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Sustainability across the Curriculum

SHARON BEVINS and NEIL WILKINSON

When Florida Gulf Coast University opened its doors to students in August 1997, a commitment to graduating ‘ecologically literate’ students had already been established. Faculty from across disciplines were courted to advance this endeavour. Nine months before the university opened, the Dean’s Council adopted the following statement as a guide for the development of programmes:

We have made a commitment as a university to make environmental education an integral part of our identity. One of our university-wide outcomes is that all students will develop ‘an ecological perspective.’ A way to accomplish this perspective is to devise a course, or group of experiences, with an environmental focus that all FGCU students must complete, and in which faculty from all four colleges would be involved. Because ‘ecology’ applies to our total living space and interrelationships, human and natural, it is relevant to all our disciplines and professions. Thus an ecology course would touch on all nine of the university-wide goals and outcomes, and more. Students would not only be introduced to FGCU values, they would participate in them. (Dean’s Council 1997)

To this end, FGCU requires all undergraduates to complete a course on sustainable development, called ‘The University Colloquium: A Sustainable Future’. To date, all students who have received an undergraduate degree from FGCU have taken this class. For the spring 2009 semester, 31 sections of Colloquium were offered, with 25 students per class, taught by 28 faculty members.

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THE UNIVERSITY COLLOQUIUM: A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

The Colloquium revolves around three themes: sense of place, ecological literacy and sustainability. Students read a variety of authors, including essays on experiential education from John Dewey, ecological literacy and education for sustainability from David Orr, environmental ethics from Aldo Leopold and the Earth Charter, and local environmental issues regarding the Everglades, a subtropical wetland that covers much of the southern half of the Florida peninsula and that has been designated one of three wetland areas of global importance by UNESCO. Students participate in field trips designed to provide a deeper understanding of southwest Florida and the connections between culture, society, business and the environment. They tour a swamp containing one of the last remaining old-growth bald cypress forests in southeastern United States and a farm that researches suitable crops and technologies for sustainable farming in developing countries. In addition, they visit the heavily urbanised downtown of the nearby city of Fort Myers to better understand the role of citizens in making urban areas more livable.

During the semester, each student creates a plan of action that incorporates concepts explored in class into a meaningful community-service experience. The goal of this activity is to help students understand that their learning advances when they act on what they have learned through serving their community. Students are expected to plan, to engage and then to reflect. In these projects, students integrate the two key learning outcomes of ecological perspective and community awareness and involvement and evaluate their own previous learning in consideration of what they have learned in the Colloquium about natural systems and our dependence on them. The service projects take their learning to a new level at which they make the abstract concrete. As Hamin (2006: 79) notes, ‘Empowerment cannot be only an academic concept described in the class, but must also be experienced by the students within the class’.

THE FGCU QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLAN

Colleges and universities in the United States undergo continuous rigorous evaluation to establish and maintain their accreditation. In 2004, the accrediting agency for the southern region of the United States, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), began requiring all colleges and universities to prepare and implement a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that provides evidence of the institution’s focused attention on some aspect of student learning with the goal of improvement. In 2005, when FGCU underwent re-accreditation, we elected to centre our QEP on two of the university’s undergraduate student learning goals: ecological perspective and community awareness and involvement, which we define as follows:

Ecological perspective: Know the issues related to economic, social and ecological sustainability. Analyze and evaluate ecological issues locally and globally. Participate in collaborative projects requiring awareness and/or analysis of ecological and environmental issues.

Community awareness and involvement: Know and understand the important and complex relationships between individuals and the communities in which they live and work. Analyze, evaluate and assess human needs and practices within the context of community structures and traditions. Participate collaboratively in community service projects. (Florida Gulf Coast University n.d.)

The QEP provides an opportunity to systematically evaluate student learning in these areas and develop strategies to refine curriculum and enhance student learning as part of an ongoing plan of continuous improvement. It is closely aligned with the mission and the guiding principles of the institution.

To advance the goals of the QEP, it was necessary to operationally define concepts embedded within the outcomes. The QEP working group agreed to these definitions:

Community Involvement: Community refers to a group of individuals who share an interest in cultural, social, political, health, or economic issues. Community involvement is mutually agreed upon action taken by community members to achieve long-term benefits for the community and to develop an overall stronger sense of community. This notion is expanded to include a land ethic; enlarging the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, air, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.

Ecological Perspective: An ecological perspective recognizes the interconnectedness among diverse ecological, social and economic contexts. While rooted in a sense of place, this perspective is developed by examining issues on both local and global scales. An ecological perspective attempts to balance economic and social aspirations with the imperative for environmental sustainability. (Florida Gulf Coast University 2005)

One of our primary goals was to create a developmental model within the undergraduate curriculum for these two learning outcomes; that is, the faculty desired to integrate these learning outcomes across the four years of study in a way that allowed students to progressively engage the complexities of sustainability education. As a result, the faculty has incorporated sustainability readings into the first-year Writing Programme (discussed in the article by Rowland et al.) and service into upper-level courses that focus on environmental issues (discussed by Otto and Wohlpart).

For the purposes of the QEP, it was decided to assess student learning in ecological perspective and community awareness and involvement through the University Colloquium. FGCU developed an instrument, the Environmental Literacy Instrument (ELI), which is now administered online near the end of the semester. Completing the instrument is a required assignment in the course, thereby providing ongoing assessment data. The learning outcome related to community involvement is assessed through the administration of the Community Service Attitudes Scale (CSAS) that was modified to measure students' attitudes about community service related to the environment. This assessment is based on a model developed by Schwartz (Bringle, Phillips and Hudson 2004). We have just begun to collect and assess data from these two instruments and will use that data to improve student learning in the course and across our curriculum.
BEYOND THE COLLOQUIUM

Many academic initiatives have developed across the broad curriculum as Florida Gulf Coast University has matured, expanded programmes and added new graduate courses of study. For example, the College of Education has added an Educational Specialist degree, which includes three courses in sustainability: first, a required seminar that introduces definitions, historical perspectives and issues in sustainability in education; second, a seminar that focuses on global issues related to sustainability education, which involves field experiences, discussions and presentations; and third, a curriculum development course that allows for the consideration of pedagogical and curricular decisions that relate to sustainability education and that explores models for sustainability education, including those that use the Earth Charter. In the College of Business, a new academic centre has been proposed to support sustainability across the business curriculum, connecting economic issues relating to sustainability with the local and regional business community. In the College of Professional Studies, the programme in Resort and Hospitality Management has a focus on ecotourism and sustainability, training students to understand the relationship between green practices and the local tourist industry. In the College of Arts and Sciences, both a Master of Science in Environmental Science and a Master of Arts in Environmental Studies have been created. The MS prepares students in the science of ecology and in applying the concept of sustainability. The MA prepares students in public policy, environmental protection and in environmental education.

Research related to sustainability ranges from the scientific, such as that on ecological restoration, to the applied, such as the impact of the University Colloquium on student learning. The University strongly supports a Center for Environmental and Sustainability Education, whose work is to elevate the environmental mission of FGCU. Its expertise is in educational theory and practice and it has provided leadership in publishing books and articles on this topic, including, most recently, *Young People, Education, and Sustainable Development: Exploring Principles, Perspectives, and Praxis* (Corcoran and Osano 2009). The Center is a global nexus for Earth Charter scholarship which led to the recent publication of *A Voice for Earth: American Writers Respond to the Earth Charter* (Corcoran and Wohlpart 2008). FGCU became an affiliate of Earth Charter International in 2009, and will work towards expanding the use of the Earth Charter across the curriculum. In addition, a great deal of research occurs in the nearby Estero Bay on such issues as oyster-reef restoration and habitats, which provides information on sea-level rise and climate change, as well as freshwater inflow and the estuarine tributaries of the bay, along with other research projects such as an Environmental Protection Agency-sponsored project on sustainable housing in the local region and a South Florida Water Management project to support environmental and sustainability education in the local primary schools. One final major area of research that will be both scientific and applied will be on the solar field that is currently under construction.
References


