

# Engaging Students in Sustainable Behavior

*Summary by Katherine Gasner*

## *Panelists*

**Caroline Howe**, *Yale College '07\**

**Daniel Worth**, *National Association of Environmental Law Societies (NAELS)*

**Emily Biesecker**, *Yale College '08*

\*Workshop organizer

This workshop featured three young speakers, all involved in establishing that college students are essential to progress around the climate change issue. The participants learned why students are so important in achieving progress toward sustainability and examined examples of student action.

## **A NATION-WIDE PROGRAM TO INVOLVE STUDENTS IN ADVANCING SUSTAINABILITY ON CAMPUS**

Dan Worth began the workshop by discussing the importance of involving future generations in sustainable initiatives on campuses nationwide. He stressed that the young generation of today has the responsibility to initiate action against climate change, and he proceeded to share some strategies to achieve such progress. First, he highlighted the importance of taking advantage of universities as centers of research and student body energy for sustainability programs. He explained how universities are especially unique, having unmatched enthusiasm from the student body alongside generous resources for education and implementation.

Worth outlined three components of this generation's mission:

1. Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 70-90 percent within the next 45 years;
2. Lead a modern industrial revolution, which would entail reconstructing the power and transportation sectors;
3. Overcome political differences to achieve the first two goals.

For the achievement of the first goal, Worth pointed to NAELS' initiative entitled "Campus Climate Neutral." The goals of this nation-wide project are to generate

research for sustainable solutions, to support and institutionalize ongoing climate and sustainable initiatives, and to educate and prepare the next generation of leaders. Campus Climate Neutral has three stages: first, in-depth research and assessment of the university's policies and current infrastructure; second, expansion of this research into other disciplines, including students specializing in policy, law, financing, business, design, and engineering; and third, expanding this assessment and research regimen to the surrounding city and country. To pursue these stages, Campus Climate Neutral encourages colleges and universities to offer classes for credit that require students to pursue sustainable initiatives. This gives students the right incentives to engage in sustainability work and creates an ever-evolving, but institutionalized program.

One example of a Campus Climate Neutral project already underway is at the University of California, Santa Barbara. This project began with extensive research and involved UCSB decision makers. By the spring of 2006, the "UCSB Campus Climate Neutral Action Plan" was published. Accomplishments included the establishment of a Green Fund, the development of a policy matrix describing different costs and impacts of greenhouse gas emission strategies, the collaboration of many university leaders, and the involvement of the Santa Barbara mayors in planning future city projects. With this example, Worth showed that students and university leaders can be effective in establishing a sustainability program and broadening its circle of influence through the involvement of government leaders in their host cities.

Worth then turned to the new generation's second mission, to create a modern Industrial Revolution. Here, he described his faith in young people's determination and innovation to revolutionize the transportation and power sectors. Again, he stressed that all disciplines must be involved to create the industrial change necessary for action against climate change; climate change is a field that appeals to all disciplines.

Lastly, Worth spoke of the need to bridge the political divide. Civility in discussions about climate, no matter the audience, is necessary. He also advised that preconceived notions of who is an ally or an enemy would impede progress. In addition, he recommended that preaching about problems should be avoided in the future; instead, he urged frank discussion of the possible solutions. Worth ended by restating his faith in the young generation to make a difference and lead the movement against climate change.

### **YALE'S STUDENT TASKFORCE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PARTNERSHIP (STEP)**

Emily Biesecker, who is deeply engaged in environmental activity on the Yale campus, began by describing the Student Taskforce for Environmental Partnership. STEP was launched in 2004 with a grant from Yale's "Green Fund," a pool of money dedicated to supporting sustainability initiatives on campus. The organization consists of student employees from each residential college. These employees are responsible for

student outreach throughout the year, educating fellow undergraduates about the sustainable initiatives throughout campus and facilitating sustainable practices for everyday implementation. The STEP members work closely with the administration, frequently collaborating with the Office of Sustainability, the Sterling Power Plant, and the Recycling Office. Biesecker then highlighted some of the most recent STEP projects, which included a compact fluorescent light exchange campaign, a school-wide clothing swap, a technoscrap recycling initiative, and a heat reduction campaign.

Biesecker went on to address student involvement in Yale's greenhouse gas emission reduction campaign. With help from STEP, New Haven Action, and the Yale Student Environmental Coalition (YSEC), students were able to educate the undergraduate population about the GHG reduction goals of the university. The campaign collected over 2000 signatures on a Clean Energy Pledge and thus got approval to lower the heat in each residential college by two degrees.

Biesecker concluded her remarks by describing the Yale Student Environmental Coalition (YSEC). Founded in 1986, YSEC has served as a hub for the environmental activity on campus, pursuing a wide range of activities from hosting the Climate Conference in 2005 to campaigning for more recycled paper in Yale's daily operations.



## TEACHING SUSTAINABILITY ON CAMPUS

The last speaker, Caroline Howe, addressed the importance of integrating environmental education into the academics of the university. She described different avenues of engagement: through the curriculum, research opportunities, international interaction, and education through action or service learning.

Howe began by illustrating how environmental issues have been a central focus in a number of classes and clubs on campus. Howe featured "Engineers without Borders" which successfully pursued a water quality and disinfection project in Cameroon and Honduras. Another example she gave was the Yale Engineering Design Team, which has devoted its energies to building a bio-diesel fueled bus and a solar-powered boat.

Howe also spoke of how Yale's Sustainable Food Program has offered a unique educational opportunity for everyone on campus. Beginning as a student initiative with support from the Green Fund, the Sustainable Food Program has become an institutionalized and valued part of campus life. Today, classes are offered and participation at the Yale Farm is encouraged.

In conclusion, Howe described how Yale encourages a great deal of research and involvement outside of campus. Through summer grants, such as the Environmental Studies Fellowship, many students each year are able to extend their studies and their impact outside of Yale.



## DISCUSSION

In the discussion following the presentations, many participants got involved. One participant asked how the older generations fit into all of this activism and change. The panelists established that it is very important that older generations, whether teachers or administrators, not underestimate the energy and potential of students. They also agreed that communication must occur between generations about resources and valuable networks in order to sustain progress and momentum.

Another participant, representing the University of California Berkeley, wrapped up the workshop nicely. He expressed an appreciation for his student's ability to stubbornly persist with campaigns and challenge the administration. He acknowledged that this is a very important part of the process toward sustainable progress. The fact that students "won't let you say no" is actually an essential part of sustainable activism. He also noted that collaboration between the students and administration is crucial. While administrative support is essential in advancing student involvement in environmental issues, students are important resources for the administration as well in pursuing sustainable campaigns themselves and observing what actually happens on the ground level throughout campus.