



Focal Points

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Innovative Teaching Issue

Each spring semester, CAS faculty members are nominated for the Dean's Award for Innovative Teaching. A faculty committee, chaired by the Associate Dean, selects the annual recipient, and this year the award winner is Katherine Osburn, Associate Professor of History. In the following essay, Dr. Osburn describes the pedagogy upon which her award was based.

JACK ARMISTEAD, DEAN

SUSTAINABILITY STUDIES

Katherine Osburn, Associate Professor of History

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed, "without a vision, the people perish." Those of us in the "service departments" of Tennessee Tech who devote the majority of our professional time to teaching large sections of required courses to captive and frequently resentful students often feel as if we are indeed "perishing" without a vision. Recently, however, I have caught a vision for a dynamic program of study and student action that would place Tech at the cutting edge of environmental scholarship and provide leadership in addressing severe problems that are facing our region. *The Honors Colloquium on Sustainability* that I coordinated this semester is the template for a proposed program of study that would harness the intellectual, moral, and economic power of the University to tackle some of our most pressing environmental and social problems.

The Colloquium as a Model for Cross Disciplinary Studies

This course brought together scholars from Engineering, Business, Agriculture, and Arts and Sciences to ask: "can we sustain our current way of life, especially our economic growth based on consumerism, and preserve the earth's resources for future generations? If not, what changes must we initiate in order to assure a future for our planet, and how might we institute these changes?" Throughout the semester, the students reached across artificial boundaries of disciplines and embraced a holistic perspective on this crucial question.

I would like this course to serve as a template for a new field of study at Tech called Sustainability Studies in which students take a wide range of courses addressing issues of sustainability and then produce a capstone project that integrates several disciplines. This program would position the University as an important resource for environmental concerns and would attract innovative, imaginative students. It would also help to showcase the research of our talented faculty, many of whom have produced excellent scholarship on sustainability issues.

Moreover, it has become crystal clear to me from this discourse with my colleagues last semester that we are facing serious environmental problems. We



must admit to the possibility of major ecosystem collapses, global climate change, and shortages of water, arable land, and energy in the next decades. In our region alone, the destruction of entire mountain ranges for coal has placed in jeopardy the unique ecological and social heritage of Appalachia. It is a vital time for the state's leading technological University to become proactive in seeking solutions to these grave matters.

Student Environmental Activism: Taking the Colloquium Beyond the Classroom

Last semester two of the Colloquium students made environmental activism their class project and have built a nucleus of students who have begun several campaigns to "green" the campus. These include improved recycling, an initiative to switch



the university to recycled paper (they have located a cheap source of this paper), and, most ambitiously, a clean energy campaign.

This latter campaign is part of a region-wide initiative from the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy. This organization is a coalition of groups promoting TVA's Green Power Switch, a program that produces electricity from renewable sources such as solar, wind, and biomass. Tech can harness market forces for the greater good of our community through purchasing Green Energy, as raising the demand for this service will lower the cost. As pollution from coal fired power plants is a leading cause of respiratory disease, and as this region has some of the highest rates of childhood asthma in the nation, TTU's contribution to a greener energy future fulfills our mission to "benefit the people of Tennessee and the nation." The Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC) also proposes to help Tech find ways to improve energy efficiency, and some would like to see the installation of on-site power generation using wind or solar energy. The students realize that these proposals will be costly and are lobbying SGA to pass the *Clean Energy Initiative Act of 2005* instituting a \$8.00 per semester fee to pay for these objectives. While the students realize there is often resistance to new fees, they note that a cleaner energy future is about the price of a new CD. Surveys they have taken reveal a surprising level of support for this idea.

Moreover, the Green Energy Campaign will have an immediate impact on this region. As of now, 115,000 acres of the Cumberland Mountains are slated for Cross Ridge Mining, a form of Mountain Top Removal. This mining practice blasts away up to 1,000 feet of mountain, shoving the rubble into the valleys below, burying streams and destroying all aquatic life. The denuded hillsides turn into giant mudslides when rain falls, and people have been killed in West Virginia when this has occurred. (see: <http://www.mountainjusticesummer.org/>) If we indeed have "a special commitment to enrich the lives of people and communities in the Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee" then we must harness our resources to help safeguard our irreplaceable ecological

and social heritage. An integrated vision of sustainability at TTU can help to provide that assistance. With this campaign, I envision our greener campus as a model for sustainability research and responsible student action that goes beyond the classroom. This campaign instills in our students a sense of their role as citizens in a democracy. What is more democratic than organizing people to improve the quality of life in their communities?

Finally, the Honors Colloquium has promoted student-professor cooperation on several fronts. After meeting SEAC co-chair Tyler Pannell in the Colloquium, Dr. Jon Jonakin appointed him to the University Environmental Committee, which is designing an environmental policy statement for Tech. The draft Environmental Policy Statement asserts the University's commitment "to being a model of environmental innovation, health, and safety through the organizational activities of its members as teachers, researchers, administrators, staff, and partners with the larger community." Tyler has been reporting on the draft document to the club and soliciting feedback. This facilitates closer interaction between faculty and students and increases the students' position as stakeholders in the University community. Moreover, the Clean Energy campaign has produced collaboration between two courses to be offered this fall. Dr. Ada Haynes's students in the Sociology of Appalachia are working with my students in the Environmental History class in raising awareness of the threats facing Appalachia.

Conclusions

Much work remains to be done to implement this vision of Tech as a leader in sustainability solutions. I realize that my seminar and this student club are small in comparison to the overall student body. As an historian, however, I also realize that significant social change usually begins with the proverbial small group of people. In 1956 E.D. Nixon of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in Montgomery, Alabama called a meeting at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to support a woman who had been arrested for violating the segregation laws on the Montgomery bus system—Mrs. Rosa Parks. One of the last people he informed of the meeting was the new minister of the church, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who founded the Southern Christian Leadership Council and launched the modern civil rights movement. Why can't Tennessee Technological University also inaugurate a new vision in environmental education that has the same possibilities for wide-ranging actions? Why can't we be the leaders whose research, education, and activism help preserve our planet's living systems upon which all life depends?



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