

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
George P. Nassos

Environmental Sustainability Education is More Critical than Ever

The environmental crisis is getting worse every day. There are many environmental issues with climate change, depleting natural resources and water being among the most crucial. But the biggest problem in solving them is that too many people just don't care enough. And the biggest reason they don't care is they don't fully understand the problem. We need to educate as many people as possible to get them all on the band-wagon in solving these problems. This applies not only to individuals but also to corporations and academia. And here are some recommendations to accomplish it.

Corporations have been moving in the right direction by appointing chief sustainability officers (CSOs), or comparable titles, for some time. The Weinreb Group has been tracking CSO appointments since 2004 when the first one was appointed and two years later the second one was appointed. Today there are a little over 100 CSOs working at publicly traded companies. That is not very many and some may not even have the right experience or training.

Embedding sustainability in the operations of a company should not be exclusively the responsibility of a CSO, or Director of Sustainability, or Sustainability Coordinator. It should be the responsibility of all the employees in the company. If all, or at least most, of the employees understood the environmental issues at stake and became aware of the possible solutions, they could all work together to make the company truly sustainable. What this would require is some in-house training on environmental sustainability. Of course, this would not be necessary if the employees had learned about sustainability as part of their formal education.

Let's look at how we can improve the educational system in business schools. Having been director of masters programs in environmental sustainability at two different universities, here is something that works. Create a board of advisors consisting of environmental experts from the corporate, government, NGO and academic sectors in the geographic market of the university. Meet once or twice per year to discuss the proper training of the students in order to meet the needs three to five years out. As sustainability is an evolving concept, improvements to the curriculum and the courses should be made regularly.

Another recommendation is to understand that sustainability should not be a business school discipline like marketing, accounting, finance or operations management but rather should be considered a concept that could be embedded in all of the disciplines. When teaching courses like accounting, organizational behavior, operations management, marketing, or even law, the concept of sustainability should be included in the respective courses. There could be,

however, some resistance to this recommendation as some professors may be reluctant to modify their courses' syllabi after teaching them for many years. Another potential problem may be the extensive approval process that some schools have to make in order to change curricula. By the time the administration has approved the modification to the program, it may be time for another improvement to the program.

Introducing sustainability into appropriate courses should not be restricted to just business schools. Philosophy students may debate individual responsibility and debts owed to future generations as a result of climate change. Media students can analyze various climate narratives. Economic students can study the financial cost of environmental degradation. Law students can study and estimate future risks due to various environmental issues. Architecture students have, for some time, included various building standards like LEED in their design requirements. Every new building, whether industrial, commercial or residential, should follow LEED guidelines at a minimum whether or not they're interested in LEED certification.

Fortunately, there are schools that have become aware of the importance of embedding sustainability throughout many programs. One such school is Loyola University Chicago. Their business school has recently included sustainability in as many courses as possible so all of their graduates will have an excellent understanding of the concept. In the undergraduate school, Loyola requires every student, regardless of their major, to take at least one environmental course. In fact, it just recently created the School of Environmental Sustainability which indicates how important the topic is to Loyola. This university is in the forefront along with others that are trying to meet the needs of improving the world's environment, something that is becoming more critical every year.

For individuals to contribute to the improvement of the environment, the best way is for them to understand the current and future state of the environment. If people had a better understanding, it would not be necessary to tell them what they should do as they will want to do it themselves. In a recent presentation that I made to a church group on how to green the parish, I first presented to them some of the major environmental issues. After learning about the current and future state of the environment, they would be more inclined to participate in some of the environmental recommendations that followed.

Just as we are concerned about our personal health and do something almost every day to improve or maintain our good health, we should embed in our minds some of the things that can be done to improve our environmental health.