

Coming to a Campus Near You

Focus the Nation Joins Schools in Climate Change Collaboration

By Linda Baker

LuAnne Thompson is in an ideal position to champion a grassroots global warming initiative. A professor of oceanography at the University of Washington, Thompson teaches a graduate class on climate dynamics and works for an institution that has chosen Elizabeth Kolbert's climate change classic, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, as its 2007 "common book," which every incoming freshman is required to read.

Now Thompson is em-barking on another global warming-related challenge. She is one of hundreds of faculty members around the country participating in Focus the Nation, an ambitious organizing project that is coordinating teams of teachers and students at more than 1,000 educational institutions to engage in a collaborative discussion about solutions to global warming. A year-long event, Focus the Nation will culminate in a January 31 symposium next year at colleges nationwide.



Universities have "a huge role" to play in raising public awareness about climate change, says Thompson. Colleges not only have the credibility to discuss the complex set of issues linked to global warming, she says, they also provide direct access to the young people poised to inherit a radically changing environment. "We created this problem," Thompson says. "It's theirs to fix."

Focus the Nation will allow universities around the country to pool resources to inspire students—and the public at large—to take direct political action.

Over the past few years, grassroots climate change initiatives have proliferated. These include the nation-wide rallying effort, Step it Up, which took place last April; stopglobalwarming.org, a Hollywood-sponsored virtual march; and the Campus Climate Challenge, which organizes students on college campuses and high schools to promote clean energy policies at their schools. Add to that dozens of local efforts sponsored by Sierra Club chapters, churches and Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs), and the picture that emerges is of a diffuse but expanding 21st century social movement.

Focus the Nation, says Eban Goodstein, the executive director of the organizing project, "is the teach-in of a social movement."

An economics professor at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon, Goodstein also ran the Greenhouse Network in the 1990s, a nonprofit that trained people to educate their communities about climate change. Goodstein says his sense of personal urgency—he has two daughters—coupled with increasingly alarming scientific reports, motivated him to launch the Focus the Nation initiative during his 2006/07 sabbatical year.

"Focus the Nation isn't just education—it's civic education," Goodstein says. Timed to coincide with the 2008 presidential campaign, the January symposium will culminate in a campus-endorsed agenda and a student roundtable with national political leaders. "We want to mobilize large numbers of people to put national legislation—a Climate Act—at the forefront of American politics," Goodstein says.



As of June 2007, more than 500 colleges and high schools had signed on to Focus the Nation—about halfway to the intended goal of 1,000. The initiative also includes business, church and civic organizations and aims to move beyond the science to include the diverse human impacts linked to global warming.

At the University of Washington event, for example, two plenary talks will address both the science and policy dimensions of climate change. There will be panel discussions on climate solutions, a town meeting with political leaders and an exhibition space featuring art, music and student work. "We have a lot of intellectual resources at the UW," says Thompson. "It's an opportunity for us to build relations with—and influence—the community."

At Ursinus College in Pennsylvania, organizers have confirmed several keynote speakers for the January symposium, including climate change researcher Richard Alley and *New York Times* environmental correspondent Andrew Revkin. There will be a presentation by artist and environmental activist Sara Steele, and Ursinus students will partner with a local high school in drafting legislation to present to policy makers. Senators Arlen Specter and Robert Casey are among the politicians who have been invited to the roundtable.

"There is a lot of moral support at the college for engaging climate change issues," says Rich Wallace, a professor of environmental issues and co-chair of the event. "Our goal is to show students how to tackle these issues practically."

Carlos Rymer, an undergraduate member of a Focus the Nation group at Cornell, says the university already has an active "Beyond Kyoto" student organization. The group claimed a major success last year when Cornell's president signed the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment, which requires institutions to analyze their carbon footprint within two years.

The advantage of Focus the Nation, Rymer says, is that "it lets us go outside of campus to influence policy at a national level." The Cornell team is now working with other Ivy League schools to sponsor a presidential candidate's forum. Participants will be asked to approve a set of climate change policy recommendations.

Goodstein, who recently completed a memoir titled *Fighting for Love in the Century of Extinction* (University Press of New England), has spent the year traveling the country to raise support for Focus the Nation. "He's done a terrific job of transforming a very diffuse group of universities, organizations and individuals from a cacophony of noise toward a more coherent ensemble comprising more than the sum of its parts," says Brian Smoliak, a graduate student in atmospheric sciences at the University of Washington.

Smoliak has attended two Focus the Nation organizing conferences—one in Portland and one in Las Vegas. A veteran of Step it Up and Campus Climate Challenge actions, he says that because of its emphasis on political dialogue, Focus the Nation has the capacity to bridge the gap between existing, disparate global warming activist efforts.

Goodstein says faculty can be notoriously territorial about their academic disciplines. "This issue has the potential to break down silos and have educators own up to their very explicit responsibility in terms of preparing kids for this new future," he says.

"In 2100, the world could be 10.5 degrees hotter than it is now," Goodstein says. It's a post-peak oil, post-water shortage world, it's tribalistic politics, and it's not a place that we want for our children or grandchildren." But he says a second world is possible, one in which "we rewire the planet with clean energy solutions and create millions of jobs and lay the foundation for a just and sustainable society."

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