

Although general awareness on sustainability issues is rising, it can be difficult to encourage students to make genuine change, University of California Berkeley Director of Sustainability and Energy Lisa McNeilly said.

According to a report from the U.N. Environment Program, global energy consumption is predicted to increase by 44 percent between 2006 and 2030.

“Against the backdrop of climate change, these statistics highlight the urgency with which we need to find new approaches and solutions to meeting our needs,” the report said.

Steve Motenko, director of operations for the Sustainable World Coalition, said he believes it is troubling how society is not more concerned about the negative impact humans are inflicting on the environment.

Motenko said part of his job is coordinating marketing and social media initiatives to spread awareness and encourage action, which can be very difficult at times.

“I am helping others to discover the elusive social media recipe that gets people involved beyond just likes and clicks and things like that,” Motenko said. “Really, there’s no cut and dry answer.”

McNeilly has found her own recipe for success and said the UC Berkeley Office of Sustainability is very engaged with staff, faculty and students, primarily due to the fact that many groups have approached her looking to get involved.

“We work with individual faculty on a class-by-class basis,” McNeilly said. “We’ve got a lot of student groups and we try to support students as much as we can.”

McNeilly said her and other office staff will often times host events or serve as guest lecturers to draw attention to important sustainability issues.

McNeilly said she recently spoke to a class of students who are working towards degrees in sustainable environmental design before they presented their final design projects for the semester.

“I tend to start with a story about the California condors back when I was working as a citizen scientist in the Grand Canyon,” McNeilly said. “When they were taken out of the wild for protection, I was so struck by it. I had help out.”

McNeilly said she finds that students already committed to a sustainability-related program are usually the most willing to take action in the community.

According to the UC Berkeley sustainability and energy website, the sustainable environmental design major is just one of more than 500 sustainability courses across 46 different departments including environmental science, civil and environmental engineering and Buddhist studies.

With such a wealth of opportunity, McNeilly said it’s no surprise that there’s a higher level of general sustainability awareness across campus compared to other regions in the U.S.

“There is constant, passionate involvement from students,” McNeilly said, citing the student-led upgrades on the creek running through campus as an example.

UW Milwaukee Chief Sustainability Officer Kate M. Nelson said her campus also stands out when it comes to campus and community involvement compared to similar universities across the state and country.

“We compare quite well,” Nelson said. “Our urban environment and diverse student body make us quite unique in Wisconsin.”

The downtown UW Milwaukee campus location provides certain advantages and disadvantages, which faculty and students have fully embraced, Nelson said.

“For us, our greatest environmental challenges are stormwater management, due to the combined sewer system and what it does to Lake Michigan,” Nelson said.

High school graduate John Benish, a Milwaukee resident, said although he hasn’t personally made changes to his lifestyle to live more sustainably, he does support cleaning up the city.

“Parts of the city are bad,” Benish said. “The river might be the worst, or maybe the lake. I sure as hell wouldn’t swim in either one.”

Nelson said one of UW Milwaukee’s most successful programs has been the campus gardens that serve the kitchens, personal food options, gardening, compost production, partnership alliances, STEM programs, community programs and grant opportunities.

McNeilly said much of her success on campus comes from targeting students in residence halls.

“It’s a good, easy place to get their attention,” McNeilly said. “Make it fun, provide food and make it peer-to-peer.”

McNeilly was originally inspired to get involved in a career in sustainability because of the time period she grew up in and her past experiences.

“Growing up in the 1970s I was more aware of some of these things than I even knew,” McNeilly said. “As I went through my career I really wanted something more hands-on. It continues to be rewarding in that way [with] short-term and long-term wins and successes.”

McNeilly said this mindset helps her tackle tough challenges like the current California drought and then uses those challenges to encourage action on campus.

Echoing McNeilly, the U.N. report said that going from passive to active action is crucial and a big topic of debate in the environmental community.

“Empowerment and education are now essential to provide young adults with concrete and workable solutions, so they can fully become actors in the design of sustainable societies,” the report.

McNeilly said she agrees and points out that the gap between awareness and action is complex and centered around the issue of establishing habits.

“There’s a lot of factors at play and there’s a whole new literature on human behavior,” McNeilly said.

While many students and community members care about the environment, Benish said he isn’t motivated to make lifestyle changes.

“I just don’t care that much to do anything drastic,” Benish said. “That’s not how I was raised so it’s not really important to me.”

Kentucky native and farmer Norma Allen said she believes climate change is not man-made, but rather a natural part of the Earth’s climate cycle.

This belief makes it difficult to accept the sustainability marketing tactics that hinge on the devastation of human-caused global warming, Allen said.

“I care about the environment, but I have no control over it,” said Allen. “I’ll love and protect it you know, but there’s a point where my actions won’t make a difference.”

Benish said he isn’t sure whether or not he agrees with Allen that global warming is not man-made, but said either way the changes are tiny.

“I can’t remember what the statistic is, but it’s only warming by a couple degrees,” Benish said. “Yeah that might cause some change, but not much.”

McNeilly said while she argues it is important for individuals to attempt a sustainable lifestyle, it really does take an entire community to make significant change.

“Having that community around sustainability, that’s really important,” McNeilly said.

Nelson said although she serves no role in discussing climate change specifically, the UW Milwaukee campus does a great job of pulling together with the Milwaukee community to lessen the campus carbon footprint.

“I think at UW Milwaukee people make changes to save resources and improve their health and well-being,” Nelson said.

It might take time to get students and communities on board across the state and country, but Motenko said the benefits are well worth it.

“A big part of our mission is supporting individuals in taking action,” he said. “Our world desperately needs that right now on all fronts.”

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Report:
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