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CLIMATE CHANGE LITERACY, ACTION, AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN KENTUCKY

Like environmental education, climate change education can have multiple outcomes, from climate action to positive youth development. Environmental action involves decisions, planning, implementation, and reflection by an individual or group to achieve a specific environmental outcome,¹ whereas climate action refers to an environmental action with a specific climate adaptation or mitigation goal. Similar to environmental action, climate action provides opportunities for positive youth development.² Below we tell the story of Jennifer Hubbard-Sanchez’s work at Kentucky State University, which involves undergraduate students in climate action projects that lead not only to climate action but also to positive youth development outcomes like leadership, taking responsibility, and building connections with others.

How would you approach climate change if you lived in a state whose leading politician says that “each side has their scientists”³ and where the coal industry is a valued part of the state economy and culture? These challenges don’t stymie Jennifer Hubbard-Sanchez at Kentucky State University (KSU), for whom climate change represents the “unifying issue and opportunity of our time.”

Jennifer, who has master’s degrees in environmental studies and Mexican anthropological studies, is the state specialist for sustainable programs in the College of Agriculture, Food Science, and Sustainable Systems. In her projects at KSU, Jennifer combines her skills working with multicultural groups and her knowledge of climate change.

Jennifer’s Climate Fellows project built on work she did through the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Climate Stewards

Education Project (now called Planet Stewards). She developed “Climate Change 101” and conducted climate change community leader training sessions with members of KSU student groups, such as the Green Society and Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences. “The goal of my project really was to empower students to understand what climate change is, how we are contributing to it, and what we can do about it here locally,” she said. As part of empowering students, Jennifer guided them in building partnerships with local organizations, developing communication strategies aimed at their peers, and working with the university to effect change.

Jennifer started by introducing the topic of climate change, including basic concepts like the differences between weather and climate, and using humor to make her students comfortable. “The way that I present is oftentimes pretty goofy and pretty funny. Humor always helps. Climate change is a heavy issue. And it’s a heavy topic. And I think when we present it in a way that’s heavy, all we’re doing is scaring people and turning people away.”

Once students had gained knowledge about climate change, Jennifer asked them how they wanted to address climate change in a way that raised awareness and reduced the university’s carbon footprint. Jennifer’s students engaged in a variety of network building, leadership, public speaking, and problem-solving activities. One activity involved riding the KSU bus to Walmart, during which they gave Climate 101 “mini” talks along the way and handed out reusable bags imprinted with tips for climate change action, thus aiming to reduce students’ use of plastic bags and potentially reduce their carbon footprint (should the new bags be reused multiple times).

Jennifer used framing strategies reflected in climate change communication research, including drawing on local examples and emphasizing scientific consensus. She explained: “I think it’s really hard for people to look at a picture of a polar bear and walk away and really feel like they’re going to be able to make any sort of change or want to make any sort of change. I think it’s important to talk about the scientific agreement about this. Climate scientists, the experts in this area, do agree that it’s happening, and that there’s something we can do about it.”

Jennifer also had advice for climate change educators who might go home feeling hopeless about their task. “You can’t win them all. And I say this from a coal state. You can’t win ’em all. And that’s OK. And I think that’s really important to remember, to not get frustrated when you realize you just can’t win them all. Channel that fear or frustration or hopelessness that I think all climate change communicators feel, channel that into something positive.”

In the spring of 2016, the city of Frankfurt, Kentucky, invited Jennifer to help organize the city’s annual “Reforest Frankfurt” event. Jennifer and her students hosted hundreds of volunteers, the mayor, the city commissioner, and additional KSU students. Together, they planted 2,500 trees. Although official city publications did not frame the event around climate change, for Jennifer and her students, the event was a chance to reduce the community’s carbon footprint.

TABLE 12.1 Summary of Jennifer Hubbard-Sanchez’s climate change programs and how they connect to concepts covered in chapters 1–10

SETTING	KENTUCKY STATE UNIVERSITY AND CITY OF FRANKFORT, KENTUCKY
Audience	Undergraduate students in student clubs
Primary program outcomes	Climate literacy Positive youth development Collective action
Climate psychology connections	Aims to reduce feelings of helplessness in the face of climate change (e.g., reduce terror management responses) by letting students choose their action projects and encouraging local actions
Climate Communication Connections	Uses positive, hopeful messaging Uses metaphors like “heat-trapping blanket” Frames climate change in terms of local and human impacts Uses humor to put students at ease
Program strategies	Pairs climate literacy activities (Climate Change 101 lectures) with opportunities for student action and leadership Fosters a community of practice among students

Summary

Jennifer structured her program to give students opportunities to lead and create action projects. She used positive language and incorporated humor in her Climate Change 101 trainings to build climate literacy while enhancing student collective action and self-efficacy, which is consistent with positive youth development outcomes (table 12.1).

Jennifer’s Tip for Educators

Instead of letting the climate change blues get you down, harness your frustration into something productive and active, like a climate change action project.