

Infusing the Earth Charter into Research  
and Curriculum:  
**One American University's  
Example**

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**Introduction**

*The region in which the university will be located combines population growth in a geographically constrained area, the Gulf of Mexico to the west and Lake Okeechobee to the east, with a unique and sensitive environment. Building on a strong programme at the undergraduate level, the university will have the opportunity to ultimately develop a centre for environmentally oriented graduate programmes and research. (State of Florida. State University System of Florida. Ten Year Development Plan for a New University in Southwest Florida. Report 2-3. Board of Regents: November 20, 1992.)*



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The founding mission statement of Florida Gulf Coast University, located in Southwest Florida, recognized the environmental sensitivity of the land and the controversy associated with the creation of a university in the region. Written before the site of the campus was determined, it offers an insightful premonition. The agreement to build the University in the middle of land that was, up to that time, undeveloped, ultimately led to the explosion of housing developments, the creation of shopping malls and business parks, and the widening of roads and canals. While the campus plan included very high standards for ecological restoration, the land around the university had only to meet the much lower county standards. As a result, the waterways that were created on campus to restore the historical water flow are dry, and the campus itself, with its native landscaping, is surrounded by gated communities with exotic plants and large water fountains.

Such are the unintended, but predictable, consequences of unconstrained development in a country whose economic growth is exalted above other values. At the same time, and ironically as a result of the building of the campus on environmentally sensitive lands, the University has worked hard to teach other values, those of environmental protection and sustainability. The recently updated mission of Florida Gulf Coast University states that the institution “practices and promotes environmental sustainability,” which becomes translated into the learning goal of ‘ecological perspective’ in the classroom. **As stated in one of the University Guiding Principles:**

Informed and engaged citizens are essential to the creation of a civil and sustainable society. The University values the development of the responsible self grounded in honesty, courage, and compassion, and committed to advancing democratic ideals. Through service learning requirements, the University engages students in community involvement with time for formal reflection on their experiences. Integral to the University’s philosophy is instilling in students an environmental consciousness that balances their economic and social aspirations with the imperative for ecological sustainability.

One of the ways the founding academic deans created to fulfil this ambitious ethical principle was to establish a common academic experience in environmental education. “The University Colloquium: A Sustainable Future” is a course required for graduation at Florida Gulf Coast University for all of our students. It is an interdisciplinary environmental education course designed to explore the concept of sustainability as it relates to a variety of considerations and forces globally and locally in Southwest Florida. In particular, the course provides a sense of environmental, social, ethical, historical, scientific, economic, and political influences and includes an important field component.

The road to environmental sustainability in universities is almost always a rocky one, and the idea of infusing the curriculum, beyond the Colloquium, with sustainability has proven stubbornly difficult. This has been true even with motivated faculty and strong support of deans and even, most surprisingly, at a new university with a birthright commitment to a broad definition of environmental responsibility and unbounded by tradition. To assist in realizing this institutional dream, and the larger dream of a sustainable Earth, we have turned to the inspiration and integrated vision of the Earth Charter. We promote it as an aspiration to envision sustainability in research and curricula. Further, as the University grows, we see the need to creatively imagine the infusion of environmental sustainability into our wider culture. To do so we have established an environmental education research capacity through the creation of an academic centre.



Prof. Peter Blaze Corcoran in class.

The Centre for Environmental and Sustainability Education at Florida Gulf Coast University nurtures and emphasizes sustainability education at our institution. **The mission of the Centre for Environmental and Sustainability Education (the Centre) states that we work:**

...toward realizing the dream of a sustainable and peaceful future through scholarship, education, and action. The Centre advances understanding and achievement of the goals of environmental and sustainability education through innovative educational research methods, emergent eco-pedagogies, and educational philosophy and practice based on ethics of care and sustainability. The Centre seeks to elevate the environmental mission of Florida Gulf Coast University and serve the University community, the local community of the Western Everglades and Barrier Islands, and the wider community of scholars.

A major component of the Centre's work is to bring current scholars in environmental literature, religious studies, and political science to campus to meet with students and to deliver public lectures. Key areas of emphasis include ethics, activism, and the literary arts. The Centre promotes the Earth Charter in its signature events, in institutionally-oriented research, and in what we call Earth Charter scholarship.

Our signature events include the two lecture series for the students, faculty, and staff at Florida Gulf Coast University and for the public of Southwest Florida. The Rachel Carson Distinguished Lecture is our major event drawing large crowds to our campus. The speakers embody the contributions of Rachel Carson most relevant to the Centre – public-policy based on sound science and ethics; active participation of an ecologically-literate citizenry; and appreciation of the natural world through the literary arts and environmental education. All of the lecturers have referenced the Earth Charter in their talks, thereby building awareness and reinforcing the relationship of the Earth Charter to key issues of our time – climate change, sustainable living, and religion and ecology, among others.

The goal of the Terry Tempest Williams Student Dialogue, our second signature event, is to raise awareness among Florida Gulf Coast University students and faculty about critical issues in our local region. The series focuses on sustainability and education for a sustainable future, including our role as stewards of our natural, cultural, social and political environments. Intended to spark youth activism and inspire the intellectual climate among the FGCU and Southwest Florida communities, the initiative fosters an open space for dialogue and student ownership of that dialogue. The events have focused on the general topic of agriculture and ethics, with specific discussions of social justice, environmental health, conditions of labour to produce food in America, and the humane treatment of animals who serve as human food. The Earth Charter addresses all these issues and is commonly referenced in the panel discussions. Many of the issues raised in the signature events are on the Centre's modest agenda of institutional research. For example, we are studying and promoting humane and sustainable alternatives to our corporate food system at the University.

Among other initiatives we have developed is a 'Guide to Eating Humanely and Sustainably with the Earth Charter at Florida Gulf Coast University'. The Earth Charter provides an alternative to industrial agriculture and the economic exploitation of labour and environment, challenging us to "Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community wellbeing" (Principle 7). The Guide aims to link Earth Charter ethics to sustainable ways of



Homero Aridjis- Mexican Poet at Rachel Carson Distinguished Lecture.

life and to assist in the development of a culture of sustainability at our university and in the region.

Such a culture is supported by the decision of the interim president of the university to join the leadership circle of the American College and University President's Climate Commitment that is a part of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). This initiative has bold ambitions and Florida Gulf Coast University has a tradition of rhetorical commitment to sustainability, without always following through. We seek to support the administration in truly realizing the aim of reducing its carbon impact through the development of sustainable food systems, which are sensitive to transportation, methods of production, and food choices that are 'lower on the food chain.' We believe significant carbon emissions savings can be realized while advancing Earth Charter principles.

As a part of this reinvigorated commitment to sustainability on the part of the university, the Centre has recently been invited to take the lead in developing a green building on campus – one that was originally planned to showcase sustainable building practices but is now being re-imagined as a space where green curriculum meets green architecture. We envision a planning process and learning space based on Earth Charter principles.

Our most significant area of Earth Charter related research, along with essays and talks, is the publication of two books. The first, **The Earth Charter in Action: Toward a Sustainable World** (KIT Publishers, Amsterdam 2005), was co-edited with others and with contributions from sixty-four writers from thirty-five nations. The book is a collection of over seventy thematic and descriptive essays inspired by the Earth Charter and demonstrating the rich diversity of its uses. It points toward the many possibilities of future utilization, including its ability to bridge the Islamic and Christian worlds and to work across the divide between the northern and southern hemispheres. Contributors are practitioners, experts, and Earth Charter activists from around the world.

The second book, **A Voice for Earth: American Writers Respond to the Earth Charter** (University of Georgia

Press, Athens, Georgia forthcoming 2008), we co-edited as part of our work at the Centre in order to provide a literary voice to the ethical principles outlined in the Earth Charter. The writers whose contributions are collected in this book reflect upon the ethical dilemmas that confront us and assist us in understanding the nature of the crisis before us. Their voice is part of a growing collection of voices calling for—and indeed initiating—a cultural transformation from the Cenozoic era to what Thomas Berry calls the Ecozoic era, a new period of mutually enhancing Earth-human relations. We hope to advance Earth Charter scholarship through our own research and writing and by bringing together the small community of Earth Charter scholars and sharing their research with the wider world.

Along with advancing Earth Charter scholarship, we have sought to infuse the Earth Charter into the curriculum at Florida Gulf Coast University. Our efforts to bring a discussion of ethics through the Earth Charter has occurred at different levels – as a component in a course, as an organizational framework for a course, and as a unifying principle in a curriculum. As already noted, the "University Colloquium: A Sustainable Future," our mandatory course in environmental education and sustainable development, includes the Earth Charter as a component to introduce students to a broad understanding of sustainability. Students read and discuss the Earth Charter in class and are then required to write about the document in one of the five short academic essays assigned in the course. It is often the subject of a lively discussion as students and faculty members read the principles and sub-principles together and consider their value and its efficacy. This open-ended discussion is founded on strong critical and creative thinking skills.

Our first course to use the Earth Charter as an organizational framework is one that we team-teach. Environmental Literature, an interdisciplinary course in the Communication, English, and Environmental Studies programmes, considers the role of sustainability within the humanities, focusing especially on exploring an ethical perspective that promotes respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, and democracy, nonviolence, and

peace. We read several works – philosophical, theological, and political – through the lens of the Earth Charter in order to open a space for a dialogue about ethics and values; the Earth Charter acts as a touchstone for our discussion and not as the defining ethical system for the entire class. Ultimately, through the readings and discussions in the course, each student works toward developing his or her own personal ethics of sustainability. We expect students to read the Earth Charter with serious and intense questioning and invite and expect critical analysis of the principles outlined in the document and in the other texts. The course includes a service learning component which enables the students to enact their ethics of sustainability, bringing them to life.

Furthermore, we look to consideration of the Earth Charter as a unifying principle in a curriculum. For example, the University has committed to enhancing education for sustainability through what is called, in the United States, a Quality Enhancement Programme (QEP). A QEP, which is an institutional focus on a central, mission-driven area of the university for assessment and improvement, is required for many universities across the United States for their accreditation. At Florida Gulf Coast University, the QEP, a five year project, focuses on the development of an ‘ecological perspective’ and ‘community awareness and involvement,’ two of our unique university-wide learning goals. Our work during this period is to inculcate sustainability education across our curriculum using such documents as the Earth Charter. One prime example of this work is in our first year writing classes, required of all students; the faculty members are working to pilot key essays that deal with such topics as climate change, agricultural practices, and social and environmental justice. In order to advance this discussion in these classes, faculty members also use the Earth Charter as an example of shared values that advance sustainability. Ultimately, the goal is to work towards including these essays into a Composition Reader that is used at many institutions across the United States.

Finally, we are in the very early stages of conceptualizing the Earth Charter as a core for a Liberal Studies major offered in our College of Arts and Sciences. This is a bold

and daunting possibility presented to us as a challenge by our Dean, Donna Price Henry. The incipient concept is to create an interdisciplinary, liberal arts programme that considers the concept of sustainability broadly – from the perspective of the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities and arts. A guiding concern in this curriculum might be the ethical dimension behind issues of sustainability, and the Earth Charter has been discussed as a method for engaging this discussion. In support of an effort such as this, the Centre for Environmental and Sustainability Education is developing “A Guide to Teaching the Earth Charter at Florida Gulf Coast University” that includes methodological suggestions for appropriate values education.

In conclusion, higher education presents particular challenges for the use of the Earth Charter. First, one needs to make the case for materiality and relevance to the curriculum, and perhaps to research, depending on the institutional ethos. Sustainability always takes place in a particular context. The Earth Charter’s appeal to our university vision and mission of environmental sustainability helped us to accomplish this. Second, because the Earth Charter is normative, it arouses concern about how values are taught and about whose values are taught. These are vitally important questions to address in the tradition of academic freedom and critical inquiry. However, we believe that sustainability is the great moral question of our time, the meta-narrative of the twenty-first century. And we believe it is a moral responsibility of universities to study and teach sustainable living. Infusing the Earth Charter into research and curriculum at Florida Gulf Coast University has helped us to assume this sober responsibility.

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