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## Environmental courses signal a shift in learning

By Barbara Correa, Staff Writer

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Don't know much about history? Biology?

Don't worry. The hot subject for college students these days is sustainability.

Melting polar ice caps, talk of \$300-a-barrel oil and increasingly violent storms are altering the university climate as much as the weather.

Law, business and economic degrees are still a draw. But more and more students are lining up for green degrees - programs that focus on environmentally friendly subjects like management of urban growth, scarce water resources and global warming.

Green studies are among the fastest-growing degree programs at some universities.

Cal State Northridge plans to open a Sustainability Institute; UCLA is hiring a sustainability czar; and USC recently introduced a new graduate program in energy, technology and society.

"It's a sign of the times," said Tom Smith, acting director of UCLA's Institute of the Environment. "We are looking at a pending crisis of climate

warming and dependence on fossil fuels and the loss of biodiversity. We are in a crisis."

If the post-World War II boom spurred a generation of engineers and nuclear physicists, and the digital age popularized computer science majors, are we on course for an era of eco-educated professionals?

Ashwani Vasishth, a professor in the Urban Studies and Planning Department at California State University, Northridge, thinks we might be.

"Everybody is doing this," said Vasishth, who presented a Greening Manifesto to the university provost a few months ago calling for climate-change courses to be made part of core general-education requirements for undergraduates.

He said the rush to incorporate environmental issues into academic programs represents a huge change for education, like the shift from faith-based education to science-based education in the 1920s.

Young people entering universities see climate change as the defining issue of their generation.

"They came out with Earth Day in the '70s - it's always been around. But nobody has thought about it because humans tend to take advantage of what they have, especially us in the U.S.," said Sevan Baroni, a CSUN senior studying urban planning.

"On campus, you feel the momentum building.

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And you just want to be part of something great."

### **Programs not isolated**

Professors say green degrees are not isolated programs that create disciplinary divisions on campus.

"It's a completely different way of looking at knowledge," Vasishth said. "The old ideas of engineering being over there, and business management being over here is gone.

"We are going to appreciate interdisciplinary knowledge in ways we haven't before."

The idea behind a CSUN Sustainability Institute is to create a research center within the next few years where the community and faculty can work together to tackle problems brought on by global warming, said Vasishth.

It would be an independent institute separate from any one college within the university. The academic goal would be to prepare students to make decisions about energy, transportation and housing in an era when sustainability becomes a necessity instead of a choice.

Vasishth foresees a graduate certificate program with courses in carbon trading or green manufacturing, and an undergraduate major dedicated to green living.

CSUN professors have already begun teaching courses with a sustainability spin.

For a business management class last spring, Dr. Nancy Kurland asked students to chart the life cycle for a household product, and then redesign it in a sustainable way.

One group created several new products out of pairs of old jeans: insulation for a house, a new purse and a CD holder made from pockets.

At UCLA, students are encouraged to compost dormitory food. Smith, the acting director of UCLA's environment institute, said the two-year-old bachelor's program in Environmental Science has doubled in enrollment each year and is one of the fastest-growing majors on campus.

### **Picking green school**

The allure of green is even motivating prospective students to pick schools based on whether they have programs dedicated to sustainability and the environment.

A Princeton Review survey during the last school year found that 63percent of college applicants said a school's level of commitment to the environment would help them decide where to apply for college.

"That caught a lot of people's attention, that sustainability matters to students," said Julian Dautremont-Smith, associate director of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education.

Baroni, the CSUN student, credits Al Gore and his film, "An Inconvenient Truth," with making global

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warming a household term.

Spending so much time studying green design has forced Baroni to change his own personal habits. He says that now, he turns the water off during every shave, and he finds himself telling his parents to turn the lights off when not in use.

He also drives his V8 Mustang at the speed limit.

The biggest change, he said, will come when developers and inventors learn how to make things that are both sustainable and cheap.

"We can make buildings today that (are sustainable); the problem is the cost," he said. "You have these (environmental) buildings, but a 1,500-square-foot condo is going for a million dollars. We can make things cheaper."

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