Sustainability 101:

A Workshop Series for Life After College

Charlotte Stanley
May 7, 2010
EVS 300
Smith College
Abstract

How can Smith better prepare students for a sustainable lifestyle after graduation? After researching the various methods of sustainable living, I decided to poll students on what abilities they already had, and through what method they would prefer to learn sustainable practices. Students overwhelming thought that a workshop series incorporating gardening, recycling, food preservation, and home selection would be the best way to learn sustainable practices. With that knowledge I created a syllabus for a 6 day workshop that could take place over January Term or as a Lunch Bag Series.

Introduction

Sustainability is the biggest new ‘green idea’ on the market, everyone is trying to tell you to be sustainable, yet consumption levels in the world are at the highest they’ve ever been. Vendors want people to buy into the sustainability idea not because of how it can help reduce waste, and make the planet’s resources last longer- but rather because they want you to buy their product that supposedly will help you “be green”. America wasn’t always this consumer oriented; at one time traditional ways of living and sustainable practices were passed down through the generations.

In the years following World War II, all of this changed; there was a big push towards modernization, and consumer culture gained the footing it holds on to today. During the post-World War II era, the suburb became the new demographic center in the United States, as track housing took over once rural farmlands (Luhr 2009). Historian Elaine Tyler May explained that during the 1950s the domestic ideology of the Cold War promised personal fulfillment through a consumer-oriented family life in the suburbs,
where consumerism was heralded as a “means for achieving individuality, leisure, and upward mobility” (Luhr 2009). Families now based their identities off of what they had compared to their neighbors, not what they did for a living. The rise of gated communities represented a new degree of isolation and withdrawal from the larger community (Luhr 2009). No longer did people care about how their actions affected their neighbors, or where their waste from excessive consumption was ending up. It no longer was practical, financially necessary or hip to do things the way their parents or grandparents did for generations.

The end result of this move towards modernity is an American youth that are no longer taught how to carry on sustainable lives. The education system in the United States, and the world is failing the youth. The current system prizes academics that lead to high paying jobs, which leads to more consumption and little care for the community. Our education emphasizes theories, not values; abstraction rather than consciousness; neat answers instead of questions; and technical efficiency over conscience (Orr 2004). Our education, especially in the sciences, separates us from the problem- that will be the downfall of our planet unless we reconnect the two. David Orr states that “it is of no small consequence that the only people who have lived sustainably on the planet for any length of time could not read… education is no guarantee of decency, prudence, or wisdom” (2004).

We need to stop educating about managing the earth just to have dominance over it, but rather to educate how our human desires, economies, politics, and communities can be managed to help the earth (Orr 2004). Environmental education should be represented in all fields of academia, but it instead is squeezed into a tiny corner of the
natural sciences and ignored everywhere else. Environmental education should also be hands-on, the way in which learning occurs is as important as the content of the lesson.

Orr states that “process is important for learning… courses taught as lecture courses tend to induce passivity…[and] the illusion that learning only occurs inside four walls” and that type of learning isolates the lesson from the “real world” (2004). For this reason, any attempts we make at educating college students on how to break free from consumer culture and to begin a sustainable life needs to avoid isolating lessons from the real world, and instead focus on the connections being “green” has to economics, politics, and self-fulfillment.

Smith College, while a top-rated liberal arts school, has fallen behind on the environmental education front. Current students had only the option of minoring in Environmental Science & Policy, since the major was only passed this year. There currently are only four purely Environmental Science & Policy (EVS) courses, of which one is limited to First year students (Smith College 2009). There are 26 courses spread among 8 departments, with the bulk of them in the natural sciences departments, which can be applied to the minor. Additional electives, once redundant courses are removed, amount to only a handful (Smith College 2009). Many of the students who choose to minor in EVS are already majoring in the sciences. In the spring 2010 Environmental Science & Policy Seminar class, only 3 or 4 students has majors outside of the sciences. Smith students, as academically diverse as they come, are still not drawn to environmental education as they are either afraid of not having the background knowledge, or don’t see the relevance to their own major.
Smith is working hard to reverse this thinking on campus and promote environmental education and responsibility. Along with approving the major in Environmental Science & Policy, fall 2009 saw the opening of Ford Hall, a $73 million building that is certified as a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) facility. Smith College also developed a Center for the Environment, Ecological Design & Sustainability (CEEDS), as part of its mission to improve environmental education and multidisciplinary collaboration in an effort to improve sustainability on campus (Smith College 2010). While the college has taken a big step forward in promoting sustainability on campus, no programs currently exist for teaching students sustainable practices for life outside the classroom.

We need to reduce the hold consumer culture has on the youth, and become more self reliant and economical by educating college students on environmental issues and what they can do to help. My objectives with this project were to test the current knowledge Smith students had about sustainable practices, gauge interest in extracurricular sustainable learning, and then prepare lesson plans for the type of method selected by the students.

**Methodology**

To first establish whether my concerns were substantiated, I polled Smith students to determine how much knowledge and sustainable living skills students currently had, as well as what programs best fit their needs. After polling, I looked into the best sustainable methods to teach current students that would translate into lives outside of college.
Market Research

I asked 15 students in 3 of my current, varied courses. I didn’t want to get answers only from a bunch of students following one academic pursuit, such as chemistry, or students who are immersed in environmental knowledge, such as the Environmental Science & Policy Seminar students. Instead I wanted answers from a multitude of backgrounds and academic interests, because living sustainably does not only apply to scientists. The three courses I polled students in were History of the Silk Road, Post-World War Two Global Cinema, and Savoring Italy. I asked five random students in each class a series of six neutral questions regarding basic sustainable practices.

The results of the poll were enlightening, students knew less than I had hypothesized on basic sustainable practices (see Figures 1, 2, 3). Most
students did not know how to grow their own food, and those that did only two knew how to plan out a garden. Surprisingly, a majority of students were interested furthering their knowledge on sustainable practices (see Figure 4). When asked what method they would prefer to learn sustainable practices by, an overwhelming number choose a workshop series that incorporated hands-on instruction (see Figure 5).

Lesson Research

With this knowledge, I proceeded in gathering information on what practices would best suit the needs for a recent college grad, and developed a program that would incorporate all of them into bite-size lessons. I researched gardening books for instruction on how to plan a garden, as well as the best fruits and vegetables to plant in the same fashion as the victory gardens of the World War eras. I looked into home remodeling guides for what materials and upgrades are eco-friendly and renewable, as well as cost saving in terms of tax credits and government grants. Homemaker journals proved useful for recipes on non-toxic home cleaners made from common household products, such as baking soda. I also researched the importance of picking out a community to live in, as this may be the most fundamental advantage or disadvantage to living a “green” lifestyle.
**Results**

The result of polling was to develop a workshop for Smith students and community members that taught the basics of sustainable living from growing food to installing resource saving technology, no matter what the living situation may be. The workshop would be divided into 6 days, with each day focusing on a new topic and ending with hands-on instruction of a related project (see Appendix A). Ideally the class would take place over a period of two weeks, with instruction on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

The first week will concentrate on smaller actions that anyone can do to help “green” their life and teach them self-reliance. Day 1 would focus on gardening (see Appendix B). The class would cover how to plan, prepare, and plant a p-patch garden in a yard as well as options such as planter box gardens for those living in apartments. Composting and water collection will also be discussed in the garden segment. Day 2 involves how to preserve foods, including actually canning a small jar of fruit (see Appendix C). The instructor will cover what foods can be preserved via canning, drying, or freezing and the best preparation methods. This lesson will also include why stocking up on food is a good idea, and the money it can save. Creating eco-cleaners is the focus of Day 3 (see Appendix D). The lesson will include a short discussion on the current “green” cleaner trend, and how to avoid jumping on the bandwagon to pay overpriced cleaners that you can make at home with a few common ingredients. Students will leave class with a small cleaning solution for use in their dorm room.

The second week would kick off with a lesson on reuse, recycling, and salvaging on Day 4 (see Appendix E). Instruction would cover the importance of reusing materials,
donating instead of dumping, and contributing less to the growing landfills in our
country. Thrift stores and internet forums will be highlighted along with other channels to
use for the disposal or attainment of items. This lesson will also go over basic instructions
on salvaging furniture through reupholstering and refinishing, as well as basic sewing
skills. Day 5 covers the importance of picking a community. Discussion will include how
a community can help people achieve a green lifestyle, or keep people from it (see
Appendix F). Students will be guided on how to look into the transportation systems or
bike-friendliness of cities, along with what local markets are available for food outside of
grocery stores. The day will include a trip to a local farmers market or food co-op. The
final day will involve lessons for people a little further along then recent graduate. The
class will cover how to regulate water and electrical use in both an apartment and home,
but will also discuss upgrades homeowners can do to help “green” their home (see
Appendix G). Students will be guided on how to take advantage of tax credits and
government loans to install renewable materials and energy-saving devices.

**Discussion**

Students clearly need instruction on sustainable practices for life once they leave
the Smith “bubble” and a workshop series is an ideal way to achieve that goal. The six
part workshop I devised could easily be integrated into Smith as a January Term class,
taught by a student with the correct background, several professors, community members
or a combination of the three.

The workshop would make a great kickoff event for Smith’s new Center for the
Environment Ecological Design & Sustainability (CEEDS) or Women & Financial
Independence (WFI) as it does cover smart financial choices and self-reliance, two hallmarks of the program. The workshop could also be paired down into a simple Lunch Bag Series put on jointly, or individually by CEEDS or WFI.

The layout for a Lunch Bag Series would be similar to the program WFI put on during Spring 2010 about the Economy. In this format hands-on instruction via projects would be cut as well as field trips. Information would be limited to only things useful for recent college graduates, thus there would be coverage on home upgrades or renovations, but rather but students can do in their apartments or family homes. Funding for instructor fees, if applicable, as well as materials for projects and transportation costs for field trips could be provided by Smith under CEEDS or WFI.

Another topic that came up in the process of this project was the feasibility of starting a new academic department at Smith that would teach sustainability under an array of courses. Historically, Smith made students take finishing classes to prepare them for society and home-life. While I do not suggest re-implementing House Wifery 101, a department similar to the Exercise and Sports Studies department could be a valuable resource for Smith students. This department could have courses worth only one or two credits, and classes that cover gardening, sewing, cooking, and home finances.

While Smith has done much to remove itself from the image of a finishing school, and instead established a reputation as one of the premier feminist institutions in the world, the process has left women without much instruction on how to take care of themselves in the home. I’m not advocating a return to finishing school, but rather basic instruction on how to balance a checkbook and till a garden.
Appendix

Appendix A................................................................. Workshop Contents
Appendix B............................................................... Gardening
Appendix C............................................................... Food Preservation
Appendix D............................................................... Eco-cleaners
Appendix E............................................................... Reuse and Recycle
Appendix F............................................................... Selecting a Community
Appendix G............................................................... A Green Home
Appendix A

Workshop Contents Day-by-Day

Day 1: Gardening
  Litter box/planter gardens
  P-patch gardens
  How to plan a garden
  Soil testing
  Composting and water collection

Day 2: Food Preservation
  What foods you can preserve
  Basics of canning
  Drying methods
  Freezing methods

Day 3: Safe Cleaners
  What cleaners to make, and what to buy
  Eco-friendly, home made cleaners
  Alternative uses for house hold products

Day 4: Reuse and Recycle
  Thrift and salvage stores
  Resurfacing and reupholstering furniture
  Basic sewing skills

Day 5: Selecting a Community
  Finding resources for sustainable living
  Importance of location
  Transportation decisions
  Buying local

Day 6: A Green Home
  Upgrades andremodels
  Tax credits and grants
  Water and electrical use
Appendix B

Gardening

- Determining what garden is right for you
  - Home owners and renters
    - Do you have space for a garden that gets enough sunlight?
    - Do you have the time for garden upkeep?
    - Renters may need to get garden approved by landlords
    - Neighbors may also have opinions
  - Apartment and city dwellers
    - Do you have a balcony or outdoor space to grow plants?
    - Do you have __ facing windows for growing plants?
    - Do you have the time for garden upkeep?

- Planning a P-Patch garden
  - Determine the size of garden required for your needs
    - Will this be a supplemental or will you rely solely on the produce from this garden?
    - Two plants for every person is a good rule of thumb
    - Mark out the garden size needed and observe how much sunlight and shade it receives in a day
  - Test the soil for any nutrient deficiencies
    - Basic test kit from University of Massachusetts for $9
      - [www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest]{http://www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest}
  - Prep the garden space
    - Till the ground and remove any grass that may be growing
    - Add in nutrients, avoiding chemical fertilizer
      - Organic alternatives include bone meal, and
    - Form growing rows by plowing soil into long mounds, with a valley in between each row
  - Planting
    - Plant vegetables, fruit and herbs in accordance with your climate zone’s schedule
    - Seeds can be started inside during the early spring
    - When transplanting, water plants thoroughly before and after

- Planning a planter box garden
  - Determine the location of your planter box
    - Fire escapes or balconies are ideal, be wary of fire codes
    - South facing windows are also good spots
  - Pick the planter
    - Store bought planter pots work well for growing herbs
    - Larger, wooden planter boxes can be made or bought
    - A litter box can be recycled into a planter box
      - Poke several evenly spaced holes into the bottom of a litter box using a drill or a hammer and nail
• Layer the litter box on top of another or use a tray underneath for drainage

➢ What can your garden grow
  o Climate Zones
    ▪ Tell gardeners what grows best in their area
    ▪ Guide for planting and harvesting
  o Light
    ▪ Certain fruits and vegetables need more or less light
  o Garden depth
    ▪ Some plants need soil to be nutrient rich only on the top few inches
    ▪ Other plants have deep roots that need good soil for a foot or more below the surface

➢ Composting
  o Easier than you think
  o Collect organic kitchen scraps, excluding meat in container
  o Composts better in warm, moist environment

➢ Water collection
  o Adding a water collection barrel to the side of your house can greatly lower the costs of watering a P-Patch garden

➢ Hands-on project
  o Plant your own mini herb garden

Appendix C

Food Preservation

➢ Why preserving foods is important
  o Backup food in case of emergency
  o Food, especially fruit, gets more expensive in the winter
  o Preserving your own food helps you avoid added preservatives and fillers found in other canned goods

➢ What foods you can preserve
  o Almost anything!
  o Many vegetables, fruits and herbs can be preserved for later use
  o Foods that work best with canning:
    ▪ Tomatoes, carrots,
    ▪ Pit-fruits such as peaches, apricots, plums and nectarines
  o Foods that work best with drying:
    ▪ Tropical fruits such as mango and pineapple
    ▪ Herbs
  o Foods that work best with freezing:
    ▪ Meats, especially uncooked poultry and beef
- Mango, berries, and most other fruits
- Most vegetables, including peas, carrots, and corn

- Basics of canning
- Drying methods
- Freezing methods
- Hands-on project
  - Canning your own selection of fruit

Appendix D

Eco-Cleaners

- Current trends
  - Being “green” is suddenly hip
  - Buying into a product’s promise of being eco-friendly can be a trap
- What is worth the money
  - Laundry detergents
  - Dish washing soaps
- What can be home-made
  - Surface cleaners
  - Carpet cleaners
- Alternative uses for household products
  - Microwave to loosen stains
  - Dishwasher to sanitize
- Hands-on project
  - Create your own surface cleaning wipes

Appendix E

Reuse and Recycle

- The importance of reusing and recycling
  - One man’s trash is another man’s treasure
  - Avoiding the landfill
- Where to acquire goods
  - Thrift stores and pawn shops are an excellent location
  - Local tag or yard sales
  - Internet forums and websites
- Craigslist.org
- Freecycle.org
  - Salvage stores in local area
  - Some landfills will allow people to reclaim things

- Where to donate goods
  - Thrift stores and internet postings are a good option
  - Throw a tag sale to get rid of unused goods

- Making furniture new again
  - Much easier than people think
  - Resurfacing furniture
    - For wood objects
    - For metal objects
  - Reupholstering furniture
    - Smaller the space to replace the easier it is

- Basic sewing skills
- Hands-on project
  - Resurfacing a frame

Appendix F

Selecting a Community

- Community is key
  - Make or break your sustainability goals
  - Supportive, like-minded communities make things far easier
  - More accepting of sustainable practices

- Finding resources for sustainable living
  - Website and blogs, as well as local stores may provide literature on sustainable events happening in your new area

- Importance of location
  - Close to work
  - Close to shops

- Transportation decisions
  - Is public transportation available?
  - Is carpooling common or practiced?
  - Will you actually walk or bike to work?

- Buying local
  - Keep the local economy strong
  - Reduces transportation costs
  - Supports local workers and producers

- Hands-on project
  - Field trip to local farmers market
Appendix G

A Green Home

- Choosing an energy efficient place
  - Small footprint
  - Energy efficient appliances
  - Quality insulation

- Buying versus Renting
  - Buying
    - Allows for more upgrades
    - Good for long-term living
    - House types
      - Fixer-upper
      - New construction
  - Renting
    - Upgrades must be approved or done by landlord
    - Good for short-term living
  - Costs
    - Always add material and labor costs for upgrades to the purchase price of any home
    - Avoid surprises with a home inspection
    - Check local property values as comparison

- Credits
  - Tax credits for energy-efficient upgrades

- Grants
  - HUD Grants for buying “greened” housing

- Remodeling and upgrades
  - Renewable materials
  - Salvaging materials
  - Roofing options
  - Easy upgrades
    - Insulated windows, energy efficient lighting and appliances

- Utilities usage
  - Reduce the cost of utilities in any living situation
  - Setting timers for water usage and lights
  - Reuse “gray” water for activities that don’t require potable water
Literature Cited


