

College Eight Commencement June 13, 2009

Parents, relatives, friends, and colleagues, we are here to celebrate and honor these graduating seniors who are completing degrees in a wide range of fields and interests. But something brings them all together that is much more than this celebration. They are students graduating from College Eight – the College of Environment and Society. In this College they have had many opportunities to build a community of people with a different understanding of what it means to walk lightly on the earth, to give back more than they take, and to be agents of change in a time when change is deeply needed. And it is how so many of these students (your children, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, siblings, and friends) – it is how they have engaged the issues of the day, contemplated the future, collaborated with their teachers and advisers, and worked together to show that there are feasible, doable, and positive ways for change to occur - that is what I want us all to celebrate.

As an Environmental Studies professor where I try to engage students in an exploration of the idea of sustainability, I have had many opportunities to learn together with these students about the challenges that human society face. We have all heard so much about some of those challenges. I think the four most urgent challenges are food, fuel, finance, and climate –

Food, or how we ensure that almost ¼ of the world population stops facing hunger on a daily basis, and how we stop the loss of small farms and farming communities.

Fuel, or facing the end of the fossil fuel era, and how to counteract the rising levels of carbon in the atmosphere.

Finance, or the need for an alternative economic structure from the one that has gotten us into the mess we are in.

And Climate, or how to halt and reverse global warming and the accelerating changes in weather patterns impacting our globe.

These are giant challenges, and from an individual person's perspective, they are so immense as to appear unsolvable. But when you look at some of the examples right here on our campus that these students have created, we know that a different future is possible.

Since I can't possibly cover how we are going to solve all of these challenges in the few minutes I have with you today, I want to focus on Food. I feel so lucky to be able to teach courses in ecology and natural history, or how nature works, as well as agroecology – applying ecology to designing and managing alternative and sustainable food systems. Lots of lessons to learn from both perspectives, especially when we link them, and UCSC has been a wonderful place to do this.

I'm sure all of you have noticed the natural beauty of our campus. The redwood forest and the banana slugs are quintessential UCSC. But scattered around this campus is an amazing network of organic gardens and an organic farm that do much more than grow carrots and rutabagas. Some of them date back almost to the beginning of our campus over 40 years ago. They help our students develop an understanding of what a truly sustainable food system is all about – one that protects the environment (from its healthy soil to its biodiversity), creates viable livelihoods and economies grounded in opportunity, equity and sharing, and promotes social justice where all people and cultures are respected and honored for the work they do. They learn how the sustainable food systems of the future are being built by re-connecting the two most important parts of the system – the growers and farm workers on the one hand, and the eaters on the other. They have become so separate that eaters no longer know who grew their food, how it was grown, or how far it had to travel to get to the table, and the growers and workers have no idea where their food goes or who eats it. And those in the middle make most of the profit. Part of the process of what we call “Getting Culture back into Agriculture” is all about reconnecting these two parts of the food system. It's not just Agri-business. You will be hearing a lot about this topic in the press and cinema this summer, and we will be watching the first crops grow in Michelle Obama's garden at the White House!

When you go back up to College 8 for the reception following graduation, you can step into a remarkable example of one of these gardens just below and south of the dining hall. Started almost 15 years ago by a group of energetic students and supportive staff and faculty at the College, it has become a course offered every quarter where 30-40 mostly College 8 students get their hands dirty while engaging in conversation, exchanging experiences, and reflecting on what each of them have learned from this “living laboratory.” I've been fortunate to be able to teach it for most of those years, and constantly marvel at the lessons learned from the garden.

Let me share one student's experience. Lauren came to UCSC as a first year student 5 years ago. Her first quarter she came to the College 8 garden. We gardened together, but we also talked about what it meant to be a new college student, what she thought she might do in her studies (she already had decided she was going to be a Marine Biology major), and the different ways her peers defined the word “food.” She decided to take the garden course again her second quarter, and then again, and again – until she ended up taking the class every quarter for all 5 years she has been at UCSC. She continued with her Biology major, but she added a double major in Environmental Studies, wrote a thesis on the future of grazing systems and nomadic life in Mongolia, and after essentially working as a teaching assistant in the garden class for the last couple years, she was the teacher of the garden class this past quarter. And now she has been accepted into the UCSC Masters and credential program in Education, with plans to become a teacher and use gardens as living laboratories for teaching about sustainability to the next generation.

We also have a garden more than an acre in size, which the students named the “Foundational Roots Garden,” that is part of the PICA program – the Program in Community and Agroecology, located on lower campus at the entrance to the student residential area known as the Village. Students from many diverse majors, all having in

common the fact that they eat, live together and work together in the garden, harvest food and share meals, and participate in seminars that explore food and food system issues. It is amazing how much we all learn together.

In the garden students learn by doing, but they also keep journals and engage in the power of writing to capture and convey the lessons and reflections on what they are learning means to them. I would like to read some students' words from the journals they keep as part of these courses so you can get some feel and understanding for what they are learning from the garden:

SG: The garden offered many valuable lessons to learn – which was more interesting and memorable than learning in a classroom...Listening to the opinions of others related to sustainability truly opened my eyes in many ways.

SR: I began to think about how it is not a coincidence that the vast monoculture fields that define modern agriculture can't be separated from other monocultural elements of our society, such as the dominance of a few chain stores and our cities looking more and more homogenous.

SG: Sustainability and equality have always been strong parts of my personal belief and it does not seem fair to feed the US on the backs of the world's labor. This course has shown me the power of food sovereignty. The idea that we can have social change with every seed planted and crop harvested.

SG: Sustainability is not created in a lab but created by people like us who actually care about the environment and making the soil sustain itself year after year through natural inputs and not pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Composting finishes the cycle of food, going from field to us back to the soil to help grow other plants.

SG: Abundance and choice – beauty and community. We are all in this together. Let's harvest our mistakes, so we can share them with others. Then they don't have to be repeated.

SG: Despite all the doom and gloom we hear about, I have made a shift towards an optimistic approach of learning about environment. I am still looking for my leverage point – how can I use this information, my energy and creativity, coupled with like minded people and ideas to cause “paradigm shifting change”? I am lost there as of yet, however, at least I feel this class situated me in a community that equips me with the skills and access to information and resources necessary for taking pathway directions to better leverage points. I want to be a part, a contributor, a designer, a player in educating and dispersing the action-based foundation that will “sustain” us indefinitely into the future.

SG: But FOOD, something so tangible, intimate, and directly associated with everyday necessities of every person is such a terrific looking glass into the web of life: how food

is nature, how humans are involved, the consequences and repercussions associated with the human-food relationship, and possible alternatives or solutions to some of the monsters man has created in trying to tame and define the untamable and undefinable – Nature! I used to have a very linear approach to viewing education and research, but in studying the environment, food systems especially, I am beginning to think more WEBlically, more integrated and structurally, and hopefully, more wholistically.

Aren't those amazing reflections? Our students are awesome! They show how the garden is much more than a place to grow plants – it is a metaphor for life (if I may be so bold!), where they learn about themselves, their community, relationships, cooperation, networking, systems thinking, social justice, social change, and sustainability...

It's no coincidence that we have such a large concentration of organic farmers and gardeners in the Monterey Bay region, as well an incredible concentration of farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, and farm-to-table operations, as well as school garden programs in our K-12 schools, and non-profits engaged in food system sustainability activities.

Another wonderful example of what these students are doing is something called the Education for Sustainable Living Program – ESLP. Sponsored by College 8, but organized and run by students themselves, this annual course takes place in Spring Quarter with a Monday night speaker series where world renowned activists working for environmental justice and change are attracted by the student organizers. Accompanying the speaker series are working groups that focus on ways to bring sustainability to the UCSC campus and the local community. Projects are carried out, presentations made, lobbying the university carried out, and change occurs – and all through the work and commitment of the students themselves. And even more amazing, through an initiative voted on and approved by the students themselves, their own student fees fund the course! Listen to the list of projects that students carried out this year in the ESLP course:

- Self-sufficiency
- Intentional communities
- Transformative environmental Action
- Campus action plan for sustainability
- The Green Campus Initiative
- Students for Organic Solutions
- Greening our Dining Halls
- Sustainable Food Systems
- Social Justice and Environment
- Empowering Environmental Philosophy
- UC and the Bomb
- Ecocities and Sustainable Communities
- Minimizing impacts and opening minds
- Never take no for an answer

And the student leaders of these projects have organized a course, taken the winter quarter before the Monday night series, that focuses on goal setting, consensus building, group dynamics, non-violent communication, and teaching. Imagine the skills and knowledge that these students are gaining, and what they will do with these experiences after they graduate.

And finally, another exiting activity taking place with incredible potential for the future is the demand (pressure) that students are putting on faculty for a curriculum in sustainability. Imagine a set of courses that any student could take, along side their major field of study (be it ENVIS, Art, or Computer Science), that give them direct, hands-on experience with sustainable living, alternative energy, organic gardening, social justice, and other issues and areas that will impact and alter how they can live their lives in the future in ways that sustain our planet. Here at College 8 Provost Ravi Rajan has an exciting experiment underway with the core courses required of all entering first year students, where students are introduced to sustainability and given opportunities to engage in service-learning actions. Elsewhere on campus faculty from diverse departments and divisions are joining together to teach courses that link technology, environment and society in ways that not only give our students the tools for change, but the values of sustainability needed to drive that change. A Sustainable Living Center has been established at PICA where small projects and activities carried out by students demonstrate how sustainable technologies can be integrated with social change. We will have a lot to learn from these students, and I encourage all of you to listen intently when they talk to you about how your family can make steps towards becoming more sustainable.

So I am here today to celebrate these students, each with the potential to make change happen. I just finished teaching several courses this Spring, and they all gave me a tremendous lift as students expressed what they had learned and how they had grown as a result of our partnership (teacher/student, elder/youth, partners in a change process).

Yet it feels like I am asking myself more frequently these days if I can keep pace with all of their young energy or if is it time for me to hand it on to someone new.

But these questions are my questions, not the questions I would want to pose to these students now as they too carry the sense of community and sustainability we have cultivated together here at UCSC. In fact, rather than questions, lets just continue to build and expand our partnership for change. I feel more like the elder, with a bit more experience, but also with the continually renewed sense of hope and partnership, of working together, and sharing a vision. It's not my vision, its not their vision, it is OUR vision. And they will be sharing that vision with all of you, planting it, cultivating it, caring deeply for it, so be prepared to join them in the harvest of changes that are coming.

We all here acknowledge the crisis they are going out into, that we are all in, but with the

tools from the gardens, the interdisciplinary understanding of our environment, from essential programs like Community Studies and Latin American and Latino Studies, community building, and the amazing new ways for networking they have in their hands, minds, and hearts, it will be different. They are prepared in very special ways to think and act outside the box – outside the garden. Just as the soil can become healthy again with wise and knowledgeable management – agroecological management, where people matter as much as what is produced - society will once again cultivate the values of community, equity, cooperation, and sustainability.

I want to thank and appreciate all of the support that you, as the families of these students, have given them so they could get to this point. And my words for you students specifically, as the farmer sending the harvest off to be put on the table:

You are leaving behind a greener campus, but also an awareness of the balance needed between technology and culture, between individual and community, and between economy and social justice. Your voices have given our University an opportunity to carefully consider where we make cuts in face of the budget crisis in California and beyond, and realize that community, diversity, and social justice are at the core of our future. We hear about green collar jobs, the greening of the economy, and change, but you tell us that this all needs to be grounded in equity, fairness, and compassion. Take this with you, graduating seniors, and...

Live the sustainability you have learned.

Show others what that means

As alumni, find ways to give back

Build (and rebuild) community

Listen more than you talk

Share good meals

Keep planting new seeds