Fostering Sustainability and Mitigating the Social Impact of Climate Change:

A Community-Based Learning Experience
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Objectives

- To describe major roles that social workers can play in mitigating the effects of climate change and responding to climate disasters.
- To analyze the current status of sustainability in social work education in the USA.
- To present a case study of a pre-service course on social work and sustainability that focused on community-based learning.
- To discuss the challenges of introducing environmental frameworks into professional education.
Social Work and Climate Change

Responding to the Crisis And Mitigating Its Effects
Social Work Responds to Climate Change

- Social Work professionals can work within their communities
  - to address the health threats posed by climate change:
    - Food insecurity (Polack, Wood, & Bradley, 2008).
    - Pollution–caused health conditions (Rogge, 1998)
    - Accelerated spread of disease (McMichael et al, 2006).
  - to prepare for and respond to natural disasters linked with climate change (Galambos, 2005).
  - to assist environmental migrants displaced by climate change to adjust to their new living situations (Chang–Muy & Congress, 2009).
Social work professionals can engage in initiatives that have an immediate impact on both social problems such as poverty and global climate change (Hoff & McNutt, 2008).

- Social workers have taken policy stands to support the enforcement of existing environmental protection laws (IFSW, 2005; NASW, 2006).
- Members of the profession can also rally support for policy change that stabilizes the earth’s atmosphere and simultaneously bolsters human health and well-being (Rogge & Combs–Orme, 2003).

- Recognizes the importance of “environmental responsibility” and “care for the environment” in social work practice.
- Calls on social workers to practice in a way that “our concept of human rights includes the natural and built environment with special focus on the needs of ethnic minority and indigenous people” (IFSW, 2005, p. 3).
Social work educators have recently written of the importance of the profession being guided by a deeper ecological theory (Unger, 2000, and focusing on the social dimension of sustainability (McKinnon, 2008).

International Federation of Social Workers’ policy statement asserts that environmental issues should “gain increased presence in social work education.” (2005, p. 4).
Education for Sustainability in Social Work

The Situation in the United States
Primary theoretical and practice models taught in the US are built on a multi-dimensional systems framework with person-in-environment as the most frequent focus (Ashford, LeCroy & Lortie, 2006; Saleeby, 2001).

In early work, Germaine and Gitterman (1980) proposed an ecological perspective which stated that people live in an ecological niche, including their social, natural, and built environments.

However, there has been little emphasis on the transactions between persons and their natural environments (Besthorn, 2003; Unger, 2000).

Later work focused on environmental issues, and related health and social justice concerns (Hoff & Rogge, 1996; Rogge, 2003).

In 1999 National Association of Social Workers (2006) adopted an environmental policy statement that supported stricter environmental regulation, development of alternate sources of energy, and recognition of pollution-based illnesses.
The Council on Social Work Education’s new policy statement (2008):
- Requires a person in environment perspective for curricula, but the relationship of persons to their natural environment is *not* a required element.
- Mandates social and economic justice be included, but not environmental justice.

Groups of faculty are organizing to add environmental concerns to social work courses and their own school’s curriculum.
Recently two major textbooks focused on updating the theoretical base of North American social workers:


The U.S. journal of the Council on Social Work education published Peter Jones’ (2010) call for a reflective approach to environmental education of social workers and a practice theory that takes the natural world into account.
U.S. Graduate Course on Social Work and Sustainability

A Case Study
Supportive Educational Environment

- **Portland State University**
  - Houses the Center for Sustainable Processes and Practices.
  - Received a $25 million grant from the Miller Foundation to move sustainability ahead.
  - Offers a Graduate Certificate Program in Sustainability.

- **School of Social Work**
  - Faculty members were given a grant to team with other departments to form a Social Sustainability Network with PSU faculty, students, and community members.
  - Emphasizes community–based learning.
Sustainability at PSU

• “Sustainability is often thought of as comprised of three overlapping goals:
  – (a) to live in a way that is environmentally sustainable or viable over the long term;
  – (b) to live in a way that is economically sustainable, maintaining living standards over the long term; and
  – (c) to live in a way that is socially sustainable, now and in the future”
(Dillard, Dujon, & King, 2009, p. 2)
This course examined the role of professional social work in the achievement of sustainability at the community, regional, national, and global levels.

Using a multidisciplinary perspective, the environmental, economic, and social aspects of sustainability were considered theoretically and practically.

Sustainability was linked to the attainment of environmental, economic, and social justice.
Community-Based Learning

- Social Work and Sustainability is an advanced human behavior theory course, one of seven students could choose to take during the 2009–10 academic year.
- Emphasized application of theory through a required community-based learning assignment.
- Groups of 3–4 students designed a project that promoted sustainability beyond the members of the class, and required 10 hours of service per student.
Course Organized into 9 Topics:

1. Sustainability in micro, mezzo-, and macro practice.
2. Environmental, economic, and social justice for individuals, groups, and communities.
3. Sustainable development and social work.
4. Sustainability in the international and global context.
5. Working towards sustainability with groups at risk.
7. Empowering partnerships for sustainability.
8. Sustainability and social work ethics.
9. Relationship between sustainability theory and social work practice.
Exemplars: Environmental Injustice

Response to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.
Exemplars: Community Development

Sustainable South Bronx in New York City
Exemplars: Empowering Partnerships

Community Food Security in Portland Oregon
Guest Lecturers: Portland Social Workers Promoting Sustainability

- Carma Corcoran at Josiah Hill Clinic
- Kevin Jones at Friends of the Children
- Kristin Magis at Leadership Institute
- Kate Erickson and John Ossowski at Our United Villages
- Cassie Cohen at Groundwork Portland
Seven Student Projects Promoted Sustainability Beyond the Classroom

- Three projects delivered student sustainability projects to community members through non-profit community-based organizations.
- One project collaborated with other student groups to promote sustainability at PSU.
- Three projects focused on sustainability promotion within the School of Social Work.
Designed and distributed a guide to affordable, local, sustainable food to people living in low income areas.
Designed a guide to cook 7 family meals for $7 apiece based on healthy local food; distributed to agencies serving low income residents.
Nature Programs for Community Youth

Compiled evidence of the health effects of outdoor programs for at-risk youth, shared with local youth-serving agencies
Worked with PSU student organizations to mount a social marketing campaign encouraging the use of tap water and campus refilling stations.
Held sessions teaching social workers how to make non-toxic cleaning substances and about the disproportionate exposure of women and low-income people to toxic cleaning products.
Supply Exchange: Sustainability Promotion

Started an exchange of usable school supplies for the School of Social Work, networking with a PSU exchange.
Held meetings of School of Social Work students to discuss sustainability, conducted a sustainability survey of students, and brought the results to a faculty meeting.
Students shared their work, and some fresh, local food with 50 PSU faculty, students, and community members.
Student Reflections

- All students submitted a paper with their personal definitions of sustainability during the first half of the course.
- Every week students kept a journal of their reflections on readings and their progress with their projects.
- Final papers had students reflect on their community-based projects and apply sustainability theory to what they had done.
New skills such as social marketing, partnering with community organizations, and behaviors that promote sustainability.

Additional knowledge about the current environmental crisis, globalization, sustainability theory, and their relation to social work.

“In order to transition to a sustainable future, we must concern ourselves with what leads individuals to engage in behavior that collectively is sustainable, and design our programs accordingly. Then, the transition must be shaped well in such a manner that in the end, communities will be able to pass down the values to the next generation with ease.” (Naanyane, 2009, final paper).
Lessons Learned about Educating Human Services Professionals about Sustainability

Challenges and Strategies

New Home of the School of Social Work–LEED Gold Certification
Challenges

- Professional education has prescribed content that is required for accreditation—already too much for the classroom hours allotted.
- Social workers are trained to respond to the social problems that have immediate impact on people—poverty, disease, violence, and injustice; environmental degradation and climate change seem to be outside of the scope of their work.
- The professional literature about sustainability in social work is not well-developed.
Challenges

- Few social work faculty have sustainability as their major focus of study.
- In the class in this case study, several students had a much more comprehensive knowledge of climate change and environmental issues than the instructor.
- A sustainability focus requires a major conceptual shift for the entire field.
Illustrating the Conceptual Shift: Prior to Sustainability Framework

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Traditional Area Of Focus
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Inter-relationship

Expanded area of focus
Garner support from key administrators and faculty prior to asking for course approval and scheduling.

Draw upon the stated priorities of top university administrators to have each unit engage in sustainability activities.

Call upon community agencies doing environmental work to provide guest lecturers—in turn, their organizations became better known and more widely supported.

Use the informal seminars held through the Social Sustainability Network as a forum for students to present, discuss ideas, and learn from other disciplines.
Strategies

- Enrich the social work literature base through the use of works by international scholars from a variety of disciplines.
- Use the Sustainability Fair as a social marketing opportunity to widen the support base within the School of Social Work, and to recruit next year’s set of students.
- Highlight sustainability as a focus area for field internship experiences.
- Move sustainability concepts and environmental concerns into the required coursework.
COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION
PORTLAND, OREGON 56TH ANNUAL PROGRAM MEETING
OCTOBER 14–17, 2010
PROMOTING SUSTAINABILITY IN SOCIAL WORK

For a copy of these slides:
http://www.pdx.edu/social-sustainability