

Shelly: Is it possible to get students to think about and act on sustainability issues? We'll find out today on this Thought-Provoking podcast. We'll also hear about a unique program that combines sustainability, student research and job readiness and helping disadvantaged students. And it all started in a class on the geography of clothing. This is Shelly Kiser, and joining me today are Vanessa Slinger-Friedman, professor of geography here at the College of Humanities and Social Sciences here at Kennesaw State University, Jason Rhodes, lecturer of geography, and Britt Pickering, Director of the OwlSwap Sustainability Initiative. Thanks for being here today.

Jason: Thanks for having us.

Shelly: Vanessa, I know you are quite involved with sustainability here at KSU and you do research on how to teach students to become sustainably minded. What drew you to these topics?

Vanessa: I think sustainability is really a topic that should be addressed across all disciplines. I think here is applicability to every discipline to consider sustainability as part of teaching within the curriculum. Geography, by its nature, is focused on the human environment interaction, that's an actual subbranch of geography. So, my master's work and my Ph.D. work were really sustainability focused. I looked at an agricultural system in Brazil for my master's work, then looked at ecotourism on a Caribbean island for my Ph.D. work. So, I really had that focus already through my research. And it was just a natural extension to put it into my teaching.

Shelly: I read a paper that you and a number of your colleagues at KSU wrote about teaching sustainability. In that paper you talk about teaching students to become environmentally emancipated. So, what does that mean?

Vanessa: It means to really think critically about sustainability and environmental issues, and to actively get involved in them so that by becoming aware of the issues and thinking critically about the issues that they can actually take an active role in changing the way things are done throughout all the disciplines.

Shelly: Oh, very interesting, and that goes into my next question. I know your paper talked about employing an active learning approach. What is active learning and how can that contribute to making students more sustainably minded?

Vanessa: Active learning is truly about being student centered. You have students that go from being kind of passive receivers of information and turn them into active participants in knowledge creation and learning from actual experiences.

Shelly: That goes along with what your paper said. I love this quote; it says, "Planting the seeds of sustainability means learning by doing not learning by osmosis." And then you talked about how students become knowledge producers instead of information consumers. You also talk about students become change agents. How does that really happen through these experiences that you talk about in your paper?

Vanessa: I guess I could give a couple of examples. That paper focused on for my discipline the Owl Planet project that I implemented in my Local and Global Sustainability course. Through those projects, students get involved in looking at an aspect of sustainability at our University—Kennesaw State University—researching what we're doing, researching best practices that can be locally or globally, and then coming up with some suggestions or ideas for how we can improve how we operate and be more

sustainable. This can be in the arena of recycling, water use, transportation—any aspect of the University. Once they have that information and they follow that process, then they can actually engage in putting that solution in place on campus. One example is the KSU sustainability map that was produced by a student who was a geography and GIS student. She developed that project through that class and the Owl Planet project. Now KSU has a sustainability map that people can access on our website.

Shelly: What's the sustainability map? Does that map out where all the projects are?

Vanessa: It maps out any aspect of sustainability that we have at KSU. So, it can be anything from curriculum resources—which departments do you find sustainability courses taught—all the way through where you can access drinking fountains that have the spout that allows you to refill a bottle. So that students are being sustainable. They carry their own single use... Not single use, multiple use water bottle. We want to avoid single use. And they're refilling that as opposed to using tons of plastic containers throughout the day.

Shelly: There are many different projects going on around here that you talked about in that paper. It was interesting. It wasn't just geography. It was a number of different places and I know in architecture. They started a LEED lab. Can you tell us a little bit about what the students in the LEED lab did as part of the learning process?

Vanessa: Yeah, sure. I don't know how many people know about LEED certification, but it's all about using sustainable materials. Pretty much the whole process of designing and building any kind of construction uses best sustainability practices. You're making good use of your resources. Also, you design your building to make it the most environmentally sustainable. The students in the architectural course learned about LEED certification, but then actually applied it, also, at Agnes Scott University. LEED certification is a bit controversial, so it's not allowed within public and state universities. But the professor for that course, Professor at Aikens, was able to work with Agnes Scott students to implement it on a building at that university, which is privately funded.

Shelly: I thought that was interesting. Partway through the project, it became kind of illegal to do what they were going to do. Who could have guessed, right?

Vanessa: Right, creative work around. And the great thing is that the students not only got the academic knowledge of LEED, but then they were actually able to implement it. And I think in a way you create a much deeper type of learning that is very long lasting when you do things with active learning in mind.

Shelly: Right. Not just learning about it, but actually putting it into practice so it really gets down into their brains a lot better. And the next project was engineering and the KSU engineering department. I thought that was a really good thing to get them involved in sustainability, because some of the decisions they make and the projects they make can outlive them. So, it's really about long-term impact.

Vanessa: Yes, impact on sustainability. They created an Eco-Partners initiative. I was not as involved with the Eco-Partners initiative. But the professor who was involved in that project was Roneisha Worthy. What was really interesting about that project or her work with active learning was that they actually had students that got involved with campus organizations. Student organizations partnered to look at, once again, ways to improve sustainability across KSU. They worked at the KSU Field Station

which, at that point, was called Hickory Grove Farm. They worked on building a chicken coop. And they also worked on building beehives all with the idea of sustainability in mind.

Shelly: I thought that was interesting. The engineering of the building and the sustainability of the movable chicken coops and rebuilding the bee population. Nice combination. Then, it really surprised me that marketing was included in the sustainability projects, because when we think of marketing we often think more about profitability and less about sustainability. So, what how did the Marketing and Professional Sales Department at KSU incorporate sustainability with marketing?

Vanessa: Dr. Maria Calamus used the Faculty Fellows Program to develop a green marketing course. And the idea behind it is that the students would take on the role similar to apprentices and learn by being on the job. She was developing the course during that period of time and it had actually had not been implemented or physically taught. But the idea behind it was to have the students do a sustainability survey. And so, they learned about survey design, data collection and data analysis, and then they designed a campus-wide sustainability awareness campaign. Those were the active learning components of what she was planning to put into place in that green marketing course.

I think one of the things that all of these pieces do is connect how faculty, and staff interactions with students can really positively influence student success, make them lifelong learners, and make them really critical thinkers so that they can learn about the issues and the challenges, but they can also be super creative about coming up with solutions and implementing solutions, even on their own campuses. This makes them much better employees, when they get out to the “real world.”

Shelly: Definitely. They have some real experience doing things and know how to talk about them. What are some of the things that can be done to promote this type of experiential learning—where students really become effective participants? What would you say to people interested in incorporating this in their teaching?

Vanessa: It's definitely challenging. Initially and pretty much throughout the process it is more time consuming, but I think the rewards are worth it. And I think it's very exciting. It really gets me super excited every semester to interact with students and have them participate in knowledge acquisition and knowledge application. I just love that part of what I do. I think there are some pretty obvious ways that students can take part, like internships and directed applied research opportunities and being part of student groups. I think encouraging students to do that is an excellent way to get them involved in a more extracurricular way. Within courses I think faculty could potentially think of creative ways of, not changing the course content, but just thinking about how they can have students apply that course content in more active learning ways.

Shelly: So how did the Geography of Clothing class lead to one of the biggest and most visible sustainability programs on campus? We'll find out next.

This is Shelly Kiser, I'm the host of the Thought-Provoking podcast, and also communications manager for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia, just outside Atlanta. Kennesaw State is the third largest university in the state, and a Carnegie-designated R2 doctoral research institution, placing it among an elite group of only 6% of U.S. colleges and universities with either an R1 or R2 status. It's also one of the 50 largest public institutions in the country. The College of Humanities and Social Sciences is the largest college at KSU with over 400 faculty

members and over 7,000 students. It houses 11 departments and schools, with more than 80 programs of study. Our show features the amazing researchers in our college, and their amazing and thought-provoking research.

The geography program that was talked about in that paper was OwlSwap. Jason, I know that came out of your class. You have a very interesting class called the Geography of Clothing. Now when I think of classes in geography, I usually think of World Geography, the geography of Africa—really place named. So, it's very interesting that you're doing the geography of a thing. What inspired you to start a class like that?

Jason: I guess it was several years ago, pretty soon after I started teaching at KSU, that I was asked by my department to teach a class called Social Issues and Perspectives in Geography. I said, "That sounds interesting. I'm happy to teach it. What's the content of the class?" I was told, "Whatever you'd like it to be." That was both a great opportunity and meant a lot of work in terms of starting a class from scratch. So, I decided that I wanted to come up with topics that I was personally interested in exploring further and also topics that I thought the students would be interested in exploring.

I guess I've always been very interested in that kind of thing, what I would call the geography of everyday life—the geography of everyday acts of consumption, things that we do each day, and finding the connections and tracing them back to the people and places where they originate. I think that's fascinating for everybody. And in the world that we live in today that often connects us to pretty urgent issues of human rights and issues of environmental sustainability. And of course, in fact that that is what we find.

So, we analyzed clothing, and where our clothing comes from. It really was something pushed by students, as we started to explore those topics and read books about it. The students were first fascinated, but then they said to me, "Well, what are we going to do about it?" That hadn't quite crossed my mind. What was I going to do about it? I was going to finish the class. So, it started.

It's something that students really took the initiative on. Britt is with us today, and she was in the first Geography of Clothing class and about halfway through that class one of the students, probably was Britt, said, "Hey can we can we do this again? Can we do this next semester?" I said, "What do you mean 'do it again'?" How do you do that? They said, "What we would really be interested is doing a semester where we now explore practical solutions to some of the problems that we've been discussing." Literally half the class signed up for that second round, as directed studies, and they produced OwlSwap.

Britt will be talking a lot more about that. OwlSwap has become one of the most visible student organizations on campus, and when we're not in a global pandemic situation, their regular clothing swaps draw literally hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of participants. It's built on the idea of swapping clothes as opposed to going to the store and buying this incredibly resource intensive product. As we studied the geography of clothing, we've learned that the current model for the fashion industry is to create disposable fashion or what we call fast fashion. The idea is that you sell things incredibly cheaply.

Shelly: And they fall apart two weeks later, right?

Jason: Quite low priced. The companies will make tons of money because, yeah, as you said, two weeks later, it's no longer something that you choose to wear. So, the clothing swaps create a real alternative

to just wringing our hands and saying, “Wow, this is terrible,” and feeling bad about it. It gives students an opportunity to consume clothing in an alternative and sustainable way. It also allows people to continue enjoying fashion.

I mean, if you really love to get 10 or 20 new outfits every semester, you can do that by participating in OwlSwap, and you are actually helping the environment, and I would say OwlSwaps are more fun than going to the mall and swiping your credit card. They're definitely cheaper, but there's also a real community aspect to it. Just like going to a farmer's market makes you feel connected with your community, participating in an OwlSwap makes you feel connected to the campus individually. So, it came out of that class, and it really was something that students embraced and pushed me to move forward with.

Shelly: A focus on the clothing industry has to do with the social justice issues. Is that why you picked that and really went with that, because of those issues that the garment workers face?

Jason: Yes, and that a theme of my own scholarly interests. Something that I often talk about with students is that if you want to analyze social justice issues in your society, the best thing to do is look at basic things like food, clothing, shelter—things that every single society that has succeeded in the history of humanity has had to deal with. I often say that every society has a Fourth of July. You could go to North Korea and you would hear ringing pronouncements about human freedom. I think it's often best to disregard that flowery rhetoric and ask how do we make and distribute our clothes? How do we make and distribute our food? No society is perfect, and I think being a good citizen is looking at the way your society does that and say, “How can we do it better?”

Looking at where our clothing comes from gives us a real opportunity to say there are ways that this can be done better. It really is threatening the environment, and it's not sustainable. We will not be making and distributing clothes in this way and on this scale 20 years from now, because it simply can't be done.

And then as you mentioned, looking at the issues of, not just low wages and overwork, but also of labor. That's something that we learned about in our class; something that was new to me—forced labor and cotton all over the world. When we think about forced labor and cotton, that's something that we think ended with the Civil War. It's dismaying to find that it's still with us here in 2020. But there are international movements that are raising awareness against that and fighting against it. It's been inspiring to see KSU students get involved in those movements. The OwlSwaps, while they're a fun alternative means of consuming clothing, they also raise awareness about those kinds of issues.

Shelly: There is also a research component to this, which is related to Bangladesh. Can you tell us what the research component is?

Jason: Britt, did we in our first class, have that partnership with the University in Bangladesh?

Britt: I believe they started that as part of the directed applied research. That was really cool to me—connecting students and consumers here to garment workers in Bangladesh. It allowed them to ask each other questions and interview each other. We've continued that relationship with BRAC University in Bangladesh, working with undergraduate and graduate students to do research on the environmental issues and health issues that garment workers face and the industry as a whole. We have a couple of those interviews up on the OwlSwap website.

Shelly: Okay, I can put a link in the show notes to the OwlSwap website so people can go and learn more about that your program. If our listeners want to learn more, check the show notes for a link to that.

Jason: That would be great. I was trying to remember exactly when it was in the process of the course development. It's probably when I was teaching that first class—Britt's class—that, as I was exploring this issue myself I read a book called *Broken Promises of Globalization: the Case of the Bangladesh Garment Industry* by a professor at BRAC University which is in Dhaka, Bangladesh. I just had this idea that maybe that professor would be interested in partnering on a project. So, I emailed him and pitched this crazy idea that we could have my students come up with questions that they would be interested in asking garment workers and his students could actually go talk to those garment workers in Bangladesh. He enthusiastically said, "Yes, I'd like to participate in this."

We got a very generous \$300 contribution from a local business owner, her name is Nancy Van, and she owns a used clothing store in Kennesaw called Ecology. She's been a great supporter of OwlSwap. She now funds OwlSwap's entire annual budget, which is fantastic. She sent \$300 to Bangladesh to defray the student's expenses as they conducted those interviews.

They interviewed garment workers and video recorded them. Then they undertook the painstaking work of translating those interviews into English and sending them back to our students. That has been a project that received that first \$300 donation from Nancy of Ecology, and then, two years in a row, we got small grants. We received over \$2,000 each year from the academic journal *Human Geography*. That has continued to fund this program. Just this morning I got another interview sent to me from Bangladesh that, for the first time, has the subtitles in the video. We can post that to the OwlSwap website.

Shelly: That sounds like a really neat project featuring international cooperation and involving community partners and students.

Jason: It is a really exciting program.

Shelly: How does OwlSwap help disadvantaged KSU students, and what's next for OwlSwap? That's coming up next.

Don't forget to join us next month when we'll be talking to Kerwin Swint about his research on mudslinging, and the dirtiest election campaigns in history. And of course, we'll be talking about how this year's presidential campaign compares. Is the Trump versus Biden campaign season more brutal than when Thomas Jefferson and John Adams fought for control the White House? Join us next month to find out that, and more.

Britt, you were one of the students in that initial Geography of Clothing class who initiated the OwlSwap program. Can you tell us how you and these other students came up with this idea?

Britt: I think it was partly Jason but then also just the classes. We were so disheartened by what we were learning. It's kind of sad to sit there and hear all these things, right? Okay, but what can I do about it? And a lot of students thought, oh, let me raise a bunch of money, or do something to make things better. But we decided to look at what you can do here on campus. What can just our small group of students do? So, we started with a small clothing swap. Because this is a human rights issue and an environmental issue. All the things surrounding clothing—you really don't realize how much is tied to

what you put on every single day. We started with the small clothing swap and then it's just blown up from there.

We have hundreds of students attending the swaps. We have a sustainability film series and now a sustainability book club. We have a professional clothing closet for students in need and an emergency needs response program for students lacking access to resources for clothing. It goes on and on and on. I started doing an internship running our swap, and now I've graduated from KSU and have a full-time position at the university running OwlSwap. We've just continued to grow and grow.

Shelly: Yeah, it's wonderful. I've been to an OwlSwap, and it was really great and nice to see everybody participating. It was run mostly by student volunteers, is that right? And I think internships are part of it too. So, how do students benefit from what they learn as being part of OwlSwap

Britt: Students really benefit because they can actually take action, help, and do something that positively impacts not only our community here at KSU, but I would say, globally, it has a positive impact.

By getting involved, they learn about sustainability. They learn about the industry. They get to help students at KSU. We even teach mending and upcycling at swaps. You just get a nice sense of community, and you have everyone from professors to students to staff members—everyone's coming to the swap.

Shelly: It's really cool. I'm sure some of these skills apply to future jobs.

Britt: Absolutely, I had two interns over the summer, and they totally rebuilt the websites. They learned how to map a website and how to create content and they worked on social media projects. I have digital design students are creating flyers. People helping run and write sustainability reports. There are so many skills that students gain just from being involved.

Shelly: Wow, that's wonderful. And I know you mentioned briefly there are some important benefits to disadvantaged students who participate in OwlSwap and other parts of the program. How does it help some of our more disadvantaged students?

Britt: Absolutely. Students who are lacking access to clothing and other resources get free tickets to the swaps to come and participate without having to give up any of their clothing items. It's all anonymous. The students could have tickets left over from the previous swap and no one would know that you didn't bring items to the swap. We give them to KSU Victim Services Office, the LGBTQ Resource Center, and CARE services. Then the case managers give it to the students who need it most.

Shelly: Oh, that's great. I saw that OwlSwap has another partnership with a local nonprofit that even helps more with sustainability here at KSU. Can you tell us what that is?

Britt: We actually have several relationships with local nonprofits. We have textile recycling and donation bins on campus, so we take those items in and then KSU students sort them. But for clothing items that maybe can't be donated for KSU students or to other local charities that we work with, like Hope Though Soap, they go to a nonprofit called reloom. They employ low income and formerly homeless individuals. They're actually part of affordable housing. Reloom will strip items back down to the thread and reweave them into products. Out of that relationship that started with OwlSwap, we've expanded to the whole university, so we now have a university textile recycling program. All KSU excess,

like something with the KSU logo, gets sent to reloom stripped down and turned into a new KSU product. So, we're not only helping the environment by reducing the waste disposal of those items and the cost of waste disposal, but we're employing someone, helping a nonprofit, and then creating these really cool upcycled items out of old KSU flags, T shirts and banners. It's really, really neat.

Shelly: I thought it was really neat. Just coming full circle around there.

Britt: Yeah, it's almost like a closed loop economy for all the university textiles.

Shelly: You mentioned briefly that on top of all this, as if that wasn't enough, you also have a film series and a book club. What's that? Is that student focused or on everyone's invited?

Britt: We actually have alumni and professors from different colleges attending the book club. Of course, it's all virtual right now. And then the film series this year we're going virtual. I'm actually partnering with students at UGA to run that. But it's all sustainability focused. And it's not specifically focused to clothing. Our films have ranged from talking about coral reef issues to fashion and all kinds of different things.

Shelly: Oh, interesting. What's next for OwlSwap? I heard that you are moving.

Britt: Yes, we have a new office space. I want to be able to get more office space. We're wanting to expand, in a post-COVID world, to have basically a free shop where students can come in if they need items. And then expand our professional clothing assistance for students in need, so they don't have to wait for a swap to happen if they want to check out a blazer for an interview or something. That's also where we'll run our emergency needs response program, which is where students submit a form anonymously online and we gather all those items for them. Just to have the storage space to house all those items and hopefully continue to expand.

Shelly: Vanessa showed me your space before and it was pretty crowded, right Vanessa?

Vanessa: Yeah. I just want to note that although we're not fully set up and functional yet, the new space will be in Willingham Hall Room 128.

Shelly: Okay. And I know that right before COVID happened you had sent out a request to staff to send in some professional clothing. I'm sure you will get that going again back on campus.

Britt: Yes. We had a lot of those items available in our February and March swaps. It was great to see students trying on blazers and helping each other pick out which tie would go best. It was really neat to see them help each other prepare for interviews.

Shelly: If someone's interested in supporting OwlSwap, what kind of things can they do to support your program?

Vanessa: That's a great question. Of course, we want to encourage everybody to come out to the swaps and attend the film series and participate in the book club. Organizations like this really need financial support. Also, OwlSwap would definitely love people to consider becoming a sponsor or donor to OwlSwap to support its initiatives. And so, yeah, we need money.

Shelly: That's definitely something everyone needs, and this is a real worthwhile cause. I'm just really impressed with the OwlSwap program and all that it has done through multiple aspects—from

sustainability to helping disadvantaged students to great research that students can get involved in to student training for future jobs. There are just so many benefits of this. And congratulations on doing that, folks. I think you've done a great job. Any last words of wisdom for us?

Vanessa: I think, maybe I can tie all the pieces together. I think OwlSwap really exemplifies the idea of putting active learning in place—taking it from a classroom setting, like Jason did, and then having active learning, actual experience by students. It just shows the power of what that type of learning has on effecting change. It creates students who are empowered, who are advocates, who are activists. And in the long run the end result is we have students that succeed, that they not only come out with skills, the transferable very tangible skills that are important in real life jobs. But we're also clothing them as they go for interviews for jobs and internships. So, I think it's a pretty exciting initiative. And I'm so proud of Britt and Jason and love working with them.

Shelly: Very transformative learning, for sure. And Britt is a real-life example with how she got involved in OwlSwap due to her involvement in that class and experiential learning.

So, thank you so much for being here today. This was a fascinating look at the OwlSwap, and thanks for spending time with me on the podcast.

Vanessa: Thank you.

Jason: Thank you. If I could just quickly note, I'll be teaching the Geography of Clothing again in fall of 2021. So, if anyone who's listening is interested in taking that class, I would love to see them there.

Vanessa: And I would also put a plug in for Local and Global Sustainability, which should be taught in spring of 2021. We'll see. It's very field trip oriented, so we'll just have to see how the pandemic is going at that point, if that's going to be feasible. But definitely look out for that course.

Shelly: Okay, you might have me auditing your classes, they are so interesting.

Vanessa: We would love that.

Shelly: Thank you all for being with me today.

Thought Provoking is a production of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia, just outside Atlanta. You can follow our college on Facebook or Instagram at ksucchss or visit our website at chss.kennesaw.edu. This is Shelly Kiser, and I'll be back next