

A seat at the table: Students learn the fine art of thinking globally, acting locally

Cameron Wake's class at the University of New Hampshire, by Amy Seif, originally published in the Fall 2002 edition of *Parenthesis*, a UNH Newsletter for Parents

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A group of UNH decision makers has come together to negotiate the reduction of University greenhouse gas emissions to levels set by the Kyoto Protocol. *Cogeneration*, the use of waste steam to provide heat or power, is the hot topic around the table.

"If the dorms are renovated, we would save money," points out the energy manager. "Since the upgrades were made in Hamilton Smith, we saved \$70,000 on lighting and avoided the production of half a million pounds of carbon dioxide. This might be more realistic than co-generation."

The vice president of finance chimes in, "Maybe we don't know enough about co-generation to really talk about it; we don't have much time."

He makes a good point. In only three meetings, this group must agree on a matter that has perplexed world leaders for years. The pressure is alleviated, however, by the fact that the negotiation is only an academic exercise. And the people at the table? UNH undergraduates getting a unique glimpse into the world of consensus-building and environmental policy making through the course "Global Environmental Change."

"It was all role playing, but we actually came up with ideas that may help the cause," says Darren La Croix, a recent graduate from the business administration program. "This class was excellent; it increased our awareness tremendously."

"Before they negotiated, the students engaged in interactive research," explains Cameron Wake, a professor of Earth Science and the Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space. "They interviewed professionals who represented their role in the negotiation. They determined what questions to ask, how to answer those questions, and how to defend their position—this creates an active learning environment."

To give students a foundation in the policy and sociological implications of global climate change, Wake enlisted help from Julie Newman in UNH's Office



of Sustainability Programs (OSP). Newman introduced the students to community members whose work involves the kind of challenges to be discussed at the negotiation table: the University's energy manager, vice president of financial affairs, transportation and campus planners, an academic affairs officer, a faculty member, a local electricity supplier, and a representative of an environmental non-profit.

"As facilitator of the process, I watched these students evolve into the role of the person they interviewed," notes Newman. "It was an educational metamorphosis."

When the negotiations came to a close, each group presented the agreement reached at its table. La Croix's group found a way to reduce emissions within the first day of negotiations. The plan involves switching to natural gas buses in eight years, replacing showerheads with low flow devices, retrofitting light fixtures, proposing a car pool section in the parking lot, and adding a "green fee" to student fees each semester.

Wake, who teaches this course each fall, gets a tremendous amount of satisfaction from watching the students present their projects. "So often what we teach is theoretical," he explains. "These negotiations allow me to bring the theory of global environmental change down to a scale that is applicable to people's lives and behaviors. This is a classic example of thinking globally and acting locally."

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