

Active Learning:

A Green Role Reversal

At Pace University, Professor Greg Julian's environmental studies students are turning the tables on local officials.

by David Brooks

For centuries, educators have known that the best way for students to learn is to let them teach. No other experience sharpens a student's skills, tests their knowledge or illuminates their shortcomings better than instructing someone else.

No one knows this better than Pace University Professor Gregory Julian, who's been teaching college students for almost thirty years, the last nineteen of them at Pace's Pleasantville campus in Westchester County, NY. His popular classes are known for venturing far outside the traditional box, immersing students in the realities of local and international politics, and lately, in the nexus of politics and the green movement, especially the rapidly growing field of sustainable development.

"When I first saw the term 'sustainable development' back in the early 90's, I thought, how can you have that?" says Julian. "It made no sense to me at the time."

Fast forward fifteen years. "Sustainable development" is firmly rooted in the green lexicon, and this fall, Julian's students are fanning out across Westchester County to interview local elected and appointed officials about how their towns, schools and business communities are addressing the issues of climate change, environmental health, and... sustainable development.

Partnering with non-profit Grassroots Environmental Education and Pace's own Academy for Applied Environmental Studies, Julian's students are using a 140-point criteria list developed by Grassroots to interview and educate local officials about everything from building codes to the recycling of e-waste; from preferred parking for electric vehicles to policies discouraging the use of polystyrene foam food containers.



Pace University's Dr. Greg Julian with students

The program, called "How Green Is My Town?" (HGIMT), is not only a checklist for towns, schools and businesses, but an online, information-rich "greenweb" of solutions, linking site visitors to hundreds of non-profits and government agencies that have developed successful and award-winning programs and policies.

As part of their introduction to the program, students were assigned a topic and given ten minutes to become "mini-experts" on it, using only the HGIMT web site and its links before being asked to role play an interview with a "local official" on the chosen subject.

"To be honest, it was pretty scary at first, but it really paid off," says Tiffany Tona, a Long Island graduate student who participated in the HGIMT program last summer and now helps coordinate student activities for

Grassroots. "I never thought I would be discussing environmental policy with my town supervisor, but I did it and it worked! So that was a nice little personal goal right there!" she says with a broad smile.

It's this kind of empowerment and enthusiasm that excites educators like Julian, who sees active learning as an opportunity to open minds.

"The job of a teacher is not to have students know what you know," he says. "The job of a teacher is to help students secure in their own minds the confidence that they know something about the topic they are studying. That's when you have the teaching moments."

Integrating the HGIMT evaluation program into an existing environmental studies class has proven to be the most effective and efficient way to get students involved, according to Michael Crowley, HGIMT Program Director for Grassroots.

"At first, we tried doing this as an intern program, but we found that the students who were the most interested in these green issues already had a full plate of academics," says Crowley. "It wasn't until Professor Julian took this on as part of his regular political science course that it really took off."

As word of the program spread across the Pace campus, other professors joined in with their own classes. The enthusiasm among both students and other faculty members surprised even Julian.

Town	"HGT"	Other Homlets	School District	Interviewer	Major/Supervisor
Bedford	Bedford	Bedford	Bedford		
Cortlandt	Cortlandt	Cortlandt	Cortlandt		
Eastchester	Eastchester	Eastchester	Eastchester		
Greenburgh	Greenburgh	Greenburgh	Greenburgh		
Harrison	Harrison	Harrison	Harrison		
Levittown	Levittown	Levittown	Levittown		
Maryland	Maryland	Maryland	Maryland		
Northbrook	Northbrook	Northbrook	Northbrook		
Putnam	Putnam	Putnam	Putnam		
Scarsdale	Scarsdale	Scarsdale	Scarsdale		
Sharonville	Sharonville	Sharonville	Sharonville		
Unionville	Unionville	Unionville	Unionville		
Westchester	Westchester	Westchester	Westchester		
Yonkers	Yonkers	Yonkers	Yonkers		

Outside the "war room" where Julian's students meet, a board tracks the progress of completed interviews with local officials.

"From a university point of view, it's miraculous what's happening," he says. "The cooperation among the faculty in opening up their courses to a deviation on their syllabus is pretty impressive."

As students complete their interviews with local officials, checking off the appropriate boxes and posting their comments on the virtual blackboard at Pace, it's clear they're taking this seriously, and enjoying the learning opportunities the program gives them. Julian isn't surprised.

"From pre-K to college, this generation has been told that they have to solve the environmental crisis," he says. "We as academicians should now be the accountable resources to teach the best science that we know, and provide real opportunities for active learning."

The program web site is www.HowGreenIsMyTown.org



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For more information about the HGIMT national evaluation program and how your school can become involved, please contact Michael Crowley at (516) 883-0887 or email Michael@grassrootsinfo.org