Students Help Make the Change: Environmental Activism on Apathetic College Campuses

Contributed by Austin Tye
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Editor's note: We asked a student leader, "Is there a clear, stronger trend toward more environmentally conscious behavior by students? If not, why? Why is there substantial apathy about the low-intensity war on the students' planet, compared to the 1960s generation's concern about social injustice?" It is a given that there is no militant movement visible today. At Berkeley -- the university community that originated the Free Speech and antiwar movements -- most students believe political activism is about holding a student-government office for decorating their resumés. - JL

Austin's response: “Although many colleges and universities are seeing pockets of environmental change, there is not a clear trend toward large groups of students becoming more environmentally conscious. So what is holding us back? Why, in a demographic that has shown so much power in decades past for social change, does the environmental movement continue to spark and burn out? I’d say it comes down to two things: music and the Earth’s animation. Music has been, and will be, at the core of so many campuses. The social change that was raised during the 1960s came on the heels of numerous bands bringing the topic to the forefront of students' minds through album sales and festivals. Also, it was much easier to prescribe a “face” to the social injustices of the '60s. Aside from Al Gore’s dive into documentaries, it has been difficult for people to view the environment as a living thing, an organism that needs to be protected and loved.”

Students Help Make the Change

Being in college can teach you more than what you learn in class: many students discover political and social causes that influence how they view the world, both during and after college. One major issue at many colleges is environmental conservation, and campuses all over the country are taking steps to become more efficient and “green.” [Editor's note: The green initiative has really taken off at Virginia Beach, VA colleges. Students and faculty are both working together to be more conscious of the environment.]

Even if your campus doesn’t participate in green initiatives, you can make several changes in your own daily routine as a student that can have a major effect on the environment. Spreading the word about how your fellow students can conserve energy and resources is also important—you don’t have to become an evangelist, but most people are unaware of the impact they can have by making small changes in their lives. If you aren’t sure where to start, here are a few options to get you going.

Your daily commute

Getting to class can be a challenge, no matter where you live. If you’re on a mid-sized campus, walking might be an option; but if you’re on a large campus, getting from class to class might require more than just a brisk walk. Some cities and campuses, like Emory University in Georgia, are introducing bike-share programs, which allow people to rent a bike for a set amount of time—it’s a great way to get to class on time and to get some exercise on the way.
But not every campus is walkable or bikeable; for instance, finding parking on a commuter campus can be a drain on your time and your gas tank. If you’re attending classes at a commuter or large college campus, help arrange a carpool group or use public transportation to decrease the amount of fuel you use to get to school.
Distance learning is also an option: an online degree program can offer you schedule flexibility, as well as help you cut transportation costs and fuel usage. Of course, if you’re an online student, you’ll still want to pay attention to your energy consumption at home.

Your energy and water consumption

The average American uses much more energy and water than they need in a day. Curbing your energy consumption takes some attention to detail, but it can be worth it if you're paying your own electric bill. Unplugging appliances and electronics you don't use, as well as turning off your computer at night before bed, can help you save both energy and money. Visit the U.S. Department of Energy's Energy Savers page to find more ways to save energy.

Water conservation is also important, and changing your morning routine can save gallons of water every day. A five-minute shower uses between ten and 25 gallons of water—shaving just one minute off your showering time can make a big difference. I used to be a 20 minute shower type of person, but just think of how many gallons of water I am saving by shaving off 15 minutes! And you can save eight gallons of water by simply turning your faucet off while you brush your teeth. When you're on campus, carry a refillable water bottle instead of using water fountains, which can waste water just like sink faucets. The EPA has a page full of suggestions on what you can do to conserve water.

Your campus's green initiatives

For larger campuses, energy efficiency is more than a way to positively impact the environment: it can impact a college's budget as well. But there's still more that can be done even if your college campus is doing things to go green. Community gardens are popping up in neighborhoods all over the country, strengthening community ties and providing neighborhoods with nutritious homegrown food. Several colleges and universities have found ways to combine service with learning, and their gardens are successful and well-loved by students and administrations alike.
Individual efforts can also make a major impact, so do what you can every day to make your life greener. The impact of what we are doing to our planet needs to be addressed and acted upon. Think to yourself, if not me than who? And the more people you can help become environmentally conscious, the better off the planet will be.

Contact Austin Tye via email at Austin123 "at" eatbreatheblog.com. He went to Taylor University in Indiana and the Florida Gulf Coast University where he received a degree in Marketing. About his article for Culture Change, Austin Tye remarked, "I am more of a "lead by example' type of person, so I did my best not to be preachy in my article. One thing I'm excited to do with my environmental education is to begin a crop-share, or garden co-op in my neighborhood. It's a great way for a community to come together and share and give to one another."

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Further reading:

Austin Tye's blog: EatBreatheBlog.com

Student activist initiatives on climate change: WeArePowershift.org, green energy campaign and civil disobedience against the Tar Sands Pipeline

seac.org, the Student Environmental Action Council