

Regional

Sustainability an issue that crosses many areas

As environmental issues continue to be more problematic to society, colleges and universities are becoming more proactive in addressing those concerns. At many schools, faculty members are given the position as “greener” of the campus.

One local example is Connie Frey-Spurlock, an associate professor of sociology and Faculty Sustainability Fellow at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

“The position is designed to do at least two things,” Frey-Spurlock explained. “One is to work with faculty on integrating sustainability into their coursework. More generally, the goal is to further sustainability on campus by working with faculty on their curriculum and with students and co-curricular activities as well. A second part to that is doing research in that area. So I’ll be doing some research, at least one or two projects along those lines.”

Anative of Nashville, Tenn., she obtained her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in sociology from Middle Tennessee State University and her doctorate, also in sociology, from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. She said that the issue of sustainability goes beyond environmental sciences and crosses disciplinary lines.

“At least one of our philosophy professors is teaching with sustainability in his curriculum, and that is Chris Pearson who teaches environmental ethics. Philosophy professor Allison Reinhold has also incorporated some aspects of sustainability in her curriculum. So, in terms of ethics, we can talk about it there, in terms of how we view the world, we can talk about whether we are ecocentric or anthropocentric. So those could be conversations in philosophy.” This does not mean, of course, that the issue of sustainability on campuses is purely academic.

“We live in a world that is demanding this conversation,” she said. “We live in a world that is characterized by a lot of environmental damage. We live in a world that is victim to a lot of social injustice, which is also part of the sustainability paradigm. And we certainly live in a world that has a lot of economic inequalities, which is a



Photo by Bill Retzlaff

The establishing of green roofs on campuses like this one at SIUE has become a way to practice sustainability.

third leg, so to speak, of the sustainability paradigm.” She added that she sees this issue as a teaching opportunity.

“The world we live in is changing, and changing quickly,” she said. “Our students need to be prepared when they do get out into that world to think about how to use resources, how to approach issues of social justice and how to think about economics in terms of equity.” When it comes to challenges in applying the sustainability practices on campuses, the major obstacle may be changing people’s behaviors.

“It’s tough to get folks to think differently,” said Frey-Spurlock, “but that’s what sustainability requires us to do. What I have found though is that when folks are introduced to the concepts and have a chance to work with them, think about them and talk with others about sustainability, it makes sense to them then to incorporate these ideas.” She said that she believes that there is a growing sensibility and understanding of the major issues surrounding sustainability – an important one being how we use energy.

“I think there is a growing number of students that do know and understand the origin and implication of the source of energy,” she said. “But I think the students are a lot like the rest of us on this campus in that most of us don’t know and don’t understand it. We do have a new student group that I believe just started this semester called Focus the Nation and they are concentrating exclusively on renewable energies. So it’s exciting to see that students are interested in these new, cleaner types of energy.” As laudable as it is that some groups are taking initia-

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tives, it is also important to get direction from the campus leadership.

“One of the things we do in the faculty workshops during the summer is that we take a walking tour after lunch,” she said. “Faculty that have been here longer than I have tell me there are things that they see on the tour and learn on the tour that they did not know before.” The same happens with students.

“I have taken a class of students on a tour through the gardens to just walk through, explore and think about the value of what that space is not just in terms of economics but also in terms of quality of life,” Frey-Spurlock said. “Many of them walk away talking about how proud they are of their campus because it is so beautiful.”

A problem that some environmental initiatives face is the sense that we have already damaged the environment so much that it is too late to save. Frey-Spurlock recognizes that problem, but she is clear about what needs to be done.

“It’s something that folks who work in sustainability across the United States talk about. That we have to be careful how we talk about it because there is so much doom and gloom,” she said.

“If that is the only face we put forward then folks do get overwhelmed and they do get hopeless and then nothing can change. So what I like to remind my students of is that we have got a lot of problems, and we do need to be aware of them and be educated about them, but we also have a lot of solutions and some of them are very simple.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.