The greatest good can come from the most trying of times. In the early 21st century, the world has no shortage of challenges facing it, ranging from global environmental concerns to shifts in financial markets to social and political tensions. But while these issues can seem enormous, the drive to surmount them, and to create a better world in the process, is one that is engaging a new generation of future leaders.

Across the country, “sustainability” has become a popular buzzword to define an increasing awareness of and movement toward environmental responsibility and positive social and economic change. Academic programs covering issues such as organic agriculture and progressive financial systems are being offered at an increasing number of colleges and universities, and schools are integrating this awareness into every facet of their operations, from basic curricula to campus maintenance. Here’s a look at four schools around the Northwest, and the strides they are making to help put the world on a more sustainable path.
Brad Jaeckel, manager of the four-acre Washington State University organic teaching farm, harvests kale.
University of Washington

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

With the scope of issues and challenges facing the world today—global climate change, effective resource management, the search for clean energy—it’s clear that major efforts must be taken to place society on the path to sustainability. Faced with such an awesome task, the University of Washington has embarked on the creation of one of the broadest environmental programs in the country: the College of the Environment.

“At the University of Washington, colleges or schools are our biggest units; they get a great deal of investment, and they’re units that we depend upon for our research enterprise and our teaching and learning enterprise,” says Phyllis Wise, University of Washington provost. “We thought that establishing the College of the Environment would not only be a symbolic statement of how important this is, but would be a way to empower this discipline in a way that it hasn’t been until now.”

Creation of the college was approved by the university’s board of regents last June, and the new college is slated to begin operations this coming fall. The university hopes that existing academic units, focusing on oceans, the atmosphere, fisheries, earth sciences and forests, will become inaugural members. This would give the College of the Environment a starting base of around 100 faculty members, more than 1,100 students and a budget of around $60 million. Once the college is fully operational, it will have the ability to grant degrees at the undergraduate and graduate levels as well as to offer postdoctoral fellowships.

Ultimately, the College of the Environment will bring together faculty and students in fields ranging from the natural sciences to public policy and from business to global health, with the goal of working collaboratively to research and implement solutions to some of the world’s most pressing issues. This interdisciplinary approach is key to accomplishing the college’s core mission.

“We know that the effectiveness of our students and effectiveness of our research is going to depend upon a level of teamwork that in the past has never been necessary,” Wise says. “Our goal is to take advantage of this opportunity to build upon our already strong offerings in education and research, and build a college that leverages all of that into something that is bold and really speaks to the world, and that says the University of Washington is ready to take on the most complex problems in ways that only a college that is both disciplinary and interdisciplinary can do.”

With such an ambitious program, the college will tackle issues of global significance, such as ways to slow global climate change, developing renewable energy, the sustainable management of forests and fisheries, and the sourcing and protection of clean water in an increasingly populous world. But while the research and instruction may cover such wide-ranging topics, the college will also emphasize the delicate environment surrounding the university’s Seattle home.

“It’s important for us to recognize that we’re in a really precious part of the world, a place that’s fragile and needs care in order to maintain it and improve it,” Wise says. “Part of the College of the Environment will focus on our sense of place. We’re not only going to talk about global climate change, but the impact of global climate change on Puget Sound, on Washington and the Pacific Northwest. It’s our responsibility to balance local, state, national and global demands.”

Tackling such a complex undertaking means that the college must utilize experts and students from many disciplines, but must also engage with other stakeholders—businesses, communities and nongovernmental organizations. It is in this arena where the college may provide its greatest utility: considering and balancing the sometimes conflicting demands between those who seek to utilize natural resources and those who seek to conserve them, at a time when both environmental and economic issues require focused attention.

“What both sides have recognized is that we have to work with
each other—sustainability has to take into consideration humans, because humans will be on this earth for a long, long time, and only asking for sacrifice is not going to work,” Wise says. “That conversation is really powerful now in ways that it hasn’t been before. We hope that a College of the Environment based on fundamental science—partnered with the understanding that we have to translate this science into policies, economics, business, management, laws—will be a really new and exciting conversation.”

Bainbridge Graduate Institute
BAINBRIDGE ISLAND, WASHINGTON
In early 2002, a small group of business leaders began discussing how to help move the world back onto a path that would promote care of the environment and the growth of economically healthy communities. In the group were Gifford Pinchot III, a business consultant, author and partner in the capital firm Alacrity Ventures; his wife, Elizabeth, co-founder and president of Pinchot & Company; Sherman Severin, an entrepreneur and consultant, and the former chairman of Marylhurst University’s Graduate Department of Management; and Jill Bamburg, a former executive at Aldus Corporation and a faculty member at Antioch University in Seattle. With a wide array of talents and decades of experience in creating successful companies, this group saw that business could be at the core of not only creating profit for investors, but of helping the world profit in a number of beneficial ways.

“Because they’d been consulting with business, they saw business as a major lever toward sustainability,” says Sarah Miller, director of external relations. “Being the entrepreneurs that they were, and knowing the significance of business education, they saw that the way we train our business leaders is a key part of it.”

Within months the group created the Bainbridge Graduate Institute, based on Bainbridge Island, near Seattle. The goal was simple, yet innovative: Offer students an alternative to traditional business school by creating an educational program that incorporated issues of environmental sustainability and social justice into the core curriculum. Rather than offer individual courses or tracks on topics such as business ethics or environmental sustainability, these principles were hard-wired into every part of the institute’s programs.

“We incorporate sustainability into every single course,” Miller says. Miller describes BGI’s approach as incorporating a triple bottom line: teaching students how to address businesses’ true bottom line of providing profit to shareholders, but also how to ensure that matters of social ethics and environmental responsibility are taken into consideration at every part of the process.

The Bainbridge Graduate Institute offers an MBA in Sustainable Business, along with a Sustainable Business Certificate, and a Sustainable Entrepreneurship and Intrapreneurship Certificate. “Intrapreneurship” is a term coined by Gifford Pinchot III to describe how employees can develop innovative services and products for other groups in their organization. After enrolling its inaugural group of 14 students in the fall of 2002, BGI graduated its first group of MBAs in 2004; by 2008, enrollment had increased to 157 MBA students and another 43 certificate students, and the institute had begun offering certificate programs in downtown Seattle.

One student who is pursuing her MBA at BGI is Betsy Blaisdell. A New Hampshire–based environmental scientist and manager of environmental stewardship at the outdoor-clothing company Timberland, Blaisdell says BGI’s programs enable her to round out her business skills in an atmosphere that is best suited to her company and her career. “In a traditional MBA program, I’d learn accounting, but at BGI I learn both accounting and how to apply it within my specific roles and responsibilities,” she says. “And I’m at school with people in a similar role, and who have very practical work experience that I can benefit from.”

Miller says that while the makeup of students at BGI is noteworthy—students range in age from their mid-20s to mid-50s, and
include many professionals who have decided to change their career track in order to match their values with their work—what’s even more remarkable is the institute’s faculty makeup. In addition to a small core faculty, the institute attracts leading educators from across the country to serve as visiting faculty. For these experts, the education goes both ways, and that’s become a key part of the institute’s mission.

“It’s not just about educating the [student] leaders coming into our school, but about how other business schools educate their leaders,” Miller says. This educational cross-pollination is referred to internally as “Mission Two,” and has the potential to help universities throughout the country more fully embrace sustainability as part of their business education.

“Universities come to us and ask how we’re incorporating sustainability into our programs; they come sit in on our classes, and we share syllabi with them,” Miller says. “We’re opening our doors and saying, ‘Let’s talk about this; let us help you.’”

Portland State University
PORTLAND, OREGON

For many people, the word “sustainability” conjures ideas of environmental responsibility and conservation. Students at Portland State University, however, are shown that sustainability isn’t just about our natural environment, but encompasses complex issues that touch every part of our lives.

“You can’t achieve environmental sustainability if you’re not also taking into account the impact on communities of the way we do business or operate as governments,” says Jennifer Allen, acting director of the Center for Sustainable Processes and Practices at Portland State University. “You really need to be taking into account the need for jobs and a solid economic system in order to achieve solid environmental sustainability.”

PSU’s research and education mission focuses on four key areas: ways to integrate human society with the natural environment; creating sustainable urban communities; understanding how to implement...
sustainable strategies into society; and measuring the efforts of sustainability practices. This mission is manifest in the school’s core curriculum, but it’s a mission that the university also follows in its work in and around Portland, ranging from projects such as the university’s research into innovative transportation options for the city to its creation of the Community Watershed Stewardship Program that has restored more than 2 million square feet of riparian land around Portland.

Allen says that helping students comprehend this kind of interconnectedness between environmental and social systems is at the heart of PSU’s progressive mission. “What we really need in facing the challenges in the 21st century are students who are educated to be systems thinkers—who understand the connections between the environment, social issues and economic issues,” she says. “The challenges we face—be it climate change, or the kinds of
things we’re witnessing with the financial system—are challenges that are fundamentally grounded in the fact that we haven’t been very good about thinking about systems in the past; we haven’t understood the interconnections between what we do in our businesses, in our economic realm, and the impact on our environment and communities.”

This holistic approach to sustainability is also evident on the university’s 49-acre campus. Environmental and social responsibility is addressed in campus issues ranging from the amount of locally and organically grown food that is available to faculty and students to the school’s utilization of renewable energy (by 2010, PSU plans to use 100 percent renewable sources) in order to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

In such a setting, it’s not surprising that the school seeks to incorporate principles of sustainability into every aspect of the curriculum, so that regardless of major, students come away with a deep-rooted understanding of the role they can play in making the world a better place.

“Whether they go into investment banking, environmental management or law, or whatever it might be, it’s imperative for us that students have a better ability to understand complex systems and how each part affects the whole,” Allen says.

In addition to its undergraduate programs, the university offers a graduate certificate in sustainability that is open to students from any discipline.

“So in the classroom you get engineers, planners, environmental scientists, geographers, all learning about the principles of sustainability,” Allen says.

Michael Budds graduated from the University of Montana in 2002 with a degree in resource conservation. Last year, as his interest in sustainable development grew, he chose to pursue PSU’s one-year graduate certificate. Although he already had a strong background in the natural resources aspect of sustainability, Budds says he learned a great deal from the economic, social and environmental science perspectives the program offers.

“I really feel like I came to the realization,” Budds says, “that sustainability is a
“The Port of Portland has been really progressive in pushing for minimizing waste,” Budd says. “And I’m really excited to work with Alaska [Airlines], because they started this great onboard recycling program and we’re working with them to improve it.”

Washington State University

Long before “sustainability” became a popular buzzword, faculty and students at Washington State University were working to minimize the environmental consequences of one of the world’s most important industries: agriculture and food production.

Beginning in the late 1970s, researchers in WSU’s Department of Agricultural Economics and Department of Crop and Soil Sciences started exploring the then-niche realm of organic agriculture. Today, organic is the fastest growing segment of the food industry, having grown an average of 20 percent per year over the past decade, and accounting for an estimated $23.6 billion in U.S. sales in 2008. The university’s organic agriculture program has grown along with the industry: In 2006, after years of development, WSU began offering an undergraduate Organic Agriculture Systems major, one of the first such academic majors in the country; 20 students are currently enrolled in the program, and four have graduated. The school also has 25 acres of certified organic land used for research at four locations around Washington, and

Jennifer Dill, associate professor of urban studies and planning at Portland State University, researches the impacts of bike infrastructure such as bike paths and lanes, bike boxes and boulevards.

“process and not really an end result.”

Budds works for Community Environmental Services in Portland. One of his projects is working with the Port of Portland to reduce waste. He helps companies, such as Alaska Airlines, to refine onboard recycling programs.
another 100 acres of certified organic cropland that's been leased for commercial production.

While this growth took place over several decades, WSU faculty members say that interest among students is increasing.

“One of the main reasons we started to develop academic programs around organic agriculture is there’s such a groundswell of interest in sustainable systems,” says Kim Kidwell, associate dean of academic programs for the College of Agricultural, Human and Natural Resource Sciences. “Either on their own farms or in commercial settings, students are keen to learn how to develop agricultural systems that are environmentally friendly yet economically viable.”

By employing techniques such as rotating crops and using only organically certified fertilizers and pesticides, organic farmers strive to have less environmental impact than conventional farms. In addition to the environmental benefits, such systems can also help rural communities by providing a sought-after economic base.

“When I said to the faculty, ‘We really should have an organic ag major,’ part of the reason I wanted to do it is because students wanted it, but the other part is because we’re losing people in agriculture—it’s not a popular area,” says John Reganold, a professor of soil sciences who was instrumental in creating WSU’s organic program. “People want to go into communications, or business, or design, or computer science, and agriculture is not on their mind. I said, ‘Organic agriculture is becoming popular—there’s a market and more people are interested. I offered to develop a curriculum, and the faculty said, ‘OK, go ahead and do it.’”

Given the mighty growth of the organic food sector over the past decade, the timing was right.

“If we had started earlier, it might have been tougher to get students,” Reganold says. “Part of the reason I wanted to have a major was because at that point, I thought the organic movement could support it—it wasn’t just that students were interested, but it would also be a great job market.”
In addition to the Organic Agriculture Systems major, WSU offers a Certificate in Organic Agriculture and a Graduate Certificate in Sustainable Agriculture. Students can enroll in the certificate programs at the university’s Pullman campus, but students from across the state can also pursue a certificate using online distance education; this has the potential to greatly benefit both the university and students.

“We have a lot of people who are looking at organic agriculture as a second career track,” Kidwell says. “Many of the people coming into the program don’t have experience with traditional farming; this is their first exposure to it.”

Ultimately, Kidwell says, the university would like to offer the organic agriculture major through the school’s distance-degree program; this would enable the university to reach students throughout the state who are interested in shifting to organic food production.

“The ultimate goal,” she says, “would be to create access to this program to place-bound, time-bound students.”

Three decades after faculty first began looking into organic agriculture at WSU, Reganold surveys the growth of the organic market and the larger move to environmental sustainability, and sees plenty of opportunities for the program’s graduates, even in challenging economic times. “They are all finding jobs, and are really excited to go out and make a contribution,” he says. “And the jobs they’re wanting and the jobs they’re getting are all making agriculture and society more sustainable. I can honestly say that, and that’s pretty neat.”

Although each has a unique approach, these institutions of higher learning are engaging students in conversations about the future. It’s these conversations that seek solutions for today, while attempting to ensure Earth’s well being in years to come.

These are conversations that are necessary for all of us.

Paul Clarke is a freelance writer living in Seattle.