

Want to be an environmental steward? *Here's how*



» A RAIN GARDEN designed to handle run-off from tennis courts, instead of directly into the river. An example of an Albion College's projects initiated and built to demonstrate future parking lot designs.

Here are some sample questions to ask the team:

- ⊙ Describe a time when you feel the campus performed really well with environmental issues?
- ⊙ What were the circumstances during that time?
- ⊙ Describe a time when you were proud to be a member of the organization's environmental movement. Why were you proud?
- ⊙ What do you value most about being a member of this team? Why?

AT SOME POINT, you may make the choice to become an environmental steward. It is a personal decision greater than trying to achieve "sustainability." Sustainability, in my opinion, is a media buzzword and is an over-used dust pan in which to sweep up every process and then declare victory. It is an appropriate buzzword for your communications department and doesn't put any dirt under your fingernails.

We have a job to do and that is to provide safe athletic fields. Environmental stewardship is more in line with our jobs as sports turf managers as "keepers of the earth." It takes a high level of self-organizing to embrace the mystery of the earth and understanding that Mother Nature is the victor. Self-organizing is like cleaning up the desk in your brain. The challenge is, "How to do it?"

Let's assume you are a leader on your campus and have accepted the seriousness of taking Environmental Stewardship from your institute's agenda. Be prepared because once you begin to inquire about environmental issues it will be magnified and you have to be able to wrap your mind around this worthy topic.

"What we focus on becomes our reality."

Begin with gathering all the loose papers in

your brain that document what your campus has accomplished successfully on environmental stewardship. Communicate with everyone involved with past practices, across the campus, that you have identified their accomplishments, how they were done, and that more of the same accomplishments are in the future of our campus.

In every society, organization, or group, something works. This step will do two things for self-organizing. One is that it will put success stories on the tip of your tongue when you need motivation and two, you will realize that you're not alone. A team will start to form if you focus on how successful individual projects contributed to the campus's Environmental Stewardship. How you function as a team is up to you. It is my experience that face-to-face meetings are best with the goal being an agreed upon collaborative document.

Now that you're not alone and a team is built, start to create questions that can explore environmental stewardship. Here are some sample questions to ask the team: Describe a time when you feel the campus performed really well with environmental issues? What were the circumstances during that time? Describe a time when you were proud

to be a member of the organization's environmental movement. Why were you proud? What do you value most about being a member of this team? Why?

Take these exploratory questions to your team and facilitate interviews and/or surveys. For interviews, separate team members into pairs and have each person interview the other with these questions. *"The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way."* Make sure notes are taken by the interviewer because the questions will turn into conversation. Notes will be shared soon.

Regroup as a team and start asking for small tidbits of information from the interviews. As the facilitator make sure to write the nuggets of information on a white board or large paper pad. What will happen is a common thread will emerge about environmental issues that will be visible for all of the team. *"People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the Unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (The Known)."*

On our campus, for example, we discovered that we had about 80% of the Michigan Turfgrass Environmental Stewardship Program (MTESP) portfolio of modules completed, just by identifying our past success stories. We also discovered that with some administrative

work with the state we qualified for participation in the Michigan Business Pollution Prevention Partnership (MBP3). It was easy to attach a process to our commitment to environmental stewardship half way into the discovery of our successes. Of course, this opened up invitations to invite authors, consultants and administrators of these statewide programs onto our team. The partners helped with the next step of "How to do it."

Combining the campus team and state partners emphasizes the focus on the positive. With the positive in mind, ask the team to start dreaming. Much like facilitating the information from the interviews, with a white board, asks the group, "What if we could do more of what works and what could we accomplish?" *"If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what are best about the past."* On our campus, we decided to finish the other 20% of the MTESP modules with the help of the students and enroll in the MBP3 partnership. We had another success story to build upon.

The team believed that we made strides in environmental stewardship fairly early in the process. The dream became a daily reality in other best management practices outside of the athletic fields. Purchasing started to consider Michigan-based companies and evaluated the company's environmental awareness and visions. Technology Services engaged Consumers Energy to take advantage of re-lamping rebates to re-lamp buildings with energy efficient fluorescent bulbs. Students started to gain momentum reducing the solid waste landfill stream with student organizations willing to run a recycling contest. When extraordinary developments grow on campus as a result of just asking questions, as the leader, it is time to capitalize and display that everyone on the team made all this happen and there is still work to celebrate. *"It is important to value differences."*

On our campus, we continue to see environmental stewardship action and innovation from faculty, staff, and students. We completed the MTESP and organized a multi-media press conference, bringing attention to the success of adopting an Environmental Stewardship Program. In the process, I explored some poetic explanation to my motivation:

A river is to the earth, as a vein is to the heart. The Kalamazoo cradles our acres of athletic fields, in the fold of a southern curve of least resistance.

On a quiet day the river can be heard in the distance. If something spills on campus, its fate is the river, the vein to the earth. A quiet campus is the result from the awareness of this relationship.

(Our campus is a postage stamp of property in the Kalamazoo Watershed. The Kalamazoo River Watershed encompasses approximately 2,020 square miles and includes parts of eight counties in the southwest area of the Lower Peninsula in Michigan. The watershed stretches 162 miles and varies 11 to 29 miles in width.)

In summary, to start an environmental steward process and complete a successful program, start with self-organization and focus on what works. Success is found only if you're looking for it and once it is found create the future around it. In this case, I choose to focus on Environmental Stewardship and in general much of this language can be applied daily. *"The language we use creates our reality."* ■



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