

Environmental education on campus

By Christine Lena

Western Michigan University faculty strive to develop a sustainability general education requirement for all students in order to increase campus environmental awareness.

Students coming to Western Michigan University with an interest in the environment and sustainability already have green ideas and values on their mind, or what Denise Keele, associate professor of environmental and sustainability studies and political science, calls “green-DNA.”

“Every type of student group wants to reach more people, but our goal will always be for more and to grab a wider audience since it’s mostly made up of only our people with green-DNA,” Keele said.

Many projects exist in the environmental and sustainability studies programs, but Keele said that these active groups are still quite small. She said faculty members are working with the [Office for Sustainability](#) to engage more of the WMU student population.

A small but dedicated group of students in the Environmental and Sustainability Studies Program are doing environmental advocacy work, said Brian Petersen, assistant professor of environmental and sustainability studies.

“I encourage a lot of activism in the classroom,” Petersen said. “But unfortunately activism isn’t widely shared across the student population.” The overall student population who aren’t involved in the environmental and sustainability studies or biology programs, know very little about environmental issues, Petersen said.

Petersen said he sees a lot of reasons for why the general student population at WMU doesn’t know much about environmental issues. “Lots of students work, have a lower income, and come into college without much insight on environmental issues unless that is something they specifically want to study,” Petersen said.

Allie Cousino, a junior studying biology and chemistry, said she knows other biology students are definitely aware of campus environmental issues.

“I feel like the general students don’t know much, but they need to do their part too,” Cousino said.

David Hemmerlein, a 2014 WMU graduate with a bachelor’s degree in environmental and sustainability studies and biology, said he sees positive growth in the programs with active students. However, Hemmerlein said he agrees that general students don’t know much about environmental problems on campus.

Cousino said information about campus environmental issues is available to students, but many students who are not involved in science programs need to look for it. Cousino said that the Office for Sustainability sponsors events and speakers open to all students to attend.

Matt Stewart, a junior studying aviation flight science who has never taken an environmental studies course at WMU, said he knows very little about campus environmental issues. “I honestly don’t know too much, and I think I have the same level of knowledge about environmental issues as the majority of students do.”

Jeff Spoelstra, the sustainability coordinator at WMU’s Office for Sustainability, said that the number of students who are aware of environmental issues is disappointing. Getting more students outside of environmental programs interested in sustainability is a goal of the Office for Sustainability, he said.

“We strive to do it, but it’s a challenge,” Spoelstra said. “There’s more engagement than ever within our environmental and biology programs, but we are trying harder to reach out to other students too,” Spoelstra said.

Some of these initiatives that the Office for Sustainability has done to increase student engagement is putting out a lot more year-round events and collaborating with WMU's different colleges and departments, Spoelstra said.

An introductory environmental and sustainability studies course required of all WMU students is being considered as an addition to the curriculum. Keele said that adding a required sustainability general education course into the curriculum "would be great improvement in chipping away at the general population of students."

Last year, a sustainability survey open to all WMU students and faculty was conducted by the Office for Sustainability. Of the 1,131 respondents, 33 percent of respondents were first-year students, 24 percent were second-year students, 18 percent were third-year students, 14 percent were fourth-year students and 11 percent were fifth-year students.

Survey results showed that many students, including those who aren't involved in an environmental and sustainability or the biology programs, would support having an introductory sustainability course as a general education requirement. Out of 1,194 respondents for this question, 34.6 percent of students voted for this specifically.

"I think Western students should really know about these issues, especially since we pay for it in our tuition with the sustainability fee," Hemmerlein said. "I think every student should be required to take some type of environmental studies class because it can be paired with anything."

The idea to have a required environmental studies course was one that Petersen mentioned as well. "It's the university's obligation to get students involved and it should be a requirement that all students be a part of, not just with environmental advocacy, but with activism in any area of interest," Petersen said.

In addition to adding this general education requirement course, in recent meetings of the faculty of the environmental studies program, all 11 faculty members were pushing for an environmental literacy certificate, Keele said. This certificate would be awarded to students who complete an approved list of environmental and sustainability courses.

Petersen said that students who are getting involved in environmental activism and are engaged on campus "are learning what's really going on outside of the classroom and broadening their horizons by being a step ahead of their peers." Petersen said that a way for students to get involved in environmental issues on campus is for the university to create incentives within the programs. Different academic programs can make partnerships with organizations that the students in those fields truly care about, Petersen said.

"There's a difference between caring and knowing," Keele said.