Dear College of Marin Faculty:

Earth Day is this weekend so the attached article on being a climate-conscious college (and how disciplines across the institution can incorporate climate change into the curriculum) is timely. Also timely given the speed with which the semester is hurtling forward is the other attached article, this one on 'how to escape grading jail' by employing some specific strategies to help you maintain the quality of your feedback while reducing the time and stress associated with end-of-term assignments. I hope you find both thought-provoking and useful, if for different reasons.

Also attached is a flier I ask you share with students. It is from Community Action Marin and includes information on financial coaching.

Finally, if you have not yet RSVP'd for Commencement, please do so!
https://www1.marin.edu/event/96th-annual-commencement-and-transfer-recognition-ceremony

Thank you.

Jonathan

Jonathan Eldridge, Ed.D
Assistant Superintendent/
Vice President of Student Learning & Success
College of Marin
Office: 415-485-9618
jeldridge@marin.edu

The Climate-Conscious College

Faculty members across disciplines are updating curricula in ways that inspire action, not just fear.

By Katherine Mangan
FEBRUARY 13, 2023

For California State University at Chico, the message that climate change was too big to be contained in a single department or program was delivered in plumes of choking smoke from a wildfire raging 15 miles away.

The 2018 Camp Fire, which killed 85 people, displaced more than 300 people from the university community, and canceled classes at Chico State for three weeks, left no doubt in the minds of students like Sofia Lepore.

 "Objectively, I understood the science. I understood the threat, but I didn't truly feel the urgency of it affecting my home and my community," the 2020 graduate told faculty members from six Cal State campuses participating last spring in a faculty-learning community. The topic was teaching climate change and resilience, and she was there to explain why it was so important to students.

"When you could look out your window and see the neighboring town in the form of ash and smoke," Lepore said, it became clear that climate change was an existential burden that could shape her generation's lives and careers.

The following semester, as an assignment for her "Environmental Thought in Action" course, Lepore and her classmates drafted a nonbinding campus ballot initiative calling for climate change to be taught across all disciplines. It passed, with 84 percent of the student vote, and the university responded with funding for workshops and plans to revamp dozens of courses. "Integrating climate change into all fields of study will truly help young people hone their skills and look toward the future with much more certainty and strength," said Lepore, who now works for a progressive transportation-planning company.

She had started the class in the spring of 2019 "feeling scared and totally overwhelmed and small," she told the faculty group. By the end of the semester, "I felt more empowered and engaged than ever."

Across the country, colleges have taken similar steps to update their curricula in ways that inspire action and not just fear. Many of those efforts address sustainability more broadly, and the need to balance environmental, economic, and social goals. It's a trend that Julian Dautremont, director of programs for the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education sees only growing. With extreme temperature swings, wildfires, and hurricanes battering the nation, he says, "it's getting harder and harder to put your head in the sand and hope it passes."

Integrating climate issues across the curriculum offers other benefits. Employers need workers to help them carry out their climate commitments, so green jobs, including those in renewable energy, are growing across diverse industries And students who have shown a lack of engagement in class and on campus could find the work, combined with campus activism, reinvigorating.

Getting enough faculty members comfortable teaching a topic as complex, interdisciplinary, and emotionally fraught as climate change has been one of the biggest barriers to progress. Few are trained in the subject matter, and it can be hard to parse what kind of meaningful contribution, say, a philosopher or math professor can add to the discussion.

The steady stream of grim reports from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has left many faculty members, as well as students, feeling powerless. The latest report found that the world is on a path to global warming of more than double the 1.5-degree Celsius "limit" agreed on in Paris in 2015. Greenhouse-gas emissions generated by human activity have increased since 2010 across all major sectors globally, scientists have found. Even though the latest report is less apocalyptic than some previous reports, it's enough to inspire fear.

"Climate anxiety in our students is justified, and how we teach about climate change might be making it worse," says Mark Stemen, a professor of environmental studies at Chico State who led the faculty-learning committee and taught the class Lepore described. "We need to spend less time talking about the problem, and more time talking about the solutions."

Climate anxiety in our students is justified, and how we teach about climate change might be making it worse.

The faculty-brainstorming sessions Stemen led touched on the science behind climate change, the solutions available to counter it, the need to incorporate justice into the conversation, and the anxiety it provokes in students. Over four months, 62 faculty members in more than 30 disciplines across six Cal State campuses revamped 75 courses to incorporate climate issues.

The topics ranged "from polymers to Plato," says Stemen. Social-work students turned their attention to disaster relief. A mapping course examined how populations are displaced by climate disasters. Students in a mechanical-engineering class studied how 3D printers could make it easier to quickly rebuild homes.

He gathered a list of curriculum-redesign tips and other resources and posted it on the faculty-learning committee's website. They included books like A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet, and the video series Climate Solutions 101. Another resource was a collaborative website, called InTeGrate, that includes downloadable materials and hundreds of examples of how climate change is being taught.

"What faculty needed was a whole bunch of bins they could grab stuff out of," Stemen says.

Students and faculty members aren't the only ones seeking solutions. Employers are too. Last year Microsoft and the Boston Consulting Group released a report that warned of a "huge sustainability-skills gap" facing the roughly 3,900 companies that had signed climate pledges and were having trouble finding workers with the needed expertise. The report called on colleges to strengthen and expand their sustainability programs. Companies need people with specialized skills, like using data analytics to assess climate risks or finding creative solutions for removing carbon. Community colleges with "green skills" programs are responding by training students to repair wind turbines and measure air quality.

What's also needed, the report noted, are people who can communicate the urgency of climate change and workers who can redesign products and processes with factors like emissions, water, and ecosystems in mind.

In the future, Stemen says, "every job will be a climate job." Builders will be plotting ways to reduce their structures' carbon emissions, farmers will be rescuing crops from bouts of extreme heat and flooding, and psychologists will encounter patients suffering from eco-anxiety and feelings of helplessness about their future. Teachers, meanwhile, will be confronted with questions from their students about rising sea levels and shrinking wildlife populations. Health-care workers will be treating people suffering from heat stroke, malnutrition, and other climate-related ailments.

Last month Harvard Medical School's curriculum committee voted unanimously to add climate change and health as one of its top societal priorities. That move, a response to activism by students and faculty members, will allow the topic to be embedded into all four years of the curriculum.

More than 55 percent of American medical schools now teach about the health effects of climate change in required courses, up from 27 percent in 2019, according to a report by the Association of American Medical Colleges.

The United States still lags behind European countries in embracing the study of climate change, in part because the science behind it is more readily accepted there. The University of Barcelona and Sciences Po, in Paris, are among the institutions that have required climate courses.

In the United States, curriculum changes are happening in pre-college classrooms, with both New Jersey and Connecticut mandating the study of climate change across all public schools. Skeptics of the science behind global warming decry those courses as examples of liberal indoctrination.

But even in states like Texas, where Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, has fought environmental regulations as attacks on the state's oil and gas industry, opportunities posed by the growth in alternative-energy jobs are undeniable, Dautremont, at the sustainability association, points out.

He says he's seen a steady growth in interest in weaving climate-change topics throughout the curricula. Cross-disciplinary training programs are offered to faculty members through a network of [Centers for Sustainability Across the Curriculum](). Some colleges have created separate departments and degrees that cover climate change and related sustainability topics.

In 2021 Columbia University started what it describes as the nation's first [climate school]() to serve as a hub of climate-related academic work. Yale University has a [Program on Climate Change Communication](), and Arizona State University, a [School of Sustainability]() and [a research focus]() on earth systems and climate science.

At historically Black colleges, climate change is often studied through the lens of environmental justice. Most HBCUs are located in the South and Southeast, where weather disasters are more likely to strike and minority communities to suffer as a result.

"Most of the knowledge base and communication of climate change focuses on glaciers, rising sea levels, and polar bears, but that's by and large not going to capture the attention of our students," says David Padgett, an associate professor of geography at Tennessee State University who works with a coalition of HBCUs called the [HBCU Climate Change Consortium]().

What might, he says, is learning that Black children are twice as likely as their white peers to suffer from asthma, a condition that's exacerbated by the higher temperatures recorded in cities. That could be partly because Black children are more likely to grow up in those urban areas. Many students come to HBCUs because they want to make a difference, he says. He tries to show students how they can do that through climate activism.

The focus in his classes, he says, is not just on the problem. Whether through green building design or planting more trees, communicating the urgency through artwork or teaching elementary-school pupils, he asks students, "How can you, with your skill set, work toward solutions?"

In the early 2000s, colleges experienced a flurry of interest in climate change. By 2010, nearly 700 college presidents had signed a [commitment]() to drastically reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and accelerate teaching and research on climate change.

Much of higher education's early sustainability focus was on lowering campuses' carbon footprint through steps like converting to green energy, recycling, and serving local food. Momentum [waned]() amid a rise in climate skepticism with Republican victories in the 2010 elections. The nation was slowly emerging from a recession, and sustainability programs were pushed to back burners.

Still, the pressure to tackle the issues in the classroom continued to grow. At Johnson County Community College, in Kansas, a managerial-accounting class tackles the greenhouse-gas inventories some companies now are compiling. Over the summer, students on two [study-abroad trips]() to Iceland

learned how climate change is rapidly transforming the Arctic region and what the country is doing to try to reverse the trends.

Similar lessons are happening across the curriculum at Dickinson College, a liberal-arts institution in rural Pennsylvania that began making environmental issues a [centerpiece of its curriculum](#) back in 2008.

"Our college's footprint is small in the scheme of the world's problems, but we're hoping students will take these lessons to their homes, communities, and workplaces" after they graduate, says Lindsey Lyons, director of sustainability learning. "Collectively, that's where higher education can have the biggest impact."

Dickinson has also hosted faculty members from other campuses for intensive summer institutes on teaching about climate change and sustainability.

For some faculty members, this can seem like one more demand on a plate that was overflowing even before the pandemic. At Dickinson, they're encouraged to work the topics into the lessons they're already teaching, whether it's through examples in data sets or writing prompts in English classes.

Bryan Alexander, a futurist and a senior scholar at Georgetown University, says that faculty members "have limited bandwidths" and that coping with the pandemic has left some feeling depleted. Many also have to get over their own "feelings of sadness and helplessness" and the sense it's too late to do anything meaningful to halt the progression of climate catastrophe, he says.

Students who grew up with climate change also "feel this immense wall of gloom," Alexander says, but want to be part of the solution.

Young people need strategies and tools that are accessible and affordable, ways they can make change locally.

In a [book](#) scheduled for publication next month by the Johns Hopkins University Press, he describes the many ways the climate crisis will fundamentally change higher education. *Universities on Fire: Higher Education in the Climate Crisis* argues for the importance of promoting climate literacy through interdisciplinary courses.

"The tricky part is pedagogical," Alexander says in an interview. "How do you do this and not just clobber students psychologically?" Faculty members, he says, will need training in how to respond to a student who breaks out weeping in class or writes about suicide.

The language of climate reports is meant to instill alarm. In a recent [summary](#) of the latest climate projections, the U.N. secretary-general, António Guterres, warned that "unless action is taken soon, some major cities will be underwater," and said the world could face "unprecedented heat waves, terrifying storms, widespread water shortages, and the extinction of a million species of plants and animals."

Reports like that, which also include steps that governments can take to slow climate change, can motivate people, Lyons says, but they can also leave them feeling overwhelmed and anxious. "Young people need strategies and tools that are accessible and affordable, ways they can make change locally," she says.

At Dickinson, students are encouraged to consider changes in their own behaviors, like biking instead of driving or reusing clothes from a thrift shop on campus. They're also encouraged to become active in local environmental organizations, to lobby politicians, and to spread the word, in sports clubs, churches, and other settings, about the importance of climate change.

Finding ways within one's discipline to keep ideas flowing is key, says Peggy F. Barlett, a professor emerita of anthropology at Emory University who has spent decades jointly leading national [faculty-training programs](#) on sustainability. At Emory, for instance, a Chinese professor had students translate a section from a website on sustainability. An English professor had students write poems about human beings' relationship with nature.

"That sense of hopelessness is a real threat," she says. "But lots of research shows that a few concrete examples of how people are moving ahead shifts their perspective."

Despite the increased attention being paid to climate change in many classes, there's plenty of room for more. A [study](#) published in December found that college biology textbooks devoted less coverage to climate change in 2019 than they did in 2010, and the passages were pushed closer to the end of the book.

Jennifer Landin, an associate professor of biological sciences at North Carolina State University and a co-author of the study, suggests that "climate denialism" in the United States might play a role in the decisions by textbook publishers to avoid prominently tackling topics that are still controversial in some circles. The few solutions they do cite pay scant attention to steps that individuals or local organizations can take.

She will teach a course this summer in sustainable living in which students will spend two weeks learning how to measure their use of materials and the impact of their behavior, two weeks living on a farm to test out more sustainable lifestyles, and a final week planning how to incorporate those changes into their lives. With their own garden, they'll be able to try a more vegetable-based, locally produced diet.

They might decide, after capturing one minute's worth of shower water and multiplying it by the number of minutes luxuriating in it, that the 20-minute showers of old are just for the weekend.

In a lesson about homeownership, a student who'd always dreamed of having a sprawling, five-bedroom home might think the cottage she was staying in wasn't so bad after considering the cost of repairs, utilities, and furnishing a big home. In a sustainable lifestyle, Landin points out, economics and environmental impact go hand in hand.

"Teaching people about how there's this huge problem and then not giving them any ways to work toward a solution, of course it will result in eco-anxiety and climate despair," Landin says. "We have to have hope. I tell my students that if we look at the pandemic and how quickly we changed our society in massive ways, we can do tremendous things" in the face of global warming.

At Chico, Stemen starts every class with a solution, then describes the problem. A course he calls "[Dispatches From the Future"](#) has students pick a crisis — heat, fire, drought, or flood — and tell a story in the future that describes how the problem was fixed.

In [her story](#), set in 2037, Lepore describes a rafting trip past hills blackened by fire. She and her classmates are creating a bed for seeds of native, drought-tolerant plants, and when they pass a previously treated area where tiny seedlings are starting to sprout, they break out in a cheer.

Katherine Mangan writes about community colleges, completion efforts, student success, and job training, as well as free speech and other topics in daily news.

How to Escape Grading Jail

By [Kevin Gannon](#)

For the first 18 years of my academic career, I ran into the same problem every semester. It happened at about the 13-week mark: I would share a tearful farewell with my family and begin serving my sentence in Grading Jail. In that moment, I would look back on a career of repeat offenses against efficient and timely grading of student work, and see clearly that I had no one to blame but myself. I was a hopeless recidivist.

Or so it seemed. Remarkably, the hard time I served was enough to rehabilitate me, and turn me into a productive member of grading society. And now — since we're at that point of the semester — I'm ready to share what I've learned in hopes of saving others from the academic clink.

But first (and before I beat the jail metaphor any further into the ground), I ought to disclose that my own relationship with grades is an ambivalent one. I think too much emphasis is put on grades by both students and institutions, I don't think a single grade is representative of a student's academic ability, and I firmly reject the idea that grades reflect intelligence or potential. That said, I also realize the need to assess student work in a consistent and understandable manner. In a perfect educational world, there would be individualized assessments — formative and summative — and in-depth conferences in which professors and students could share and discuss these narratives. In our imperfect world, grades are still a feature of the academic landscape, and we owe it to students to fairly use the tools we have, no matter how flawed.

Prompt feedback may be a "[best practice,](#)" but too often in the semester, we honor that injunction primarily in the breach. Thus, in a paroxysm of equal parts guilt and panic, we lock ourselves in Grading Jail — hard labor with no parole until we've atoned for our (procrastination) sins. The all-night grading binge is problematic, though. Are we really giving effective and thoughtful feedback to students at 3 a.m., after we've read 25 (or more) of their classmates' essays? Are the standards applied to the final paper the same as the ones used to evaluate the first, so many hours and cups of coffee ago?

Here, then, are the three strategies I've found most helpful in the continuing quest to better manage my grading workflow and stay out of trouble.

- **Pre-semester calendaring.** Technically, this isn't a strategy you could plug-and-play in the middle of the term to ease your grading workload. But for me, once it became a habit, it has been invaluable.

Before classes start, as I'm drafting my syllabi, I print out calendars for every month of the term and lay them out on my desk. Using different colored markers for each section/course, I plot out the due dates for every assignment I will give throughout the semester. A cluster of different colors in a three-day span is a quick visual cue that I ought to reconsider some due dates. Is there a distinct pedagogical need to

collect a stack of exam books from one course, and a pile of essays from another the next day? Or can I space out those due dates differently?

I know this sounds head-slappingly simple, but how many of us really do this sort of careful planning and comparison in advance? Judging from the litany of "I have to grade four sections of papers" lamentations on my Twitter feed, it's a strategy that more of us should consider. Sometimes the simple steps pay off exponentially in the long run.

- **Rubrics — done well — are your friend.** I was a rubric skeptic early in my career, but with education and experience, I've become a big fan of them for much of my grading. The initial impetus for me to consider rubrics was the realization that I was using essentially the same set of comments for much of my feedback across classes and assignments. How many times do I want to write "use a specific example here" or "awkward phrasing — please rework?"

  My initial solution was to have a Word document with the phrases I used most often open while I graded, and then cut-and-paste the appropriate comment as needed. I ran into two problems with that strategy, though: First, I had to be grading student work electronically to use it, and second, it became patently absurd. If I was writing the same comments over and over, maybe I needed to revisit just how clear my criteria were to my students. As I wrote out explicitly my criteria for evaluating student work, I also realized that I often didn't apply them evenly. I mean, it's easy to be seduced by a beautifully written essay, even if it says little of substance — and especially if it comes on the heels of four stinkers in a row.

  Was I being as fair as I could be? And how would I know if I was? That was where rubrics came in for me, after I did some research and consulted with colleagues.

  Constructing a rubric involves a significant investment of time on the front end, but once designed, using it to assess student work cuts my grading time by more than half. I'm not writing the same basic comments over and over, because they're on my rubric, and I can circle or highlight them there. I use the time I've saved to concentrate on more meaningful individual feedback. Most important, having specific criteria and clearly defined benchmarks gives me the assurance that I'm being as consistent as possible in my grading. Indeed, my assignment design has improved as a result of forcing myself to define specific learning outcomes, and how I plan to assess them.

  An additional advantage: If students have the rubric in front of them as they work, ambiguity and guesswork (as well as the anxiety those can produce) are eliminated from the process. That's no small thing when it comes to a high-stakes assignment like a final research paper, for example. (Of course hastily written or vague rubrics don't provide any of those benefits, and indeed may exacerbate the very problems they were intended to solve.)

  A caveat: Advance distribution of a rubric shouldn't be your only conversation with students about your expectations. A good, detailed rubric promotes transparent criteria, consistently applied. As the only reference point, though, it becomes easy for students to "write to the rubric," creating homogeneity

and blandness rather than giving them the freedom to achieve learning outcomes in a creative and genuine way.

- **I can talk faster than I write.** So can you, I imagine. In the last couple of years, speech-to-text options (Google's Gboard mobile app, for example) have proliferated. Dictating comments into a Google Doc and using speech-to-text to transcribe them in real time is one way to provide substantial feedback on a large amount of student work without developing carpal tunnel syndrome.

However, I've found it even more meaningful to record my comments and then share them with individual students via an audio file they can listen to on any device. I stumbled into this method out of desperation several years ago; I was woefully behind on grading student essays and needed a way to get through them quickly without skimping on feedback, so I decided to do a virtual "talk-through" of the papers for each student. I used a voice-recorder app on my tablet, and recorded myself talking through the paper with summary comments at the end, which took about six to eight minutes for each essay. Then I saved the files in Dropbox folders and gave students a link to their feedback folder so they could stream or download the audio as they wished.

I came to that method independently, but subsequent research showed me that audio feedback has been a practice in some quarters for both face-to-face and online courses. The research also affirmed both my initial impressions and my students' reactions: My feedback felt more personal, it balanced specific and global commentary, and students felt like they paid more attention to my audio comments than they did to standard written feedback.

Since then, I've streamlined my practice a bit: I read through a paper, making cursory notes in the margins. Then I formulate my overall summary and decide which themes or issues I want to capture. I record my talk-through on a voice-recorder app (I use Voisi, but there are scads of free apps out there). I begin with the summary; I tell the student what I think the paper's strengths are, and what I'd like them to focus on for the next draft or assignment. Then I do a brief talk-through of the paper, not to point out every specific error or problem, but to give my general feedback. Because audio files are sometimes too large to attach to an email, I upload them to Dropbox and send a shareable link to the student.

What I've found is that — especially for large-scale projects and written work — audio feedback cuts my grading time just about in half, without sacrificing the depth or quality of feedback.

Those three strategies have transformed grading from something I've always dreaded into something that I … well, enjoy is too strong a word. But I am now able to provide timely and meaningful assessment without locking myself away for days at a time. Professors are remarkably like our students in many ways, perhaps most obviously in how we sometimes flail around trying to manage the end-of-the-semester crush. And just as our students don't do their best work in all-night cram sessions, neither do we.

For those of you who share my ambivalence about the value of grading itself, there are ways to turn it into a more meaningful, collaborative project — for example, Cathy Davidson's Peer-to-Peer

[Assessment](#) and [Contract Grading](#) models, and Linda B. Nilson's [Specifications Grading](#) framework. But they take time to learn and adapt. And in the midst of a semester, we aren't blessed with a lot of extra time or motivation to do that sort of long-term reflection and rethinking. You might use the winter or summer breaks to carry out a broad overhaul of your grading practices.

In the meantime, consider these three strategies the academic equivalent of a "get out of jail free" card. The more we can ensure consistency and fairness, the less likely we are to be beset with student complaints, and the better the chances of students actually putting our feedback to use in their subsequent work — which is the whole point, right?

Kevin Gannon is director of the Center for the Advancement of Faculty Excellence and a professor of history at Queens University of Charlotte (N.C.).

COMM
UNITY
ACTION
MARIN

IN YOUR CORNER

Financial Coaching Announcements for Students

Please share the following information with your students:

Free Financial Coaching available. Learn to track your money and budget, build a great credit score and manage student loans. This remote one-on-one coaching service is offered in partnership with Community Action Marin.

Email COMFinancialCoaching@gmail.com to enroll

Minimize student loans. Build a good credit score. Control your spending so you can transfer with money in the bank. College of Marin has partnered with Community Action Marin to bring you **free, one-on-one financial coaching.**

Email COMFinancialCoaching@gmail.com to enroll