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Gerry Boyle

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Gail Carlson: Inspiring Students to Step Up

By Gerry Boyle '78

Just four or five years ago, Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies Gail Carlson found that her first-year students arrived at Colby pessimistic about the future of the planet. “Students were like, ‘I might not have kids. ... I don’t know what to think about the future. ... It seems so grim.’”

Today? Not so much.

Carlson says current students view climate change not through a lens of catastrophe but with the knowledge that there are a variety of ways the problem can be tackled. “When you become a doomsday person, when you’re really pessimistic, it’s because you can’t see that you can make a difference,” she said.

A few years ago, that difference-making took the form of encouraging energy conservation. But since then, the renewable energy industry has blossomed, international climate change agreements have been reached (and



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—Gail Carlson, associate professor of environmental studies

occasionally negated), and the opportunities offered at Colby have grown exponentially. Said Carlson, director of Buck Lab for the Environment and Climate Change at Colby, “We’re not where we were in 2011. We’re at a different place.”

The Buck Lab, established by Sissy and Sandy Buck ’78 (see related story, P. 42), is one of the key initiatives that have broken climate change work wide open at the College.

Just a year in, the Buck Lab has connected students with professionals working in environmental fields, bringing alumni and others to campus, and holding networking events in New York. Students have been trained in how to more effectively request grant funding. Some 30 environmental groups, organizations, and companies—all impacted by climate change—came to campus with jobs and internships on offer.

Those efforts will be coordinated with DavisConnects to make sure the relationships are established. “It was a way for me to start that process of building a new partnership so that there are well-worn paths that students can take,” Carlson said.

Students already are working with a variety of research organizations, studying ways public health intersects with climate change, whether Maine wood can replace corn in biomaterials, how climate is changing the range of trees in North America, and how climate affects high-elevation lakes.

Public health effects of climate have become clear in recent years, as devastating hurricanes and rising water levels have increased the incidence of waterborne illness. “Climate change is exacerbating existing diseases,” said Carlson, a public-health expert. “It makes everything worse.”

Vulnerable populations, from the Arctic to Southeast Asia, are already taking the brunt of the impact, and there is a moral obligation for those of us at Colby who are less vulnerable to stay with the fight, she says.

But climate’s broad implications are being met with an equally broad range of skills and knowledge. “I think our students feel they can make an impact,” Carlson said. Melding hard science, computer science, and environmental policy, among disciplines, students are approaching climate change from an interdisciplinary perspective. “The environmental studies curriculum is interdisciplinary so they

can talk about ecology. They can talk about environmental economics. They can talk about social science.”

That knowledge and related analytical skills equip students and graduates to consider the complex climate issue from myriad perspectives, Carlson said. “I think they learn about the power of people to make change, not just in an activist sense [one of Carlson’s other fields of expertise], but also in a policy-making sense,” she said. “And I do think all of these gifts to the College around the environment have made a big difference.”

The Buck Lab has funded more than 30 internships. Additional funds—including one established by Trustee Anne Clarke Wolff ’87 and her husband, Ted Wolff ’86, honoring emeriti professor Russell Cole—have allowed students to undertake a broad range of environment- and climate-related research and work experiences.

“We have many more [environmental] majors than some other schools, and we also have our expertise and these phenomenal opportunities,” Carlson said. “I honestly think these things are transformative.” 🌍