Eco-awareness transforms education

By Tracey Porpora
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To improve the global environment, many college and university campuses are becoming “green” by launching new initiatives that foster a cleaner, healthier world. With this also comes new research and more curricula that is leading to Garden State graduates’ pursuit of careers in “green fields,” including local government and environmental sciences.

To help foster the green movement, many colleges across New Jersey are working on many projects that will reduce greenhouse gases.

“New Jersey Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability (NJHEPS) got the 56 presidents of the colleges and universities in New Jersey to individually sign the Greenhouse Gas Action Plan to reduce greenhouse gases,” said Dr. Donald Wheeler, professor of sociology and global studies at Union-based Kean University, and senior adviser for NJHEPS. “Then we worked with those campuses to help them achieve their objectives.”

At Kean University, this initiative spurred several “green” campus changes, including the use of a “more energy-efficient and less polluting heating fuel,” he said. “We also have a cogeneration plant, which is a furnace that has reduced both electricity and heat. It drives the air conditioning system, so that the heat of the machine itself is utilized to make both energy and air conditioning. We also encouraged a green design at the campus.”

This year, Kean University has instituted a “Global Warming Solutions for Everyone” theme that has resulted in a showing of “An Inconvenient Truth,” Al Gore’s documentary about global warming, to all freshmen and a contest between dormitories to reduce energy use, Wheeler said. In addition, Kean University’s global studies program and global MBA programs “are encouraging sustainable courses in the curriculum,” said Wheeler, who also is director of the university’s Center for Global Studies.

Like Kean University, many schools have launched initiatives that have resulted in new course work for students.

“We have launched the Global Climate Change Initiative, which is a new research initiative by our faculty to do things such as figure out how to get carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere,” said Dr. Jerome Kuiper, dean of academic programs and research for the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences of Rutgers University, which has campuses in New Brunswick, Newark and
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Camden.
In the area of sustainability, Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU), which has two New Jersey campuses, is on the forefront of making a difference in the environment.

“Our Institute of Sustainable Enterprise has a focus to bring people together to share, and learn how they can bring sustainability to their lives and organizations,” said Gerard Farias, executive director for FDU’s Institute of Sustainable Enterprise. “We have a three-pronged approach: curriculum, research and services. We connect with businesses and individuals who are part of the community to brainstorm about ideas of sustainability.”

In addition, a green learning center is being planned at FDU, he said. “To keep the whole idea of building the environment around the green learning center in alignment with it, we started a ‘green club’ with the students,” he said, noting FDU has initiated many green projects, from recycling efforts to Green Day events.

FDU also has an undergraduate major in management that emphasizes sustainability, said Farias.

Many universities also are offering innovative majors that will help prepare students for science-related careers. One example is a new biotechnology major being offered at St. Peter’s College in Jersey City.

“The promise of new drugs is going to come by way of biotechnology. There is a need for this kind of training for kids who want to go into the pharmaceutical world,” said Dr. Leonard Sciocia, the Rev. Joseph F. Schu, S.J., professor of health and natural sciences at Saint Peter’s College.