National Wildlife Federation®
CAMPUS ecology®

Agnes Scott College

Decatur, Georgia
Curriculum

SCHOOL

Agnes Scott College is a private, 4-year school with 930 students located in Decatur, Georgia.

ABSTRACT

Each spring, Agnes Scott College students have the opportunity to take an introductory class on sustainability. The class, Environmental and Sustainability Studies (ESS) 101, falls under the college's newly established ESS minor, can be taken by any student, and provides them with opportunities to learn about sustainability and apply their lessons to real world scenarios. In spring 2011, the ESS 101 class split into smaller groups of 10-15 and focused on one of three ongoing projects: an energy audit for one of the college's residential properties (in conjunction with instructors and students from DeKalb Tech), our Zero Waste Strategy, and a chirette for our sustainable landscape guidelines (in conjunction with the University of Georgia's College of Environment and Design). Not only were students able to participate in a hands-on application of their classroom knowledge, but they also helped the college and the Office of Sustainability build a foundation of information and data for some of our most important projects to date.

GOALS AND OUTCOMES

Goals

The Environmental and Sustainability Studies minor came about for many reasons—there was an interest among students to have academic classes centered on sustainability and sustainability issues, and there was a need to educate students about sustainability in an academic setting. In addition to the readings, assignments and exams that come with a college survey course, the instructors wanted the students to see real world applications for the lessons they were learning. Because Susan Kidd, director of the Office of Sustainability, co-taught ESS 101, coming up with meaningful and impactful projects for the students was fairly easy—we were able to fold them into work the Office of Sustainability either already doing or wanted to begin. The overall goal was for students to apply their knowledge from readings, discussions and thought-provoking questions to hands-on projects and scenarios. The curriculum will continue to include joint projects as long as the class is offered. The hope is that students will come away with a greater understanding of sustainability than what they might learn solely in a traditional classroom setting.

Accomplishments and Outcomes

We did meet several goals for these projects. The first and most important goal was to help students gain understanding of how their academic understanding of sustainability and climate change applies to real world scenarios. One student said of the projects, "Participating in the Zero Waste project has made me even more mindful of where my waste and waste in general ends up—it's made me more stringently try to recycle and decrease my use of non-recyclable items." Another student wrote, "I learnt some more specific and clearer ideas about sustainability, which helped me to reevaluate my behaviors and

habits." And yet another student said, "I'm more aware of how much we are doing and pursuing as a campus body. It makes me notice my own contribution and involvement on campus."

The projects also helped sustainability initiatives across the campus. Members of the class worked hard to gather surveys and information about student, faculty and staff views on our campus landscape, and what they would want to see in the future. Because of the data they collected, graduate students from UGA's College of Environment and Design were able to produce a 200-page document "Guiding Principles for a Sustainable Landscape." This will ultimately help the college as they begin to make major decisions about our landscape, from renovations and improvements, to policies and best practices, to plant choice and pesticide use. The Zero Waste project brainstormed the some ways to approach a zero waste strategy, which the Office of Sustainability drafted and began to implement in the summer of 2011. Finally, the energy audit helped begin the discussions for another collaboration in which five college-owned residential homes were put in a national energy efficiency program because of the success of the first, student-led energy audit.

Challenges and Responses

The most major challenge the project presented was how to concretely show students that the very basic data they collected would help the project and have more major implications to sustainable initiatives across campus. We responded to the challenge in several ways, but especially by allowing students to provide feedback as they worked on the project. For future project, we would like to ensure there is better follow-through at the conclusion of the projects. We want to really make sure students understand how their project made a difference for their college.

Campus Climate Action: Your School's Carbon Footprint

The ESS 101 class discussed climate change science and politics, read several articles and overall challenged students to think critically about climate change. At the simplest level, the projects reduced or slowed global warming by comprehensively educating a group of tomorrow's leaders about climate change and its current and potential effects on our planet. The projects also began the process for a zero waste strategy, sustainable landscaping policies and practices, and energy audits on several college-owned residential properties.

Commentary and Reflection

One of the best ways to involve students on campus is to give them the opportunity to make a direct impact on the practices, policies or overall goals of the institution's core missions. Each student was given the opportunity for experiential learning through their required field projects. These projects were

designed to help students understand aspects of sustainability as they apply to real life scenarios in order to help them better understand the impact of applying real sustainable practices.

ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Leaders and Supporters

This project was done as part of the Spring 2011 Environmental and Sustainability Studies (ESS) 101 class. The course had an unusually high enrollment for an Agnes Scott course, with close to 30 students, and was very popular among all levels. Students took the class for different reasons: some took it to fulfill a science requirement, others took it to complete their ESS minor and several students took it simply because it seemed like an interesting course. The survey class was co-taught by a biology professor and the Director of Sustainability so that students could learn the scientific and practical aspects of sustainability.

Funding and Resources

The projects were all donated time and collaborative efforts, and there was little to no cost associated with them. For example, DeKalb Tech and Southface loaned the class some equipment for the energy audit on the home. DeKalb Tech also brought their instructors and students in a cross-institutional collaboration, so both their students and Agnes Scott students could have hands-on experiences. The students and faculty from UGA's College of Environment and Design also donated their time and resources. The UGA graduate students used the information gleaned from the surveys and the chirette to put together a sustainable landscape guideline, benefitting both UGA and Agnes Scott. Finally, several custodial and facilities staff met briefly with students to discuss zero waste at Agnes Scott.

Education and Community Outreach

We tried to engage the campus as much as possible during the projects. For example, a college staff member rents the home used in the energy audit demonstration, and that family benefitted from the results of the audit as well. When compiling the information for the "Guiding Principles for a Sustainable Landscape," we sent separate surveys to students, faculty and staff to learn how they used our landscape and grounds, and what changes they might want to see in the future.

National Wildlife Federation's Campus Ecology Program

Our NWF fellow, Kimberly Reeves, was very involved in the sustainable landscape project. She is also spending her fellowship developing an arboretum for the college.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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MORE ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL

Campus Sustainability History
Since signing the ACUPCC in 2007 and committing to become carbon neutral by 2037, Agnes Scott college has made strides in sustainability. The Office of Sustainability works in conjunction with nearly every department on campus, from buildings and grounds, to student life, to waste management, food services, and beyond. Sustainability is truly becoming integrated into campus life.

Image credit: Agnes Scott College