

Carbon Neutral Campuses:

Local Colleges and Universities Promote Sustainable Future

By Katie Masucci

As I near the end of my undergraduate career, I look forward to the future with a readiness to solve real-world environmental problems. Certainly my classmates at Austin College – and college students from all over North Texas – are experiencing the same sense of enthusiasm and excitement. Local college grads are equipped with a strong interdisciplinary background offering specialty courses, degree programs and extracurricular societies dedicated to promoting environmental awareness. Regardless of the professional paths chosen by local students, the chances are high their institutions have helped instill a sense of environmental stewardship.

My enthusiasm on the subject of sustainability in academia stems from my experience at Austin College in Sherman, Texas, where I will soon begin my senior year. Since 1997, the campus' Center for Environmental Studies has grown tremendously, with more and more students annually declaring environmental studies majors and minors. Other campuses around North Texas have experienced similar trends of heightened interest in environmental science, engineering, ethics and policy courses and degree programs. Texas Christian University, Southern Methodist University, the University of North Texas, the University of Texas in Arlington and Collin College, among others, offer environmental studies and/or science undergraduate degrees; some offer environmental science and policy graduate programs. The selling point of such curricula is clear: students gain a strong interdisciplinary education. Studying the environment, how it sustains life and how we're impacting its integrity requires more than a few science credits. To truly understand the relationship between man and nature, students must learn how both function; by advocating courses in the life and earth sciences to political science, economics and ethics, these programs build well-rounded, capable leaders.

Beyond the classroom, students and faculty have created even more opportunities for learning, service and fun. The April 2010 launch of Austin College's "Thinking Green" marketing campaign allowed students opportunities to learn how to reduce their environmental impact. Students were able to visit with guest speakers and to take part in the campus' first annual "Green Serve," an afternoon of green-themed citywide service; over 200 students participated. Of course, months of planning for the launch were supplemented with research on experiences of other institutions with similar initiatives.

From dorm vs. dorm energy reduction competitions to bringing locally grown foods to college cafeterias, campus greening is in high-gear nationwide. North Texas institutions are making great strides as leaders. Networking among institutions has helped facilitate the success that sustainability and environmental education programs have seen thus far. The Texas Regional Alliance for Campus Sustainability has grown to be a leading body of ideas for Texas colleges and universities. Its members – including representatives from large schools, like The University of Texas in Austin and Texas A&M, and from smaller institutions, like Austin College – hold regular teleconferences to share campus updates and the latest ideas for reducing energy consumption and waste on campus.

Strong sustainability-oriented degree programs are best supported by faculty and staff that take campus "greening" to the next level. Many local colleges and universities work to make their campus facilities more eco-friendly. Through actions such as cutting emissions through energy conservation, investing in renewable energy and purchasing carbon offsets for international travel, local campuses are setting precedence for environmentally conscious behavior. Austin College will soon break ground on its new science building designed to achieve a (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver certification level. Once completed, it will be the first LEED certified green building in Sherman, Texas. Treating sustainability as a major transformative initiative has united over 670 institutions, many of those in Texas, under the

American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment. Signatories of the Commitment agree to incorporate sustainability into multiple facets of campus life. The ultimate goal for signatories is to achieve campus carbon neutrality, or net zero emissions, by a target date of each college's choice. Setting such a goal demonstrates these educational institutions' dedication to practicing what they preach!

The driving force for all of this is a combination of students, faculty and staff all with a desire not only to learn but to act. There's no doubt the next generation of leaders will be well-rounded individuals with rich interdisciplinary backgrounds. Hopefully, graduates from North Texas colleges and universities will take what they learn from campus "greening" efforts and apply that knowledge to whatever professional ends they pursue.