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GOING GREEN: HOW NORTHWEST CAN GROW IN SUSTAINABILITY

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Photo credit Molli Henderson



A neighbor to Seattle and surrounded by world-renowned natural beauty such as Mount Rainier and the Puget Sound, Northwest University is centrally planted in a cultural hotbed of environmental awareness and activism. 'Sustainable,' 'green,' and 'resource consumption' are some of the buzz words that increasingly appear everywhere we look. Steps towards becoming environmentally-friendly are being taken at local grocery stores, restaurants, businesses—and many colleges.

Looking at our own forested campus, we can see the concept of sustainability has 'taken root'. Yet there are numerous opportunities for more growth, and that growth will be best if propelled by students and supported by the university.

But why is sustainability an issue students should care about? Is it more just than a buzz word?

Lindsey Hall, a senior in the environmental science program and someone who is passionate about environmental issues, responded by pointing to Genesis 1:26 and 2:15 and noting, "God put us in charge of this creation that he made, but we also have a responsibility to care for it."

Hall acknowledges there can be public stigmas resisting 'eco-friendly' advocacy, but our call to environmental stewardship is a God-given command, regardless of current popular opinion.

"I have been called anything from earth muffin and tree hugger...to nerd," said Hall, "because of the issues I believe are important. I do not take offense by it, I just see it as a way to educate people who see these issues as trivial."

Rick Engstrom, Dean of Student Development, noted how our culture often presses us to have a consumer identity.

"We should challenge that as Christians," said Engstrom, "We should contest that. God's intent for us and humanity is one of stewardship."

Stewardship is a part of NU's mindset and identity, affirmed President Castleberry. He noted there has been a "sustained discussion of environmental concerns [at NU] for a long time."

That discussion led NU to offer an environmental science major beginning in 1999, which Dr. Eric Steinkamp, professor of life sciences and a strong campus voice for sustainability, described as empowering students "to solve [human-caused] problems and protect the function, beauty, provision, and inherent value of creation." The program allows students like Hall to connect their passions with learning and engagement with our local community and environment.

But as is true for all NU students, that engagement does not have to wait until the diploma's signed and sealed. Steinkamp notes that environmental advocacy on campus has slipped towards the back burner lately, and all students have an opportunity to spark movement

"The most successful programs come from student advocacy," said Engstrom. "As a community we have to say we deeply care about this, otherwise it's a practice in futility."

Many shifts NU has already taken to decrease their ecological footprint have had the dual effect of saving the college money. For example, last fall the university invested in changing a majority of campus lighting to LEDs, which are more energy-efficient and bright. Students may have also noticed lights in some campus buildings and parking lots are now motion-activated, which conserves money and electricity, albeit making a nighttime game of "Cops and Robbers" more challenging.

An increased dedication to sort recyclables into recycle bins—whether in the Aerie, offices, or residence halls—would save NU money as well, since Waste Management hauls recycling bins for free, but charges for every load of unsorted trash.

Poor communication is one of the factors currently crippling NU from more effective recycling. The respective bins are available per request, explained Kristian Andal, the director of maintenance and NU facilities. Many offices have already approached Andal requesting bins, but other campus locations may still be unaware of the resource.

Another confusion revolved around whether recycling was sorted out of trash bins at the Waste Management's facility. The City of Kirkland has affirmed, however, that this is false. If recycling is placed in the trash, it will go straight into a landfill—meaning there needs to be a stronger emphasis on sorting on campus. Recycle bins should be widely available, but they are pointless if students and faculty are not using them consistently.

Beyond recycling, the possibilities to advance community stewardship are endless. NU can learn from eco-friendly steps other local colleges have taken: subsidizing ORCA cards, connecting carpoolers and encouraging bicyclers, using recycled or compostable materials through campus, providing composting bins, and carefully monitoring the college's resource consumption, to name a few.

But ultimate progress still comes down to the individual actions of NU students.

Joshua Maurmann, also a senior in the environmental science program, emphasized the importance of, "the ethical choices we make every day, and it may start with little things: like turning off lights, throwing away less food, or taking the extra effort to recycle."

Hall explained, "I don't think that the problem is with my friends not caring about environmental issues, I just think they don't actually know how big of an impact they can make."

Both Hall and Maurmann agreed that we, as NU students, can and should make a difference because our care for nature is intrinsically linked to our care for people.

"Sustainability and caring for creation is the key to bringing people out of poverty, solving health problems, and many other issues around the world," said Hall. "And this is something that Christians should be concerned with."