Sustainability Efforts GIVE RISE TO ENVIRONMENTAL Leadership Programs

The drive to make industries and cities more environmentally friendly, efficient, and equitable has spawned an array of university graduate programs that tackle the real-world issues of leadership for environmental sustainability.

"Probably 30 of these programs have launched within the last three years," said Steve Mital, the University of Oregon's sustainability director, who helped design a new graduate certificate in sustainability leadership, which starts classes later this month [Sept 27]. The trend is not surprising, he said, given that Fortune 500 companies, universities, and cities are hiring sustainability directors and coordinators—among the job roles that the programs prepare students to fill.

One established degree is the master's in environmental leadership offered at Naropa University, in Boulder, Colo. The two-year program, offered since 1995, is just 14 students but is intense and practical, said Anne Parker, a Naropa University professor who helped found the program and retool it four years ago. Naropa's, like other environmental leadership programs, takes in many students in their late 20s and early 30s—or even older—who have work experience and are highly motivated to help organizations "go green," she said. "Some of our students come in with strong science background; they want to know how they can lead for change in their various communities."

In addition to a full slate of coursework, students work extensively with community organizations on sustainability projects. "It's more like a professional consulting experience," Parker said. Consistent with Naropa's roots as a Buddhist-inspired university, the program also addresses "inner sustainability," with a first-year course on "inner work for environmental leaders" or "how to find a place of rest in a busy life," Parker said. Yet the program also pushes outer boundaries. All students, in the summer between their first and second year, take a wilderness class, including three days spent "solo" in a remote wilderness.

Duke University gives students an online option with its two-year master's degree in environmental leadership, designed for mid-career professionals.

Offered by the university's Nicholas School of the Environment, it leads to the same degree as that earned by students who are present on the Durham, N.C., campus, according to Sherri Nevius, the director of the Duke Environmental Leadership program.

The online program gains breadth from a global student body—even though most students are from the United States "Our student from Guyana who lives on the coast has different perspectives on environmental issues and a different government than the student in Zurich," Nevius said.

Though most course activities are online, in real-time or asynchronous sessions, the program requires six "in-place" visits of about a week at designated campus locations and in Washington, D.C., where students meet environmental leaders in corporate and government roles. A leadership consultant also provides coaching.

The Oregon Leadership in Sustainability certificate program—though brand-new with eight students enrolled—was designed with lessons from the University of Oregon's decade-old environmental leadership program, which has put teams of students into consulting roles with local organizations and agencies tackling environmental problems—for example, mapping the habitats of the Western pond turtle.

The 65-hour program consists of core courses in ecological design, energy and climate change, foundations of sustainability, and green cities. In the fall, students will work with a client city to develop a sustainability plan, and in the winter and spring they will draw up ecologically appropriate plans for a site being redeveloped.

"The program is designed to provide a year-long 'boot camp' in the skills and knowledge needed for a career in sustainability," said Program Director Vicki Elmer. The team focuses complete the leadership package, Steve Mital added, "creating what I call the inspired generalist."