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Class Tackles Energy Plan

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Class tackles energy plan

They trail into class from all campus corners, a group as varied as the issues they are studying.

Dropping backpacks at their feet, 10 students settle around a table ready for work. They are business students, historians, artists, biologists, musicians. “Technically he’s contributing to greenhouse gas emissions because of all the carbon dioxide he expends when he plays his trumpet,” someone jokes, gesturing toward a classmate. Others nod and smile.

Though diverse, they share a common passion – the environment.

All are environmental studies majors or minors enrolled in the capstone course, Environmental Problem Solving. With the mindset to “think globally, act locally,” Marvin Henberg, professor of philosophy, and his students identify best practices and bring them to Linfield.

“We have students from both the policy track and science track, with minors in everything from business to Spanish to music,” said Henberg, who has led previous classes to clean up Cozine Creek and restore native habitat.

When President Thomas L. Hellie signed the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment on Earth Day, April 22, 2008, Henberg recognized a timely class topic – identify Linfield’s carbon footprint and create a plan to reduce it.

The two-phase project began last year when students calculated the amount of greenhouse gas emitted by Linfield annually. They found Linfield’s carbon footprint to be far lower than that of other colleges of comparable size, but according to Henberg, that is not because the college is using less energy. Rather, it is using cleaner energy. Linfield’s energy comes from hydropower provided by McMinnville Water & Light, which does not contribute to global warming.

“It’s not because we’re more efficient than other colleges, it’s because we’re luckier,” he said. “The meaningful statistic will be to compare Linfield’s output from year to year, which will show whether or not we’re making progress.”

This year’s class created a plan to lower Linfield’s energy use over time. Dividing into small groups, students tackled three areas – infrastructure, green energy and behavioral change. Group members conducted interviews both on and off campus to get a sense of current habits and reviewed reports from other colleges. The material culminated in a comprehensive report.

“The strength of the class is everyone’s different backgrounds,” said Tasha Haraguchi ’09, who earned a degree in business management while minoring in environmental studies and art. She interned at The Nature Conservancy this year to learn more about challenges specific to Oregon, and hopes to work for an environmental non-profit after leaving Linfield. “Each student either has a minor or major in environmental science, which helps the class to come together and collaborate.”

Henberg recognizes the importance of diversity in dealing with environmental issues. He helped found the environmental studies program, designing it with two tracks – one specializing in policy and the other in science. “You need the two tracks to work together,” he said. “You need scientists to figure out what we’re doing to ourselves and you need policy people to figure out how not to do it to ourselves.”

Students are optimistic their work will impact Linfield’s future and look forward to seeing their ideas implemented.

“Everyone agrees sustainability is a pressing issue,” said Eric Butler ’09. “Our report will be useful – it may not necessarily set college policy for the future, but it will help inform it.”

– Laura Davis



Samantha Mack '11 works in the community garden.

Student initiatives

This spring, the Oregon Campus Compact awarded a \$1,000 mini-grant to Linfield for the Bike Shop project, spearheaded by Sarah Valentine '11. Bicycles left on racks at the end of each semester will be given to the project, which will then fix them to be raffled off or rented to students on a daily basis. A repair shop, free and open to the community, will repair bikes that might otherwise be thrown away.

In conjunction with McMinnville Water & Light, Linfield students are going door to door offering to replace incandescent lights with more energy-efficient compact fluorescents. For every replacement documented, Linfield will receive a \$2 energy rebate.

In May, the student body passed a referendum to create a renewable energy and sustainability fund. The fund will be established with a \$10-per-semester student body fee, which will raise about \$34,000 annually. A portion of the funds will go toward purchasing renewable energy credits to increase the use of renewable energy at Linfield from 6 to 15 percent. The remaining money will be awarded in the form of grants for sustainability projects designed by students, faculty and staff.