

Education for a Transition to Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

The transition to a sustainable society requires active intervention on the part of those who promote environmental protection, social justice, and a health-regarding economy. Such interventions may be driven by progressive political leaders, visionary business interests, non-government advocacy organizations, and community-based civil society organizations. The education and training required to be an effective advocate is often learned on the job and through direct personal experience. Universities can play an important role in such education by providing students with broader awareness, values clarification, personal and professional skills, and an opportunity to share experiences collectively. Such education fits the conventional individual development model that forms the basis of most degree-oriented curricula.

Universities can also provide training, skill building and values development for communities of people who are eager to form common visions and goals. While there are examples of this kind of education, it is a less conventional model for higher education institutions.

The University of Massachusetts Lowell, in promoting its mission of “sustainable, regional development” over the past decade has developed a rich body of experience in educating communities of people seeking a transition to a more sustainable future. This paper will focus on three such examples in which the author has had the opportunity to participate.

A. The Massachusetts Toxics Use Reduction Institute located on the campus in 1990 was mandated by statute to provide a training program for professional toxics use reduction planners who were required to assist the state agencies in reducing the industrial use of toxic chemicals and the generation of hazardous wastes. The Institute developed and frequently offered a fourteen-week training course that graduated a group of professional planners. In 1994 these planners formed a new professional organization, the Toxics Use Reduction Planners Association, that has matured into a broadly based organization for promoting more environmentally conscious Massachusetts industries.

B. The Lowell Center for Sustainable Production launched a special training program for non-governmental environmental advocacy activists to develop their awareness and skills in promoting cleaner industrial production technologies and processes. This training formed the basis for the establishment in 1999 of a new international non-governmental organization called Clean Production Action with offices in the United States and Europe. The curriculum for this training was

refined and re-developed to provide training for international environmental advocacy leaders. At the 1998 training program the international activists spawned the concept for a bold new international network, called the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA). This international network, which was formally established at a meeting in Johannesburg, has now become one of the fastest growing environmental advocacy networks in the developing world.

C. In 2000, the Lowell Center launched a special education project called the Precautionary Principle Project to assist in raising awareness of the precautionary approach to environmental risk management. This project has offered specialized training for non-government, industrial and academic leaders. In 1999, the project sought a partnership with two Massachusetts non-governmental advocacy organizations to target training to grassroots community and environmental leaders. Two years ago these activists organized a bold new public health campaign called the Massachusetts Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow.

Each of these training programs has sought to raise awareness, skills, and substantive knowledge that would help students increase the effectiveness of their advocacy. In each case the training has led to the formation of new collective forms and organizations that today actively promote sustainable solutions.

What can be learned from these initiatives? What has succeeded? What limitations have emerged? What lines must be carefully constructed to separate education for change from its direct advocacy? How best can a University dedicated to a sustainable future use its educational mission to help form viable communities of people capable of fulfilling that mission?