Educating Courageous Leaders: The Case for Environmental Justice

Andrew M. Wells

University of Georgia
Abstract

This article links the Virginia Tech Student Affairs aspiration to develop *courageous leadership* with a call to empower students to respond to global climate change. The author presents learning outcomes and practical implications for student affairs administrators and scholars who hope to prepare students for a future in which environmental justice must inform the response to global climate change. Constructs examined include climate science, social justice, current practices that promote education about sustainability, and the role of higher education in preparing students for a future fraught with challenges.
Educating Courageous Leaders: The Case for Environmental Justice

We travel together, passengers on a little space ship, dependent on its vulnerable reserves of air and soil; all committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and, I will say, the love we give our fragile craft. We cannot maintain it half fortunate, half miserable, half confident, half despairing, half slave—to the ancient enemies of man—half free in a liberation of resources undreamed of until this day. No craft, no crew can travel safely with such vast contradictions. On their resolution depends the survival of us all.

– Adlai Stevenson, Speech to the Economic and Social Council of the UN, 1965

This imagery of all humanity on a tiny space ship spinning through space perfectly illustrates how the fragility of the Earth’s ecosystems, the relationship between people and planet, and how our increasingly interconnected global community must demonstrate compassion for both people and planet. The message of justice – both social and environmental – still holds true; in fact, Secretary Stevenson’s comments may be even more salient for us today. Our tiny space ship continues orbiting the sun while struggle with war, hunger, disease, and now climate change.

Introduction

As our understanding of the threats posed by global climate change increases, leaders in student affairs must reconsider how we define the leadership in response to what we hope to develop in our students. While action on climate change is certainly important in the near term, today’s college students need to be prepared to demonstrate courageous leadership in their personal lives as well as in the context of their civic duties and relationships. At Virginia Tech,
the Division of Student Affairs draws upon the Aspirations for Student Learning to guide the practice of student affairs professionals; this paper addresses the aspirational statement that Virginia Tech students are called to demonstrate courageous leadership in their lives (Virginia Tech, 2014, pg. 14-15). Virginia Tech Hokies’ courageous leadership will involve living with and combating the effects of global climate change. At the core of this argument is accepted fact that global climate change is increasingly difficult to curb, and represents a threat with dire consequences (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2013; Lincoln, 2006; Rees & Moore, 2013).

This paper connects the science of climate change, the philosophy of environmental justice, and student affairs practice. By pairing critical awareness of global climate change with the aspirations for student learning, the author will demonstrate that environmentally just leadership is not only attainable, but some practitioners at Virginia Tech are already doing it. The author first establishes a definition of Environmental Justice, situating it as social justice work combined with environmental science and global awareness. Next the author explores the meaning of courageous leadership as a value included in the aspirations for student leadership. Finally, the author explores practical implications for practitioners – this paper highlights examples of environmentally just leadership already practiced at Virginia Tech, and explores avenues for further action.

At Virginia Tech, leadership in environmental justice happens from the bottom up and the top-down, as demonstrated by the existence of student environmental groups and institutional support for sustainability (Brinkhurst, Rose, Maurice, & Ackerman, 2011; http://www.sustainability.vt.edu). To best prepare students for leadership in a rapidly changing
global community, student affairs practitioners must help students develop awareness of environmental justice as an issue that requires their leadership and passion.

**Examining Environmental Justice**

Sustainability and environmental justice are two separate but related constructs whose relationship is informed by systems of power and privilege, and advocates for these practices in student affairs should understand the nature and history of their relationship (Agyeman, 2005; Agyeman, Bullard, & Evans, 2002). Environmental justice has been defined and conceptualized in many ways in recent decades. The environmental movement first arose as a response to the disproportionate exposure of people from low socio-economic status and people of color to toxic waste and pollution (Brown, 1995; Gould, Schnaiberg, & Weinberg, 1996; United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987).

**Environmental Justice**

While Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) is often thought to have initiated the environmental movement in the United States, some have argued that the environmental movement benefits from activists’ response to the social justice issues that coincide with many environmental justice concerns (Payne & Newman, 2005). The environmental movement first began to form in the 1970s and 1980s (Agyeman, 2005; Ferris & Hahn-Baker, 1995); this movement coalesced around the response to issues of industrial pollution, air and water contamination, and urban waste disposal (Agyeman, 2005; Anguelovski, 2013; United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987) as well as the preservation of ecology for recreational and aesthetic reasons (Gould, Schnaiberg, & Weinberg, 1996; Postma, 2006). As the movement has grown, advocates have drawn from Taylor’s (2000) Environmental Justice
Paradigm to examine how the movement may be more inclusive of communities that have not historically been involved in the discourse around environmentalism and sustainability.

Often professionals use the term “sustainability” when referencing environmental issues, but the author elects to use the term “environmental justice” as it is ideologically and semantically closer to social justice. Sustainability is often conceptualized as ensuring adequate economic development today without jeopardizing future generations’ ability to thrive – an orientation that may appear to preserve the status quo of systems of injustice. The practice of environmentalism and environmental sustainability has historically been informed by a focus on the triple bottom line of people, planet, and profit (Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000; Elkington, 1999), and the concept of “deep ecology” (Naess, 1986); both of these constructs frame humans’ obligations toward the environment in terms of preservation for the sake of itself, as well as for the prosperity of future generations. Neither, however, prioritizes social justice, nor acknowledges the race and class privilege necessary to prioritize Elkington’s triple bottom line (1999). On the contrary, Agyeman (2005) has described the concepts of sustainability and environmental justice as being historically understood as dichotomous, anchoring two ends of a continuum; advocates for sustainability seek to advance environmentalism within existing structures that favor capitalism and the status quo, whereas environmental justice advocates take a grassroots approach that rejects the systems that created the environmental crisis in the first place (Agyeman, 2005).

Environmental justice is ingrained in grassroots movements that challenge economic and social systems that oppress under-represented communities through pollution of natural resources and unequal distribution of access healthy food and clean water (Agyeman, 2005). By articulating environmental justice as a social justice and political movement, some have argued
that the movement has better chances of success than environmentalists’ historical reliance on the optics of environmental degradation alone (Nordhaus & Schellenberger, 2007).

For student affairs practitioners to enact environmental justice in the context of courageous leadership, we must frame this work as a natural extension of social justice. Social justice values and action are an important part of student affairs practice. In fact, both social justice and environmental sustainability are included in the ACPA/NASPA statement of professional competencies as at the core of practitioners’ work (Bresciani et al, 2010). The language used to articulate this philosophy is more consistent with the practice of sustainability rather than environmental justice. Advocates of just sustainability (Agyeman, 2005; Agyeman, Bullard, & Evans, 2002) in student affairs administration may find that moving the conceptualization of sustainability closer to the middle of the Sustainability-Environmental Justice continuum may result in greater endorsement of environmental justice in student affairs practice.

**Social Justice**

Social justice activists examine systems of power and privilege and challenge the systems that perpetuate oppression (Edwards, 2006, 2012). Historically, student affairs’ social justice work has focused on challenging systems of oppression that reduce college students’ access and negatively impact retention. We must pair social justice with environmental sustainability to help college students understand that their leadership on issues of justice naturally includes environmental justice. Given the environmental justice movement’s origins in challenging the abuses of people in poverty and communities of color, student affairs professionals can naturally understand environmental and social justice as being interrelated.
Today’s college students must be prepared to enact courageous leadership on issues of environmental justice in both local and global settings. Social justice and sustainability are not mutually exclusive (Agyeman, 2005); nor must environmental justice activists choose between global and local priorities. Parallel to the notion is that environmental justice need not be reduced to social justice versus sustainability is the idea that the environmental movement must not be essentialized or reduced to a focus on carbon emissions or toxic waste (Nordhaus & Schellenberger, 2007). Advocates of environmental justice must frame their leadership and activism in a global context that is inclusive of people and planet, power and privilege as well as the pragmatism of international politics and economics.

**Enacting Courageous Leadership**

Courageous leadership on issues of environmental justice requires action in both local and global settings. By framing environmental justice as just sustainability (Agyeman, 2005), justice is inclusive of environmental concerns; courageous leaders can view local opportunities for environmental justice in a global context. Leaders in higher education who hope to develop college students’ orientation toward leadership may frame sustainability with justice as a moral issue, as a global issue, or even as an issue about which students are already informed.

**Moral Implications for Environmental Justice**

Scholars have long discussed student personnel administrators’ responsibility for students’ moral development. As early as the 1937 Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1937) administrators acknowledged the importance of students’ religious and moral development as part of the collegiate experience. Today, administrators at Virginia Tech may consider the aspiration to develop students’ courageous leadership on issues of social justice to be an extension of that moral development. Environmental justice has clear moral
implications that follow both from the finite nature of the Earth’s natural resources, as well as the impact of climate change and scarce resources on communities that are already marginalized.

Administrators and educators in higher education foster students’ moral development through the power of example as well as through dialogue and intentional conversation. Student affairs administrators’ relationships with student mentees provide an opportunity for exploration of the challenges of environmental justice as well as to guide the meaning-making process that may promote leadership in environmental justice (Healy, Lancaster, Liddell, & Stewart, 2012).

**Global Perspectives on Local Issues**

Student affairs practitioners who seek to develop students’ leadership on environmental justice must consider the global impact of climate change, corporate behavior, international relations and their consumption. As global climate change continues, international conflicts and displacement of economically marginalized populations will become more intense (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2013; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2013). Environmental justice advocates do not have the luxury of limiting the scope of their action and education to local issues, but must instead ‘monitor locally, mobilize extralocally’ (Gould, Schnaiberg, & Weinberg, 1996, pg. xiv).

Proponents of environmental justice will also look to international human rights as an example of a global approach to environmental justice (Adeola, 2000; Agyeman, 2005). As practitioners who seek to develop courageous leadership in college students, issues of human rights must be considered in the daily tasks practitioners undertake. Student affairs administrators can also role model environmentally just leadership by examining the financial relationships our institutions and advisees undertake: practitioners need to carefully examine the environmental ramifications of our partnerships with vendors and other third parties. Student
affairs administrators are familiar with student movements for divestment and corporate accountability, and in the era of globalization colleges and universities must consider the breadth of the operations of those entities with which they do business (Edwards, 2012; Pittman 2012). A similar critical lens can be applied to how we consume resources in programming, dining, housing, and other functional areas. Leadership in environmental justice occurs both in how business is done, but also how students’ learning and development is guided (Brown & Taylor, 2012).

**Students Are Primed for Leadership**

While students entering college may have participated minimally in political or other civic activities, research has shown that community service is a popular and common activity for adolescents in the United States; college-bound youth are also more likely than their peers to participate in community service and to be oriented toward civic engagement (Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Osgood, & Briddell, 2011). Today’s college students also come to campus with existing knowledge about global climate change and the value of environmental sustainability (Pryor et al, 2008). This existing knowledge base is one of the inputs that college student personnel administrators can consider when developing programming and curricula to enhance the environmental justice-oriented student development outcomes we seek to promote (Renn & Reason, 2013). Because college students are already involved in community service, there is a natural basis for educators to link that community service orientation with the environmental justice issues most salient to the campus. Student affairs practitioners – in conjunction with faculty and administrators – can prepare students for leadership in environmental justice by providing opportunities for contact with justice-oriented peers and mentors who can facilitate the development of active leadership (Broido, 2000).
At Virginia Tech, the call for courageous leadership addresses students’ obligation to “challenge the status quo in pursuit of a more humane and just world” (2014, p. 14). This leadership may look like challenging oppression and injustices in a local setting; racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of power and oppression familiar to student affairs practitioners continue to challenge us in our personal and professional settings. Advocates of environmental justice, however, will include global environmental and social justice issues in the call for leadership; this global perspective is imperative, in a world of global climate change and instability.

**Implications for Student Affairs Practice**

There are clear connections between faculty-staff collaborations and environmental justice-related initiatives that strengthen learning, empowering students to promote a more humane society locally and globally (Dunn & Hart-Steffes, 2012; Kerr & Hart-Steffes, 2012; Postma, 2006). By focusing on the implications of sustainability with justice, student affairs practitioners can orient their work toward tangible issues and goals rather than struggling with the ambiguous definition of “sustainability” alone (Martinez, 2014).

At Virginia Tech, faculty and administrators are already enacting environmental justice in both academic and co-curricular settings, even if the language of “environmental justice” is not in use. The Virginia Tech Campus Sustainability Portal at www.sustainability.vt.edu is an example of this work. The portal promotes environmental sustainability in action and education by uniting campus services, programming, and outreach for students, staff, and faculty. Bekken and Marie (2007) documented the development of the Earth Sustainability courses at Virginia Tech, highlighting the “spiraling curriculum” that enabled instructors from diverse disciplines,
such as law, economics, art, physical and social sciences, to examine issues of environmental and social justice.

This section identifies practical solutions for student affairs administrators who hope to incorporate environmental justice in their development of students’ values and leadership in a transformative educational experience (Edwards, 2006). These solutions range from active incorporation of reflection and discussion of environmental issues in curricula and programming, to passive education in campus auxiliaries, to leading by example by considering the environmental implications of business and programming decisions.

Because learning is a fundamentally collaborative process that benefits from the cooperation of faculty, staff, and administrators, the aspirational statement of preparing students for courageous leadership calls student affairs practitioners to seek partnership with academic affairs (American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998). Some student affairs programs and services lend themselves naturally to collaboration with faculty; examples include service-learning, centers for undergraduate research and internships, and residential learning or living-learning programs in residence halls.

Service-Learning

Throughout the United States, service-learning programs have become an important part of students’ educational experiences (Kuh et al, 2005). Service learning is an approach to student learning and development that empowers students to examine community issues such as poverty, food scarcity, and environmental issues, while providing a benefit or service to the community or population being studied (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). Service learning programs empower students to achieve a critical understanding of the social justice implications of the
issues they study (Wang & Rodgers, 2006). Service learning has also been found to improve students’ feelings of civic membership and responsibility (Lee, 2005) as well as their moral development (Boss, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Scott, 2012); this sense of civic and moral responsibility contributes to leadership on issues of environmental and social justice.

Service learning is typically a joint venture between academic affairs and student affairs, and faculty in the environmental sciences or Virginia Tech’s Center for Leadership in Global Sustainability. In addition to the curricular component of service learning, this model has been found to promote students’ global awareness and perspective-taking (Engberg & Fox, 2011). Scott (2012) argued that service-learning experiences enhance moral development when students’ navigation of moral issues is supported by educators’ facilitation of intentional, critical reflection and processing. A creative advocate of environmental justice may find implications for environmental issues in many different settings, and helping students to draw connections between the environment and their social justice or service experiences may result in the student’s development of a stronger environmental justice orientation. Guthrie & Jones (2012) articulated the value of incorporating reflection and active experimentation in learning experiences meant to develop leadership; these components are key in helping students to translate their service-learning experiences into environmentally just perspectives on global issues.

The moral and cognitive development associated with service learning can be achieved regardless of the auspices under which the program is advertised; students’ participation in service learning may be based on their desire for social connections, the academic experience promised by the program, or even moral or spiritual reasons (Astin & Sax, 1998). Regardless of why students elect to participate in service-learning, however, program coordinators and
instructors can promote students’ learning about environmental justice by incorporating opportunities to encounter and reflect upon issues of environmental justice in local community, and how those examples are connected to global issues.

**Study Abroad**

Yet another critical factor for leadership in environmental justice is the ability to take on a global perspective and see oneself in the context of a global community. Study abroad exposes students to the lives of people in other contexts, whose behaviors toward the environment may lend to a different perspective on their own (Tarrant & Lyons, 2011; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2013). Sutton and Rubin (2004) reported on the positive impact of study abroad on students’ psycho-social development, and included awareness of the world or global situation as a component of this development.

By studying abroad, students’ exposure to different cultures’ and communities’ approaches to just sustainability (Agyeman, 2005; Agyeman, Bullard, & Evans, 2002) and resource conservation can lead to their development of both greater pro-ecological attitudes, but also the knowledge and preparedness to bring about change in their own communities. Beyond navigating cultural differences, however, students may learn about other countries’ approaches to dealing with the major components of environmental justice: population growth, land use and management, water quality, energy production and conservation, air quality, waste management and recycling, and ecology and biodiversity (Neimark & Mott, 1999). By studying abroad, students may gain better understanding of the “increasingly…international and transnational” flow of waste, currency, and culture (Gould, Schnaiberg, & Weinberg, 1996). College student personnel must be prepared to connect students’ learning about globalization, environmental justice, and their moral responsibility for courageous leadership.
First-Year Orientation and Seminars

New student orientation provides an excellent opportunity for practitioners to articulate a vision of an environmentally just campus that requires students’ participation in sustainable behavior. As students arrive on campus and participate in orientation freshman seminars, they may be prompted to reconsider their values, absorb new information about environmental justice, and consider the moral and practical implications of environmentally just behavior. Messineo (2012) articulated a continuum that described the range of approaches that can enhance students’ awareness about the environment, ranging from helpful tips to paradigmatic shifts. While Messineo’s model articulates institutions’ progress toward developing environmental justice in students, the model can be adapted to demonstrate how environmental justice can be incorporated in a single campus. One may apply Messineo’s model (2012) to conceptualize how a first-year seminar developed to promote leadership in environmental justice may incorporate helpful tips (e.g., use campus transit rather than a personal vehicle) as well as exploration of paradigms and values (e.g., critical exploration of power and privilege in local and global contexts). The application of environmental justice to first-year seminars and new student orientation can also enhance the learning experiences students encounter in their residence halls.

Sustainability in Housing and Dining

Pursehouse (2012) identified several opportunities for housing and dining administrators to incorporate greater awareness of environmental justice and sustainability in operations as well as in educational programming and collaboration with faculty. Housing and dining programs offer a unique opportunity to connect students’ daily experiences with opportunities for courageous leadership.
By capitalizing on students’ common experiences with housing and residential education, administrators who seek to develop leadership in environmental justice can develop just leadership in students by demonstrating that just sustainability can be a regular part of a student’s daily life. Torres-Antonini and Dunkel (2009) examined over 80 institutions around the country that integrated sustainability in residence halls with residential education; their study demonstrated that while the physical facilities’ environmentally sustainable characteristics were important, residential education and programming were also significant aspects of the institutions’ development of students awareness of environmentalism. Residence life programming that incorporates environmental justice awareness into social events benefits from students’ desire to participate in community and social activities; Whiteman (2009) explored social programs centered on Earth Day, spring and fall equinoxes, and even the lunar cycle as opportunities to merge environmental awareness into social programs.

Green programming and education in residential life is an opportunity to inform students about the value of resource conservation, and the residential experience provides a perfect opportunity for students to develop environmentally just behavior and attitudes that they may not have had prior to moving into the residence halls (Pursehouse, 2012; Trinklein, 2009). Residential learning communities (RLCs) are an increasingly common example of how residential education can develop awareness and improve attitudes toward environmental justice (Dunkel & Deninger, 2012; Trinklein, 2009). Faculty and administrators intentional involvement in the development and implementation are critical in cultivating students’ education, satisfaction, and ultimately their preparedness for leadership in environmental justice (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012).
Pittman (2012) articulated the connections between sustainability and campus auxiliary units like dining services. Dining facilities can enhance students’ exposure to environmental justice through both the conduct of meal preparation and distribution as well as intentional educational outreach. Campus dining facilities across the country are going “trayless” because this reduces the amount of food wasted and reduces the resources spent on cleaning (Pittman, 2012). By purchasing food from local producers, dining operations are able to reduce the carbon footprint associated with shipping goods as well as connect students to the surrounding community by informing them of the farms or dairies where the food originated. While these examples may appear insignificant, they contribute to students’ exposure to issues of environmental justice in every aspect of their daily lives.

Student Health and Wellness

The student experience is comprised of more than just classes, dining, and sleep. Student personnel administrators are familiar with students’ need for balance in their lives, and how students’ satisfaction suffers when their health and wellness suffer. Campus centers for counseling, health clinics, and even recreational facilities provide opportunities for students to connect their daily experiences with environmental justice. The privilege of having regular access to these services is an example of the social and environmental justice implications of the collegiate experience. The cardiovascular exercise equipment in a campus gym offers a perfect illustration of the unequal distribution of food – college students exercise to burn excess calories while others in the community struggle to feed their families. As practitioners develop students’ leadership in environmental justice, they may consider highlighting the steps taken to promote health on campus: the healthy food or supplements, the building materials spent on a recreational facility that might have been used for other purposes, and even the ease of access to health care
that is not available for others in the local community (Pittman, 2012). One may ask: are these resources available to everybody? How can they be made more widely available?

**Conclusion**

Just sustainability is not the exclusive province of campus sustainability offices like the Virginia Tech Office of Energy and Sustainability. To the extent that these values are consistent with student affairs standards of practice, commitment to students’ psychosocial, cognitive, and moral development, and our social justice ethic, environmental justice should also inform Virginia Tech practitioners’ implementation of the Aspirations for Student Learning. Faculty, staff, and student affairs practitioners at Virginia Tech should begin to consider how to infuse just sustainability into curricula, programming, mission statements and learning objectives. Just sustainability may not be an attitude that is conditioned to be a habitual behavior, and as such it should be embraced as a critical new component to every undertaking (Chansomsak, 2013).

From the classroom to the bedroom, students make decisions every day in every setting that have implications for the environment; their leadership cannot address these environmental implication, however, if they escape the students’ awareness because they have not developed the critical consciousness of these issues.

The aspiration to develop students’ preparedness for courageous leadership both today and in the future absolutely connected to environmental justice. Today’s generation of college students must display courageous leadership to enact environmental sustainability using a lens of social justice in order to remedy the challenges of global climate change that threaten all of our futures. An increasingly globalized world will challenge today’s students to take the lead on environmental justice: they face climate change, unbalanced distribution of resources and pollution, entrenched power that is resistant to change, and the challenges we have yet to
discover. Educators must develop students’ preparedness to lead these issues of social and environmental injustice.
References


