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Sustainability in season at Illinois college

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Agonizing over those irritatingly powerful politicians and their ongoing love affairs with the fossil fuel/nuclear energy industries is like taking up permanent residence inside a speedy down-only elevator. It will plummet you into despair, sadness and paralysis.

So change direction. Take the one named Sustainability instead. Its journey will lift your spirits and warm your heart.

"Creation care" is alive and thriving. Lewis University's main campus in Romeoville, Ill., and Xavier University in Cincinnati are recent examples. Sustainability practices are incorporated into campus buildings, grounds keeping, science majors, daily campus living, extracurricular activities, spirituality and theology. As a nod to the good news, Eco Catholic is featuring these Catholic schools in this and a subsequent blog.

Perhaps in the next 10 or 15 years, enough of Lewis' and Xavier's graduates will have successfully brought their fresh passion and leadership into the worlds of work and politics so earth will be a partner instead of an object for exploitation.

Integrating sustainability at Lewis

Last month, Lewis, a De La Salle Christian Brothers school with 6,500 students and several campuses across the U.S., was named a Bronze Level Compact School by Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn and the Green Governments Coordinating Council. The award cites the school for its commitment to integrate sustainability into campus operations, academic and research, student activities and community outreach at its Romeoville location.

As a Bronze Level school, Lewis has a written policy acknowledging support for sustainability. It has established the campus-wide University Environmental and Energy Conservation Council to lead and coordinate environmental efforts across the campus and has launched a website highlighting its programs. Each spring, it sponsors a Come Clean, Go Green contest, which invites students and faculty to come up with ideas for moving further into sustainability.

Lewis' actions bring to mind a quote from *The Lorax*, one of Dr. Seuss' most beloved children's stories: "Unless

someone cares an awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

"It looks like a park here"

Through its programs, Lewis University students, staff and faculty are motivated to care "an awful lot" about the earth -- both in its largest, planetary sense as well as the earth at Romeoville's 400-acre, tree-filled campus.

"Our Campus, Our Earth" appears on the school's website, but earth care is also written into the school's mission statement, said Br. James Gaffney, the university's president for the last 25 years.

"We want to create a beautiful campus which connects us to all of God's creation," he said. "With beauty comes truth and goodness."

One end to a beautiful campus is through caring for trees, a long-standing legacy at Lewis begun more than 30 years ago by the late Br. Ambrose Groble, and continued today by Br. Augustine Kossuth.

"It looks like a park here," Gaffney said. "We have one of the most beautiful campuses in the U.S."

He is not exaggerating. The campus has more than 2,400 trees -- and that does not include other wooded areas, which could bring the number to more than 3,000, adds communications director Kathrynne Skonicki.

Dr. Jerry Kavouras, an associate professor of biology and director of the environmental science program, said that "for every tree we have to take down, we plant three more." And the efforts have paid off: The Arbor Day Foundation has named Lewis University a Tree Campus USA University [1] for the last three years.

Tree Campus USA was launched in 2008 by the Arbor Day Foundation to honor colleges and universities for promoting healthy urban forest management and involving the campus community in environmental stewardship. Twenty-nine campuses qualified that year. Today there are 152, an Arbor Day spokesperson said.

Recycling and reusing around campus

Building-wise, Lewis has an abundance of ecologically sustainable features:

- a green roof on its science building;
- two rainwater harvesting systems to catch rainwater for lawn care instead of using drinking water;

- "best management" storm water practices, such as bioswales and prairie restoration areas, to help prevent run-off and flooding;
- hydration stations installed on campus to reduce the use of plastic bottles.

Last year, Sodexo, the school's food services program, donated 800 plastic cups to staff so they could stop using paper ones. About 137,000 paper cups were saved from the landfill.

Recycling first reached new heights four years ago, when Gaffney offered a summer internship grant to Mark Melka, then an environmental science sophomore. (He's since earned two master's degrees in environmental biology and computer technology and now substitute-teaches in elementary schools around Romeoville.)

Gaffney asked Melka to find out what other colleges and universities were doing to promote sustainability on their campuses. He learned that recycling was key. He discovered many schools had also developed networks of students, faculty and staff to make collaborative environmental efforts easier to accomplish.

Back at Lewis, he organized an environmental council, and its members began a campus-wide expanded recycling program. While there had been efforts in the past among different departments, this new initiative would take the campus to a more ambitious level, thanks in part to a $60,000 grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.

A generous supply of recycling bins -- 1,700 of them -- now serve as visible reminders to everyone on campus. As of 2010, more than 100 tons of recyclables stayed out of landfills, and as of last year, the campus had reached 38 percent of its ultimate goal of recycling 100 percent of common throwaways, like plastic bottles, cans and papers.

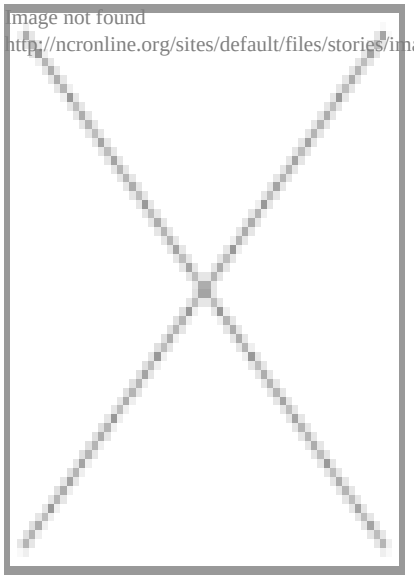
The campus aims to recycle 50 percent of such items this year, and is encouraging students by rewarding them with points that can be used on bookstore purchases each time they turn in plastic bottles.

Growing eco-advocacy

Each spring, the school sponsors a "Come Clean, Go Green" contest, awarding prizes to members of the campus community who come up with new ideas. Recent winners include Patrick Smith, Travis McKinney and Mary Pellicore.

Smith proposed that the organic chemistry labs at Lewis use eco-friendly ideas to decrease the ecological footprint, reduce safety risks and be more frugal.

McKinney encouraged students and faculty to walk or bike rather than drive from one point on campus to another.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Pellicore suggested that an air compressor with a small weatherproof covering be made available to students and faculty to increase fuel efficiency for commuters, and cut down on carbon emissions.

At the end of the event, the names of people who have been "caught recycling" were entered into a raffle drawing and received prizes.

Campus ministry and the theology department are green, too.

Environmental consciousness is definitely "in the air," according to Gaffney and Steven Zlatic, associate director of campus ministry. Students are much more attuned to the issue than they were five years ago because environmental consciousness is now being taught in grade and high schools, the two said.

Each spring, campus ministry organizes eco-immersion trips to "Rooted in Hope," the Racine, Wis., Dominican Sisters' Eco-Justice Center where students learn to care for farm animals and live on the land for a week.

Zlatic also offers environmental reflection nights for the 1,500 students who live on-campus. He stresses that living simply and consuming less is the answer to current environmental problems.

Is it all having an effect? Zlatic is realistic, acknowledging that "students are at all levels." Some truly take his ecological message to heart. Others say the right things because they are now in vogue. Zlatic said he has an uncle "who intentionally throws things in the trash."

'Paying attention' to creation

Br. Armand Alcazar, associate professor in the department of theology, has a theory regarding such stubborn resistance to anything ecological. Years ago, he played golf with a mathematician who would methodically kill snakes who got in his way during their game.

"They were actually more afraid of him than he was of them," Alcazar said.

Alcazar said he thinks his friend's attitude reflects the still-ingrained cultural belief system that humans are entitled to everything

"It's ownership instead of stewardship," Alcazar said.

Through an annual course on earth spirituality, Alcazar said hopes to emphasize the latter, beginning by starting

the course outside.

For the first 25 minutes, the students sit and follow their only assignment: "Pay attention." To leaves, grass, people walking by, little bugs, squirrels, chipmunks, dragonflies and clouds. To everything. Then they write about it.

"When they come back inside, they are amazed," Alcazar said. "They are so moved by God's creation."

He recalled a jock-type student charmed and humbled by watching a bird hopping about, and said others have told him they "need to do this more on my own."

Alcazar said he learned the "pay attention" spiritual exercise from Matthew Fox when he was studying for a master's degree in 1989 at Fox's Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality at Holy Names College in Oakland, Calif.

You start paying attention to all that natural beauty and remember that in the timeline scale of creation, humans were "almost an afterthought," he said. In philosopher Guy Murchie's universe story timeline, "we wouldn't have been created until 10 p.m. on Dec. 31."

But in this frightening era of climate change, there is possibly time to help turn things around, to shake off the habit of the human as destroyer, he said. Both the earth and humans have powers of regeneration. Every day, there is an opportunity to either heal or hurt.

Lewis University is choosing the path of healing through environmental sustainability.

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[1] http://www.arborday.org/programs/treecampususa/