



CURRICULUM FOR THE BIOREGION

MISSION AND WORKING PRINCIPLES¹

The Curriculum for the Bioregion Initiative aims to prepare undergraduates for citizenship in a world where the complex issues of sustainability—environmental quality, community health and wellbeing, and justice and social equity—are paramount.

Connecting teaching and learning to a citizenship of place

Healthy ecological and human communities and a sustainable future world-wide are the greatest challenges facing humanity. We urgently need citizens and professionals who not only understand sustainability concepts and practices but are also motivated to use them—in their households, communities, and workplaces.

A key leverage point for creating this kind of understanding and citizenship is the college classroom. It is people with postsecondary education who preponderantly vote, attend public meetings, volunteer for service organizations, and become institutional leaders. Actively engaging college students with sustainability ideas, especially in the context of their local communities, can foster critical knowledge, skills, motivation, leadership, and hope.

To reach large numbers of students, the Curriculum for the Bioregion initiative is enabling college faculty to build place-based learning and sustainability concepts into a wide array of undergraduate courses.

Working Principles

The imperative of looming global environmental challenges and the need for sustainable solutions (healthy ecosystems, healthy communities, and social justice) are what Ronald Heifetz calls “adaptive challenges.” These challenges require continuous new learning, collaborative and integrative problem-solving, and profound shifts in worldviews. To be sure, the work of sustainability requires significant technical expertise, but it also needs—*very much needs*—the capacity to sustain focused commitment, resilience, and deepened competence over time—the fiber of courageous hearts and souls.

We believe that sustainability education and a curriculum for any bioregion requires not only a different pedagogy but new content regarding the contemporary problems that face our region, nation, and world.

First, we must create opportunities for teachers and learners to have direct experiences exploring their local/regional communities so that they develop tangible and personal relationships with places, the living world, and its inhabitants.

Second, we must give students content, concepts, and skills with which to understand the workings of those places (systems), the issues in those places, and the people engaged with solutions. It is through concrete experiences that abstract ideas (e.g., sustainability, environmental justice, new urbanism, biodiversity, the precautionary principle) are internalized in students’ deep understanding.

Third, we must help students recognize and wrestle with the “gap” – that is, the gap between our aspiration for healthy communities and the world we want for ourselves and our children and the realities on the ground.

Fourth, through all of the strategies noted here, we must enable students to develop a sense of personal agency, to believe that they can make a significant difference in their workplaces, in their households, and in their communities.

¹ Prepared by members of the Curriculum for the Bioregion Steering Committee, Fall 2009. For additional information, please be in touch with Jean MacGregor, macgjean@evergreen.edu or 306.867.6608.

Additional working practices in the Curriculum for the Bioregion Initiative

We must think *and* act both globally *and* locally. We live out our lives in specific places but the choices we make and the actions we take have both local and global consequences. Experiential learning in and a heightened understanding of our local places can help us perceive larger global forces and connections and in turn, understanding global connections can inform our local actions.

We cannot wait for textbooks to include sustainability material. Faculty need to create new curriculum themselves, with the support of similarly interested colleagues and many, many regional resources. While generic textbooks can be useful for background and reference, sustainability and bioregional curriculum resources lie elsewhere—on our campuses, in our communities, in agencies and non-profit organizations, and in the business sector. Yet most of us in academia were not trained to undertake this kind of teaching and learning; that is why **communities of practice**—groups of faculty members and resource experts who make a commitment to supporting one another’s learning—are so important to developing new curriculum and new ways of teaching.

Because faculty members are perpetually busy and distracted, we need to create learning opportunities that are highly exciting, while not unreasonably demanding of their time. Thus, with most of our faculty learning communities, we have convened iterative series of meetings in centrally located places near public transit or where the drive-time is 60 minutes or less. Between meetings, members of faculty learning communities share curriculum drafts and ideas through a web-based workspace and through dedicated listservs.

We focus on effective curriculum integration within existing courses. Faculty members struggle with coverage issues and often perceive that they have no flexible space in their over-packed syllabi – so we take a “big ideas” approach. We engage faculty in thinking carefully about their outcomes for student learning and understanding and about the most key “big ideas” in their course. We define a “big idea” as “a key concept in your discipline that is important enough and meaningful enough that students should remember it years into the future.” We ask faculty to imagine how they could teach one of those “big ideas” in the context of a sustainability topic or connected to a sustainability “big idea,” but not only that, to design an assignment in which students can integrate these ideas....because it is through assignments that students use and integrate ideas and demonstrate their understanding of these ideas. Assignments are what students often take the most seriously in a course. In this way, the sustainability learning is integrated right into the “trunk of the tree,” rather than dangling uncomfortably out on a twig.

We want students to encounter place-based learning and sustainability content, concepts, and values in multiple courses and disciplines throughout their time in college. It is only by encountering place-based learning opportunities and sustainability ideas *across the curriculum* that societal norms will begin to shift.

Educational transformation requires long-term commitment. It probably goes without saying that this is work for the long haul. Education for a sustainable future requires nothing less than a transformation in what, how, and where we teach college students. Such transformation requires collective commitment to a far-sighted vision and imagination as well as patience, persistence, reflection, and dialogue.