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**Sarah Lawrence College
Yonkers, New York
Spring 2005, Environmental Literacy**

BACKGROUND

Campus Profile

Sarah Lawrence College (SLC) is a private liberal arts college dedicated to a student-driven education. With a student body numbering 1,200 and a 6:1 student-to-faculty ratio, SLC prides itself on providing a creative and individualized curriculum. The largest departments are traditionally the visual arts, writing, and theater programs, but the school also maintains extremely strong programs in the sciences, social sciences, and environmental studies, among others, with faculty members at the cutting edge of research in their fields. The intimate setting allows for unparalleled research opportunities; independent field research is incorporated into almost every class, and students work one-on-one with professors on the projects. Sarah Lawrence graduates all receive a Bachelor of Arts degree, we do not follow a standardized set of courses, nor do we funnel their studies into traditional major categories. We are instead allowed to follow our true passions and perhaps synthesize subjects in unconventional ways.

The small size of SLC also allows for close collaboration between departments and between students, faculty members, staff members, and administrators. The progress toward environmental sustainability on campus is typically initiated by students, is ultimately student-directed, and is made possible by hard work and support from our office of operations and facilities, faculty members in the ecology and environmental studies departments, administrators in the community partnerships office, the Colin staff members who work the grounds, and Grassroots (the SLC environmental justice coalition).

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GOALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Goals

The broad goal of this civic engagement project is to facilitate the environmental discourse in disadvantaged communities that are systematically ignored by the mainstream environmental movement. Because I, an NWF Fellow, am going to school in New York, I chose to focus on low-income neighborhoods in the Bronx and Poughkeepsie. The fellowship project is to conduct an educational program in local middle schools in which the topic of global warming will be covered. We will discuss the local effects of dirty energy practices and climate change and will brainstorm solutions to address those problems. The goals set for the instructional sessions are to increase local awareness about the effects of global warming and dirty energy, as well as about

opportunities for action. In addition to the teaching sessions, the children will take a field trip to the Sarah Lawrence campus where they will be able to meet and question students and faculty members who are currently studying and engaged in environmental struggles.

The short-term goals will be one step toward engaging local communities in the environmental struggles that surround them, but my objective for the years to come is to establish a version of my project as a permanent component of the Clearwater organization. Clearwater members are dedicated to public environmental education, and they run a water-borne classroom out of a sloop (sailboat) on the Hudson River. Each year, they take around 13,000 children for educational sails, teaching them about the history and ecology of the Hudson River valley. They also reach thousands of children through on-land classroom visits, and my environmental, justice-based program would fit in nicely with their current curriculum. Clearwater already takes on education interns and volunteers as a part of its program and could, therefore, serve as a means by which to perpetuate this program.

Accomplishments

Because we are working within the school schedule of both the local middle schools and SLC, several components of this project must wait until the fall to become tangible. However, this summer I have been volunteering with Clearwater and teaching school groups from up and down the Hudson. I plan on revisiting some of the schools in the fall to discuss global warming.

In the meantime, I've also been prompting a dialogue on my campus around the issues of dirty energy, global warming, and environmental justice. In February, the current Riverkeeper (head of a group monitoring the health of the Hudson Valley) came to campus to speak about the devastating effect of local power plants and factories on the health of the local communities and the Hudson River.

In March, I worked with the human rights organization titled Global Exchange to bring Elaine Alexie from the Canadian Arctic to SLC to give a lecture on drilling for oil and the effects of global warming in the Arctic. As a member of the Gwich'in tribe (which extends into the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge), Elaine was able to tell firsthand accounts of the destruction of the Arctic ecosystem and the human rights violations that occur as a result of our addiction to fossil fuels and the infliction of global warming on the world. Her talk was quite moving, and I connected her experiences with the predicament of disadvantaged urban communities, such as those in New York. A campus-wide viewing of the powerful documentary *Oil on Ice* was shown, which details the consequences of drilling for oil and perpetuating global warming.

I arranged "Fossil Fools Day" on April 1, and members of Grassroots (our environmental justice coalition) and I set up information tables educating students about the consequences of dirty energy and global warming. During Earth Week in April we also conducted events that included environmental documentaries, involved political art showings, and culminated on Earth Day with a barbeque. This cookout was campus-wide, was open to the community, used all local food, and was an opportunity for dialogue and awareness-building among students, faculty, and community members. I used the occasion to spread the word about Clearwater and my fellowship.

Accomplishments that made the events possible include generous support and funding from the SLC student senate, the environmental studies department, and the office of student affairs. Connections have also been formed between the SLC ecology faculty and the staff members of Clearwater. These links hold promise for perpetuating SLC student involvement in Clearwater.

A note should be made explaining the fact that the specific goals outlined above have been revised since my original project proposal, though they follow the same purpose of civic engagement through discourse. I had originally intended to conduct forums with adults in Bronx communities concerning local environmental struggles and to develop an environmental agenda for those communities on the basis of the voices of the people living in them. I did not set out with this project intending to teach what I know, but to facilitate the dialogue, to listen, and then to spread what I learned to the larger environmental community. However, confronting the tough issues in such a setting without a preexisting structure or precedent proved too much to organize within the narrow time frame of this particular fellowship. I have decided to take advantage of the structure of schools in those communities as a means to promote environmental dialogue. In the future, I will work to engage with a broader swath of the community.

Challenges and Responses

The greatest obstacle to my goal of engaging the Hudson Valley communities in a discourse about the local effects of dirty energy and global warming has been the lack of infrastructure and precedent. The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) has built its legacy around supporting environmental efforts in unconventional and disadvantaged communities in rural settings, but NWF does not have contacts or previous experience on the ground in inner city New York.

In addition, my original intent was to move dramatically beyond the impositions tactics - of both education and greening projects - that mainstream environmentalism typically used, by having the Hudson Valley communities tell me what needed to happen to help their local environment. However, such a grand step proved too much within the given time frame, and I altered my short-term goals. I hope my project will help to build mutual respect and trust between the national environmental movement and the Bronx and will serve as a foundation for future endeavors.

ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Leaders and Supporters

The classes at Sarah Lawrence that were most instrumental in my pursuit of this fellowship were my ecology classes with Raymond Clarke and my environmental theory studies with Charles Zerner. The research for this project was incorporated into my independent research project for a class with Charles Zerner called Environment, Media, and Mobilization, which examined the means by which communities mobilize around environmental issues. My project also would not succeed without the help of my don and grant processor, David Peritz, the whole-hearted support of the Sarah Lawrence administration; and the hardworking staff members at Clearwater.

Funding and Resources

My discourse-based project relies far less on large amounts of money than on the green engineering projects traditionally supported by the NWF Campus Ecology Program. This support makes my project more feasible and more easily perpetuated in the low-income neighborhoods

with which it is concerned. My small school also has fewer resources to throw around than a large research university would, but SLC has provided critical support to my project, contributing a total of \$2,130 to fund the speakers and outreach events on campus next fall. I have very good relationships with the administrators who fund such events, and we work closely to ensure the success of environmental events on campus. I am also supported by \$1,200 from the NWF Campus Ecology Fellowship program, which will cover travel expenses, visual aids for teaching, and publicity materials in the fall. Funds to bring the school children to Sarah Lawrence will come from the community partnerships office.

Community Outreach and Education

My education and discourse-based project is focused on engaging the communities that most depend on the Hudson River Valley. The most disadvantaged and politically powerless communities also have the most at stake when their local environment is ravaged, and the Hudson River communities continually put great energy into environmental initiatives. My efforts to increase awareness - both locally and within the national environmental movement - are an attempt to lend support to the mobilization already occurring in the Hudson Valley.

Climate Change

My project directly confronts the global threat of human-induced climate change and is guided by the belief that instilling a respect for the environment in all youth and empowering them with knowledge about environmental issues are essential components of our struggle. Children who grow up with an awareness of how human conduct affects the world will develop more sustainable lifestyles.

National Wildlife Federation's Campus Ecology® Program

Because my civic engagement project is a first of its kind for the NWF Campus Ecology program, the myriad resources compiled by NWF, wonderful as they are, have been much less helpful for me than for the other fellows. My project focused less on greening my campus than on breaking down social barriers to environmental progress. I already had an extensive knowledge about human-induced climate change; what I want to learn more about is urban environmental issues and politics, which NWF has much less experience with. I feel that including urban environmental concerns into its endeavors is an important step for the NWF, and I hope that civic engagement projects like mine will contribute to such progress.

Name recognition for the prestigious National Wildlife Federation has helped to lend validity to my project, and the fellowship proves to those I'm seeking to engage that I'm not simply a college student out on a whim. In addition, I think this project and other outreach projects in the future help to make NWF's vision of ecological sustainability more holistic and inclusive.

CLOSING COMMENT

I chose this project because I knew it was going to be tough. I am attempting to cross and to break down longstanding barriers that I feel impede ecological sustainability. The environmental movement is hindered when only certain landscapes are deemed worthy of protection, when one person's idea of a solution is imposed on another community instead of the communities working together, and when the communities most in need are denied the opportunity to speak for themselves.

As a comparatively privileged person, it would be a lot easier for me to simply come up with my own solution for the environmental problems in the Bronx, to secure funding, and to go on my own. However, my goal is truly ecological sustainability. I believe that a long-term solution demands an intimate understanding of the ecosystem in question (humans and nonhumans alike) and the full support of the people who live there. Such an approach is vastly more complicated, but it ensures true progress. I hope the connection between a powerful national organization such as the National Wildlife Federation and a disadvantaged community such as the Bronx will open the eyes of both groups and will prompt further dialogue, because global warming affects us all.