

Making students environment-conscious

Every Indian university should have a chief sustainability officer to engage students in finding solutions to ecological issues

RAJAT PANWAR

As the negative effects of our deteriorating environment are becoming increasingly conspicuous, public conversations about global warming and climate change have grown ubiquitous.

But these conversations are resulting in disappointingly few public actions. Why is this public apathy toward climate-oriented actions so pervasive?

A fundamental reason is the lack of formal mechanisms that could help our citizenries channelise their concerns into actions. Such mechanisms are especially rare during the formative years of youth, when they are mentally agile and willing to experiment with novel solutions. Our universities can fill this void by offering students opportunities to engage in transformative environmental initiatives.

Universities can be models — in fact, laboratories — that showcase how environmental concerns can lead to ideas, actions, results, measurements of such results, and ultimately reports and monitoring. Many universities in India already have student-run environmental clubs, but these clubs typically focus their energies on external projects such as plantations and sanitation — which are indeed praiseworthy — but are not transformative as they don't lead to fundamental changes in how we go about living our lives.

Our universities can help in such transformation through environmental engagement projects with an aim to inculcate thinking and living habits among students such that environmentalism becomes core to the value-system of the next generation. Food composting in cafeterias, for example, is an initiat-

ive that could instil among students a commitment to not only reduce food waste, but also internalise the core belief that what we typically think as waste can prudently be put back into nature's cycle.

But direct student engagement with such activities is critical — it cannot be a behind the curtain project that the cafeteria staff implements. Student engagement from conceptualisation to reporting of quantified results is critical. Most environmental projects currently under way remain at a personal distance from students — there is that solar panel to heat my water and I do not have to change my behaviour. This distance creates apathy.

Research opportunities

Engagement oriented environmental initiatives also offer tremendous opportunities for research if faculty and students initiate projects that compare relative environmental burdens of different activities. Again, the purpose ought to be to inculcate environmental thinking through practical research.

For example, research could determine if it is environmentally costlier to hand wash our dishes or to machine wash them. Or is it environmentally better to use black boards with traditional chalk or white boards with colour markers.

Answers to such questions can be found using life cycle analyses (LCA) tools that can help us go beyond conjecture to identify the most environment-friendly options. By engaging students in analyses that determine the most sustainable options for daily activities, they begin to question the status quo and consider the consequences of their own actions, while also learning



Green cover Create mechanisms for initiating ecological solutions |ISTOCKPHOTO

about the research process.

We must find ways to engage students and tap into their fresh thinking to find solutions to our emerging environmental challenges. The extraordinary complexities of environmental challenges often require localised and indigenous solutions that are in tune with local ecosystems.

Unfortunately, we are left with very little to showcase to our young generations that could promote sensitivity toward local contexts. We have few buildings that are models of environmentally befitting architecture and material use. In fact, most of what we consider trendy has been developed in Western climates, and has a very high environmental cost when used in ours.

Take for example, the use of glass as a building material. Such buildings are not only hard to keep clean in India's dusty environs but are also expensive to cool off amidst scorching heat and sunlight. We also don't have much to offer as demonstrable models of environmentally befitting landscaping. Every school, college, and university these days has sprawling lawns

with countless hoses incessantly pumping out enormous quantities of water to keep those lawns alive.

Need for xeriscaping

Lush green lawns have minimal water footprint in the West because of the climate there, but our arid climate and water scarcity necessitate adoption of xeriscaping — the science and art of managing a landscape using xerophyte plants and trees that require very little water. The adoption of xeriscaping by universities would not only save water and associated costs, but could also serve as a model to demonstrate to our students and society how sensitivity to local context is a key to address environmental challenges. Solutions will have to come from our imagination and ingenuity.

In order to unleash the imagination of students, universities must provide forums for student engagement in daily activities.

There are global agencies that rate colleges and universities for environmental performance against a given set of criteria. The sustainability tracking, assessment, and rating (STAR) system, a program of the Association for the Advancement of

Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) offers an excellent platform through which universities could engage their staff and students in finding innovative solutions to environmental challenges, and organise their environmental concerns and commitments into actionable initiatives that could earn them recognition. To function effectively, a coordinator is needed for these efforts.

I believe that every Indian university should adopt a rating system of their choice and hire a chief sustainability officer to coordinate its environmental framework through student engagement, faculty research, and peer reference.

There is plenty rhetoric around 'smartness' these days — smart cities, smart manufacturing, smart transportation. We need to also look at the foundation needed beneath all the smart development. That foundation should be smart thinking. We need to cultivate ways to nurture those smart young thinkers who can address complex problems in an economically frugal manner. This can happen only through sensitivity to local context and through indigenous solutions.

Environmental challenges offer excellent opportunities to instil critical thinking among our students.

What is needed now is a formal mechanism wherein students can come together to figure out their own solutions over which they can claim ownership. Institutionalising environmental thinking and actions at universities and colleges could be an effective, long-term strategy to train our youth to analyse and change their ways of living, and their organisations' ways of functioning.

The writer is Associate Professor of Sustainable Business Management, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA

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