

## **Collaboration is key to sustainability**

By Seth Baum

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Humanity faces major environmental sustainability challenges. Climate change threatens human and environmental systems worldwide, as do changes in global nitrogen and phosphorus cycles. Fossil fuel and fresh water will become increasingly scarce. Species are going extinct at unprecedentedly rapid rates. If human civilization is to thrive into the future, these challenges must be addressed – and the sooner the better.

Responding to these complex challenges requires that our citizens and professionals be both well informed and productively engaged. Education for sustainability must play a central role in the development of such individuals. We have special opportunities and responsibilities here in State College given the many people who come here to study.

Throughout this semester, these principles have guided the introductory sustainability course I teach at Penn State (Geography 30: Geographic Perspectives on Sustainability and Human-Environment Systems). Course topics are connected to current events. Readings include civic and professional sources in addition to academic ones. And students perform a semester-long project conducted with the Borough of State College.

In the project, groups of students work on one of four areas of Borough sustainability: energy, land use, transportation, and waste management. With assistance from the Borough, groups pick specific topics within these areas, such as geothermal energy sources, green roofs, bicycle lanes, and restaurant food waste. Groups combine library research with interviews and surveys of relevant stakeholders to develop informed recommendations for Borough policy. Students then report their experience to the Borough and to the public, including in writing which will later appear on the *Centre Daily Times* views page.

You can see students give public presentations of these projects at the Borough Hall Community Room (243 South Allen St., Room 201). On Tuesday, December 1, the energy groups present from 5-7pm and the land use groups from 7-9pm. On Thursday, December 3, the transportation groups present from 5-7pm and the waste groups from 7-9pm.

The course project offers students firsthand experience with actual sustainability initiatives and local political processes. They also improve their abilities to work in groups and in civic and professional settings. Meanwhile, the Borough gains detailed analyses of many relevant topics. The public gains from the students sharing their experience. Last but not least, humanity and the environment benefit from the new initiatives launched from the projects and from the students' ongoing civic and professional activities.

This sort of student-Borough collaboration can be broadly replicated, including in subjects other than sustainability. Penn State course instructors should seek such opportunities for their students. People in the Borough should welcome collaborations. Our success this semester is due largely to outstanding contributions from Alan Sam and Mark Whitfield from the Borough

Department of Public Works, among many others. Finally, students should recognize that important knowledge and information lies not just in the university but also amongst citizens and professionals everywhere. Indeed, it is only through the application of the best of human knowledge – wherever it may be found – that humanity can effectively rise to the challenges of sustainability.

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