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From Ideas to Action

Would you use an app that tracks your carbon footprint in real time the way a FitBit counts steps? Would you embrace a sustainability index for the apparel industry that provided information about how your clothes are produced?

You may one day get the chance to try both, thanks to some enterprising and environmentally minded UC Santa Barbara undergraduate students. Those are among the projects being pursued in the Environmental Leadership Incubator (ELI), an academic endeavor meant to cultivate big ideas and grow the leaders to pull them off.

And it is all the brainchild of Simone Pulver, an associate professor of environmental studies and the university's 2019 Faculty Sustainability Champion. Her proposal for the incubator won her the title and the startup funding that comes with it (champions receive grants to pursue environmentally focused research and projects on campus).

Pulver's teaching and service, including a multiyear stint reviewing grant proposals for The Green Initiative Fund, inspired the idea.

"So many students come to me with these great ideas, but no means to pursue them — and that seemed like a real opportunity," said Pulver, also recipient of a 2019 Distinguished Teaching Award from the Academic Senate. "There is so much energy and passion and creativity here, particularly among undergrads. These are the years when you navigate what could be and what can be, that tension between

big dreams and reality. It’s a time to take risks, to be bold, to try something new and different and to seize that energy of, ‘Hey, everything is still possible. How can I turn it into action?’”

Currently in a one-quarter pilot phase, the ELI is designed as a four-unit, yearlong undertaking open to any sophomore or junior at UC Santa Barbara. Set to launch in full next fall, a 10-week lecture course will then give way to two quarters of independent work under the guidance of advisors, all culminating in a spring capstone event.

“It’s a true incubator, a workshop on how you take an idea from conception to implementation,” Pulver said. “Not every idea will pan out because that’s just what happens with ideas. But some will and that’s super exciting. Even for the ones that don’t work, the leadership training will stick and be relevant and valuable to students in the next idea they try to launch.”

That training comes by way of weekly speakers from diverse backgrounds and with varied expertise — but all relevant to leadership and resonant with environmental efforts. The guests Pulver has brought in so far include an environmental consultant with a Patagonia pedigree on pitch development; Kyle Lewis, director of the Technology Management Program, on effective group work; and political scientist Hahrie Han on how to recruit people to your cause and build engagement. Experts from campus staff and administration are leading lectures on conflict resolution and leadership assessment.

“The main thing I’m incubating is leadership, but the projects are necessary to do that,” she noted. “You learn from practice and failure and trying. You don’t learn from simply hearing, ‘The abstract principles of effective group work are XYZ. You learn from, ‘Oh shoot, I have to get this person to do something they don’t seem to want to do.’ So the projects are central to the learning but leadership development is the big goal.”

From that aforementioned emissions-tracking app to an outreach campaign to engage teenagers in the Green New Deal, to a video introducing incoming students to environmental justice issues and organizations on campus, the project ideas from the pilot ELI cohort run the gamut. Which is exactly what Pulver had hoped.

“I’m open to anything that is advancing environmental causes — whether in policy, business, technology, social justice or activism — and ideally I want it all,” she said

of the projects in development. “I think this class works better when there is that diversity of ideas. Seeing and recognizing what makes other approaches effective broadens perspectives rather than locking in on one kind of solution as being the only way. And that’s so crucial to true leadership.”

In fact, Pulver said, leadership lessons are at the heart of the endeavor. The projects, in a way, are secondary. Ideas come and go, but those crucial skills — such as consensus-building and collaboration, creativity, motivation, feedback — are here to stay.

So what does leadership mean to the ELI students?

“It’s about knowing yourself, finding your passion and inspiration and using them to achieve your goals,” Kayla Gorman said during a recent class. “It’s also about enabling other people to do that for themselves.”

Impressive insights from the third-year student, majoring in environmental studies and sociology, who was drawn to the pilot course for its “more real-world” approach.

“I was really excited to be part of this,” said Gorman, one of three ELI students teaming on the fashion sustainability index to create more transparency for consumers. “Expert speakers every week, hands-on activities, working with other students on a project — it’s a different approach to learning. And it’s been really engaging for me.”

Many more students will get to experience the excitement for themselves: Pulver has secured enough funding to run ELI for three years, thanks to donors Richard Landers, Terilynn Langsev, Greti Croft and Chris Fletcher — “without whom ELI would not exist,” she said.

And she has even bigger plans beyond that.

“My long-term vision is a center for undergraduate environmental leadership at UC Santa Barbara, of which ELI would be the centerpiece, to help students access resources on campus and in the community,” Pulver said. “This is the first step. If we get it to work here we can essentially do an ELI starter kit and show other campuses how to do this, make it easy and replicate the model other universities. And how great would that be?”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.