UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

March 9, 2020
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Public Knowledge

To reach your goals, sometimes you've just got to go big.

That notion is a driving force in scholar Kenneth Hiltner's new course, "The Climate Crisis: What It Is and What Each of Us Can Do About It," at UC Santa Barbara. The class debuted in 2020 in the campus's largest lecture space, Campbell Hall, which seats more than 860 students. But the course materials — readings, films, lectures and more — are available publicly, freely and widely (thanks, YouTube).

It's a follow-up of sorts to the equally large course he started in 2018, English 22, which explores environmental thinking in literature. His latest endeavor, though, is taking the idea of a well-attended lecture to an entirely new level.

"We were going for a large audience by launching this new class in Campbell Hall, but I'm going for even larger audience — thousands more — online," said Hiltner, a professor of English and director of UCSB's Environmental Humanities Initiative. "And that was the bigger idea behind the course: to communicate about the climate crisis to as many people as possible."

The strategy seems to be working.

By the close of the 10-week quarter, according to Hiltner, he should surpass 100,000 combined views to his YouTube lectures and companion website, Climate Crisis 101. All of this for an undergraduate English course.

His efforts with English 23, as the class is more simply known, dovetail with the recent launch of digital platform UC-CSU NXTerra, a clearing house that makes available to instructors, students and concerned citizens anywhere in the world accurate, up-to-date information for learning about the climate crisis.

And what do the humanities, in particular, bring to the exploration of a subject more often seen as the purview of science? A lot, Hiltner explained.

By focusing lectures, readings and other assignments for his new course on the rhetoric around climate change and the cultural aspects of the crisis, he said, he can "deliver a message that wouldn't necessarily get out."

"This is a crucial moment in climate crisis," Hiltner said, "so it's essential for us to inform the public what's going on and to put attention on the way we live.

"One example is cars, which I approach not as a technical problem of making cars emission-free, but as a social, cultural issue," he continued. "We really don't need a whole lot of new technology here, as highly efficient forms of transportation, like trains, buses and bicycles, have been with us for more than a century. Instead, we need to make these more appealing than cars, which are an environmental disaster. These are cultural changes rather than principally technological changes. My message, and the message of this course is this: the climate crisis — anthropogenic, human-caused climate change — is caused by human action. We need to go to those actions at root. Forget about cars as possible transportation option; what does it mean for humans to get around?"

Hiltner considers such subjects and poses similar questions not only in his Campbell Hall lectures, but also in the shorter talks he delivers by way of YouTube — average length 10 minutes, replete with animations and video footage — produced by students. Comments are required of students, but more and more he finds a much broader, and bigger, group is chiming in.

"Granted there are quite a few students in the class, but the only way to account for numbers this high is that students are sharing the material, which is in turn being shared by others," Hiltner said. "This was the idea from the start: to leverage such a large class to help disseminate this material on the climate crisis even further.

"My primary goal with this course is to inform and to help mobilize as many people as possible — both at UCSB and outside it," he added. "I'm of the opinion that this

decade we've just entered will probably be the most important in terms of the climate crisis. If we act quickly, and globally, we can likely avert or mitigate a lot of what could happen."

His students agree, and it's a big reason why many of them enrolled. Political science major Tyler Ferguson and Marian Walker, who is working toward a degree in environmental studies, both characterized English 23 as a must-take course.

"This class is crucial for all students," Ferguson said. "The climate crisis is the greatest threat facing mankind, and we all owe it to each other to take this course and learn what we can do to limit our carbon footprint."

Concurred Walker: "It's critical that this course exists because it's drawing much-needed attention to the biggest issue our generation faces. The widespread availability of Professor Hiltner's content on YouTube and the clout he's been given from the tens of thousands of total views and comments he's received will increase the chances of this information being discovered by people outside of UCSB."

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.