Staten Island Theology Students “Go-Green” for an Eco-Friendly Campus Environment

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Students enrolled in the Freshman Honors Theology course taught by Associate Professor Sally Kenel, Ph.D., discovered new meaning to the phrase “getting your hands dirty.” As part of their end-of-semester Academic-Service Learning project, they collected and recycled unsold textbooks, food and clothing, developed a carpool initiative, analyzed the efficiency of water usage on campus, and climbed into several dumpsters to separate recyclable waste materials (paper, cardboard, bottles and cans) from bins located behind the Staten Island Campus Center in an effort to create a “green” campus.

“By studying each these areas through a ‘green lens,’ the students were able to apply the basic social justice dictum—look, judge, act—to the particular setting of our campus,” says Dr. Kenel. “I wanted to develop a project in which students can collaborate, work for change and address the concerns of the larger community.”

As a continuance of the fall semester’s Senior Capstone Honors Theology course, the “Go Green” proposals included a campus compost initiative and a rain water collection system for watering the lawn, as well as having Public Safety officers use battery-powered golf carts instead of gas-fueled vehicles. The freshmen class was challenged to connect classroom Catholic social teachings with environmental issues. Students divided into three groups to plan, design and execute programs to address the ecological conditions on the Staten Island campus.

Honors 4001 student Emily Winters, who describes her experience as “very inspiring,” presented an action plan to University administrators at the end of the school semester.
“The service-learning project really stretched me beyond the curriculum,” she says. “At first I thought this was just another assignment and our ideas wouldn’t really be used, but I couldn’t help but believe that if we came up with a constructive solution, the school would have to put it into action! At the end of the semester, we presented our projects to University representatives and I felt that my voice was heard, and my hard work made a difference. It gave me a sense of confidence to believe that whatever future endeavors I may pursue, I can really change the world.”

Senior Laura Pepenella credits Dr. Kenel for the amazing learning experience. “Dr. Kenel’s service-learning course was by far my overall favorite in my four years at St. John’s. This project helped to improve my networking and group interaction skills and expand my knowledge on sustainability. My overall experience was incredibly positive and I am glad to have collaborated with a class I have grown so close to during my time here.”

Under the supervision of Thomas Goldsmith, St. John’s Director of Environmental and Energy Conservation, a “Waste Characterization Study” was undertaken by Student Sustainability Coordinators Kyle Beltramini and Nathan Maupin. The two intrepid students made a “dumpster dive,” slipping on gloves, climbing into several on-campus dumpsters, opening trash bags, separating three-day’s worth of refuse and calculating the volumes of recyclable materials recovered.

“Recycling fights global warming climate change,” says Goldsmith. “The EPA’s WasteWise program provides the rules, guidelines and numbers for recycling as a way to prevent greenhouse gas emissions by reusing and avoiding landfilling. Hopefully the example of our Staten Island students will encourage others to do their part to reduce waste and increase recycling efforts.”

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Academic Service-Learning enhances the educational experience of St. John’s students and is a major component of the University’s 2009-2013 Strategic Plan. It’s also a part of the Vincentian Institute for Social Action (VISA), which was launched by the University to more visibly embed St. John’s Catholic and Vincentian mission into the educational experience of its students. VISA provides an organizational focus for a variety of new and ongoing programs through which faculty and students can work together to explore the causes of and develop solutions for poverty and social injustice throughout the world.