

Sustaining St. Olaf—Campus Collaborations

James Farrell, St. Olaf College, 2 Oct 2009

In *Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold said that “One of the penalties of an ecological education is living alone in a world of wounds.” I think that’s still true. A few years ago in a class, I asked my students to imagine a positive future, and one of them, an Environmental Studies major, said that “I find it really hard to imagine a positive future regarding our current environmental issues. Maybe I’ve had too many pessimistic environmental studies classes that seem to send me the message that there is no hope because there is no cooperation. . . . I think a lot of students, Environmental Studies majors in particular, get really down about the earth’s future.”

The current political climate reinforces many students’ sense of hopelessness. They see that we’ve gone to war in the name of liberty and oil, and that the liberty we’re protecting is not just in Iraq, but the liberties of our own lifestyle--the liberty, for example, to drive massive SUVs where we want to, when we want to, at any price to the planet. Early in the Bush Administration, White House spokesman Ari Fleisher was asked if the president would ask Americans to conserve energy. "That's a big 'no,'" Fleischer said. "The president believes that it's an American way of life, that it should be the goal of policy-makers to protect the American way of life. The American way of life is a blessed one." Even today, it’s hard to mobilize the American people over issues as complex and compelling as global weirding.

Still, there are signs of change, and many changes these days are happening on American campuses. So tonight, I’d like to modify Aldo Leopold—as Leopold himself *always* did—to suggest that one of the *benefits* of an ecological education can be living *together* in a world of *wonders*. I’d like to begin with my favorite paragraph of the last several years. In a beautiful essay called “Doing Good Work Together,” William Kittredge writes that “We live in stories. What we are is stories. We do things because of what is called character, and our character is formed by the stories we learn to live in. Late in the night we listen to our own breathing in the dark and rework our stories. We do it again the next morning, and all day long, before the looking glass of ourselves, reinventing reasons for our lives. Other than such storytelling there is no reason to things.”

So I’d like to tell some stories. I’d like to tell some stories about character, and some stories about people who *are* characters (like John Schade, just to name one). I’d like to talk about the stories we all live in, and some other stories we could live

in. I'd like to talk about reinventing reasons for our lives. And I'd like to talk about hope. And I'd like to do it mainly by telling stories about St. Olaf—about the collaborations that have, over time, made this an interesting place, environmentally.

The story I know best is my own story, and it's worth a minute or two to describe how other people at the college drew me into the work of sustainability. For me, the first catalyst was academic, and came from students wanting to know more about environmental history. About 15 years ago in the Paracollege, our late, lamented experimental college, several students asked for a course on environmental history. I knew nothing about it, but in collaboration with Gary Deason, we did a group tutorial with just five students on American environmental history. I was hooked. The next year, I taught it as a topical course in the History Department, and the following year we added it as a regular offering in the department, where it's been taught every year since.

The important thing about this story is not the course, but the students. In my time here, they have pressured us as a faculty to teach more environmental topics, and they have showed up enthusiastically as we instituted first a concentration, and then a major in Environmental Studies. As we designed the major with tracks in science, social science, and Arts and Humanities, we realized we needed an introduction to the Humanities, and so in the Spring of 2001, I taught a course called "The Culture of Nature." In an attempt to show students a local example of the culture of nature, I invited Gene Bakko, the curator of natural lands, and Pete Sandberg, our facilities director, to talk about their environmental work on campus. That week, on our course website, an enthusiastic first-year student wrote about how amazing those stories were, and how you could teach a whole course on that.

Two years later, that student declared a major called "Wild and Precious Life: Educating for an Ethic of Sustainability." In the fall of her senior year, as part of her senior project, she designed a course called Campus Ecology, and in the Spring she team-taught the course with me as an American Studies seminar. The following year, I team-taught the course with another student, and the year after that, it moved into the Environmental Studies department, where I've taught with a student-professor every year. I simply love the idea that a course designed by a student is in the college catalogue.

Campus Ecology is about the moral ecology of everyday life. The main question of the class, as far as I can figure it out, is this: What are the cultural patterns that

reflect and affect the natural patterns of this place and the planet? And how do I fit in? There are, I think, 5 things (probably more) that make this class work:

--problem of invisible complexity (Stuff), complexity/complicity

--combines the personal and the academic, the academic and the real world

--going public

--going deep: introspection

--what are people for?

--what is education for?

--what are my deepest values? what are my operative values?

--wisdom and not just knowledge

--practical idealism

--designing minds

--institutions, for example, should be designed to make it easier to be good

--seeing and saying things differently so that people act differently
(environmental rhetoric)

--hope (Hunting for Hope)

Assignments

--auditing their dorm room

--a plot project expressing a particular place on campus as an intersection of human beings and resource flows

OR an essay on the campus from the perspective of one of its non-human inhabitants

--annotating the campus—and last year, extraordinary annotations (swimming pools)

--doing a chapel service

--keeping a journal

--researching one of the resource flows of the college, and offering suggestions for improvement

OR writing a book for graduating seniors on how to live more sustainably

That course has been my greatest collaboration with staff and students. Pete Sandberg and Gene Bakko have continued to play starring roles in the class, but we've also had teachers from the foodservice, the grounds crew, Admissions,

residence life and the president's office. Because I got so curious about college culture, consumer culture, and the environment, I started writing a book called *The Nature of College*, with particular students collaborating on two chapters, and all of my students serving as informants and editors. That book should be out next year.

What's impressive to me, though, is that these kinds of collaborations are not unusual at St. Olaf. Some of the first plantings on our natural lands were done by a Paracollege student named Dave Wedin, who is currently one of the finalists to become the director of the Aldo Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University. Since then, the natural lands have been an ongoing project of Gene Bakko and Kathy Shea and generations of St. Olaf students who have worked there or taken courses using those areas as classrooms. One of the first proposals for a green science building came from the 1998 Environmental Studies senior seminar, taught by Charles Umbanhowar. Students in a special seminar that Charles taught on Green Roofs designed the green roof for this building. Students in John Schade's ES classes have written white papers on college use of our agricultural lands. Students in Paul Jackson's Environmental Chemistry class have studied building materials to assess their environmental quality. All of the students in chemistry practice "green chemistry," which is good for their education, but also good for our architecture, because it meant that we could design a lab building with about half of the fume hoods in a normal science structure. Students in Bob Jacobel's climate change class learn more about global weirding than virtually all the politicians in Washington. Students in other classes have opened a "Green Museum" on campus, or assessed water quality in conjunction with the Cannon River Watershed Project. And now we have a course called "Ideals to Action," in which students learn how to bring their dreams to reality in community projects, both here and abroad.

We also have lots of collaborations that aren't curricular, too. The largest one is probably the Sustainability Task Force. Starting in 2003, it's been a group of faculty, staff and students who keep each other connected to all the environmental activity on campus. We began by establishing a set of Sustainability Principles, and we've worked since then to support activities in all the different areas of the college. With no budget and nothing but persuasive power, we've not been catalysts for change so much as collaborators for changes already occurring in different areas. We haven't advocated for a wind turbine or a composter, but we supported Pete Sandberg when he did. We haven't caused the changes in our foodservice, but we've celebrated them in different forums. We haven't required LEED-certified buildings on campus, but we've created a climate in which such

things just seem normal. If we do anything at all—and there may be people who wonder—we’re involved in climate change, changing the climate of college culture so that environmental concerns seem attractive to people in all areas of the college.

Students have also taken on projects of their own, usually with the cooperation and collaboration of faculty and staff. One student decided that the cafeteria should serve fair-trade coffee, and she lobbied until that happened. Two other students decided that we should have our own farm, and they succeeded with the cooperation of Bon Appetit, the curator of natural lands, the grounds manager, and assorted other faculty and staff. When we were considering the composter, students collected and weighed the food waste in the cafeteria for a week to help us size the machine. Two years ago, students decided that we should have a clean energy revolving fund, and so we now have a small pool of money to fund student projects on an ongoing basis. That same year, students voted to add an environmental senator to student government, and that person now sits on the Sustainability Task Force. Student have worked for years to get a green bikes program going at the college, and we should see the bicycles yet this year.

Increasingly, too, our students are coming to college as self-identified environmentalists, interested in engaging the ecological issues of their time by applying what they know. In a recent survey, 70 percent of our students considered themselves environmentalists. 86 percent of them say that they think that environmental literacy is an important part of a college education, and 60 percent of them would support a college requirement of environmental literacy. 92 percent of Oles believe that “in the United States we consume far too many resources, and we must soon change our ways.” 91 percent of our students believe that “a change in basic American values and attitudes is necessary in order to solve environmental problems.” And my experience is that our students are desperate for meaning, and anxious to be involved in making the world a better place.

Therefore, I’d say we’re not yet done with our environmental collaborations. I’m working with a senior, for example, with an independent major called “Psychology of Social Change.” For her senior project, she’ll analyze the surveys on environmental values and ecological literacy that we sent to the St. Olaf student body, as well as research on community-based social marketing, in order to develop a year-long environmental orientation for first-year students. She’ll also take a first stab at developing a set of guidelines for a green dorm, characterized not so much by state-of-the-art technology as by students state-of-the-*heart* commitment to live together responsibly, using peer pressure for environmental advantage in addition to all the other things it’s used for.

Nest summer, we think we may resurrect the Art Barn as part of a building that will be completely off the grid, located on the natural lands, and including a classroom for those of us who use the natural lands as part of our instruction.

And it's possible—although maybe not probable—that we'll cooperate with a Latino entrepreneur in Northfield to use our land for an Agri-preneurial center to create high-profit sustainable farming opportunities for people who have come to America with agricultural experience, but no capital to get into industrial farming.

We will not, I am sorry to report, be buying a coffee plantation in Nicaragua to teach our students about fair-trade and eco-tourism, even though President Anderson listened to me respectfully when I suggested it.

I'd like to conclude with a poem by Mary Oliver because it seems to me to illustrate some essential assumptions of American environmentalism. Often, we think that environmentalism entails getting back to nature and imitating people like Thoreau or John Muir or Rachel Carson. But Mary Oliver thinks differently. Here's the poem, called "Going to Walden."

*It isn't very far as highways lie.
I might be back by nightfall, having seen
The rough pines, and the stones, and the clear water.
Friends argue that I might be wiser for it.
They do not hear that far-off Yankee whisper:
How dull we grow from hurrying here and there!*

*Many have gone, and think me half a fool
To miss a day in the cool country.
Maybe. But in a book I read and cherish,
Going to Walden is not so easy a thing
As a green visit. It is the slow and difficult
Trick of living, and finding it where you are.*

In Campus Ecology and across the St. Olaf campus, we've been engaged in "the slow and difficult trick of living, and finding it where you are." It's ecology; it's education; it's collaboration; it's hope. It's not yet sustainable, but it's a step in the right direction. Thank you.