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## **Grant of \$200K to fund Bennington College program**

By Patrick McArdle

STAFF WRITER

BENNINGTON — Bennington College received a grant of \$200,000 that will be used for a three-year project and class that will look at creating sustainable futures in New England towns like Bennington that were once considered “mill towns.”

Valerie Imbruce, director of environmental studies and co-chairwoman of the college’s sustainability committee, said the college had been increasing its efforts to improve the environment, adding the environmental studies program three years ago and pledging last year to make the campus carbon-neutral by 2030.

In looking at what the college offers to date, Imbruce said college officials realized that while they had tried to offer classes that looked at environmental problems from a number of angles, more could be done.

“You can’t understand environmental problems unless you know something about the natural science behind it, a little bit about economics and social processes and human behavior as well. Ultimately, an environmental problem is a human problem. We realized we were leaving it too much up to our students to make those connections,” she said.

With a National Science Foundation grant for \$200,000, the environmental studies program will be able to look at former mill towns like Bennington and consider “what a sustainable future could look like for these communities,” according to the project description.

Imbruce pointed out that towns like Bennington would make for valuable studies because they had relatively recently used their own resources to be sustainable through agriculture or using streams to power the local mills.

"It's an interesting time where we're looking at returning to our natural resources but with a different set of values and a different set of questions," she said.

The classes will be developed over the summer by Bennington faculty and students with local community members and the courses will be offered during the 2014-15 and 2015-16 academic years.

Imbruce said she expected there would be participation from local people who already work with the environment for the introductory course, "The Future of a New England Mill Town."

According to Imbruce, the classes would reflect what's called place-based education.

"You can't really cultivate a student body or future generations who are really vested and concerned about their world and the human place in the natural world if the study is always removed from some geographic location (and) if you're always studying about something else that's happening 'over there' and not what's happening right around you," she said.

The second course will be an advanced projects course where students will work with regional organizations during the college's seven-week field work term. Students generally chose their own project or field of study for the field work term but Imbruce said this particular class, which is geared toward more experienced students and not incoming freshmen, will require a commitment to a local internship.

Imbruce said one of the ultimate goals is to create a method of studying the local environment that could be replicated in other places. One method may be to invite some teachers from kindergarten through 12th grade schools to participate in workshops as a way to extend the reach of the curriculum.

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