental way but also ultimately a way that promotes the good life for everyone, for social justice." And Kathleen Kerr, the head of residence life at the University of Delaware, told a gathering of college administrators last fall that the idea that "sustainability is mostly about the environment" is a "myth." In fact, she and a colleague offered a PowerPoint presentation listing other items that administrators might consider in this category. They included "Fair Trade," "Gender Equity," "Affirmative Action," "Multicultural Competence," "Worker's Rights" and "Domestic Partnerships."

Which brings us back to those Delaware dorms. Thanks to some outside pressure from free-speech-on-campus groups like the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, the university's indoctrination schemes at least won't be mandatory. But they probably don't need to be. Students are generally among the most enthusiastic proponents of such nonsense.

And college administrators couldn't be happier that their young charges have rallied around this cause. After all, as Peter Wood, president of the National Association of Scholars explains, universities have been trying for decades to "create community" on campus. Undergraduates complain that campuses are too balkanized. This is the result, Mr. Wood explains, of the rejection of the administration's *in loco parentis* role, the rise of research universities and the institution of diversity programs to remind students how different they are from each other. "So administrators thought they could generate community by focusing on some inspiring issue. They turned to the residence life folks and said: 'You have a new mission. You are not supposed to just make students safe and give them a place to study.'" As a result, students have been offered an assortment of rallying cries -- from multiculturalism to sexual empowerment. And now, saving the planet. Over time, though, such fads are hard to sustain.

Ms. Riley is the Journal's deputy Taste editor.

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