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Op-Ed Columnist

The Greenest Generation

By [THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN](#)

I was visiting Williams College a few days ago and heard a student speaker there mention that at the end of the day, she had gone back to her dorm room to study and to "do it in the dark."

Hey, I thought, I'm not a prude, but did she have to be so explicit — and in public, in front of parents no less?

Fortunately, I quickly discovered that "doing it in the dark" is not some new sexual escapade, but a new Williams energy-saving competition in honor of Earth Day. Student dorms, classrooms and campus buildings are pitted against one another to see who can save the most energy. Students are encouraged to turn off lights every time they leave a room, to unplug cellphone chargers when not in use, to take advantage of daylight to study or use precise task lighting at night ("Do it in the dark!"), and to change old light bulbs to compact fluorescents.

The Williams competition got me thinking. Why doesn't every college make it a goal to become carbon-neutral — that is, reduce its net CO₂ emissions to zero? This should be a national movement. After all, today's students will be profoundly affected by climate change, the coming energy wars and the rising danger of petro-authoritarian states, such as Iran. Yet on most campuses, the whole energy-climate question still seems to be a student hobby, not a crusade.

C'mon kids, wake up and smell the CO₂! Everybody — make your school do it in the dark! Take over your administration building, occupy your university president's office or storm in on the next meeting of your college's board of trustees until they agree to make your school carbon-neutral. (And while you're at it, ban gas-guzzling G.M. Hummers from your campus as well!)

It is not that hard. Start by measuring exactly how much energy your university is consuming and how much CO₂ it is emitting, from its heating and cooling of buildings to its transport systems. The Greenhouse Gas Protocol, which can be downloaded from www.ghgprotocol.org, offers an internationally accepted way to measure greenhouse gas emissions.

Once you determine your university's total CO₂ emissions, the next step, suggests Glenn Prickett, a senior vice president at Conservation International, should be to have "your own graduate students in science and engineering develop their own comprehensive plan to reduce fossil fuel consumption." They can turn to more efficient lighting, heating and cooling; more hybrid vehicles; and better building design, including renewable energy technologies like solar panels.

After a college reduces its carbon emissions as much as possible, it can then develop a strategy for offsetting the greenhouse gases it is still putting into the atmosphere. To become carbon-neutral, you need to finance a project that will measurably reduce greenhouse gases, and it has to be a project that would not have happened if your school had not paid for it. That's how you get the credit.

You can pay to preserve rain forest land in the Amazon so trees there will not be burned, a major source of greenhouse gases, or plant forests in Africa that will absorb carbon, or sponsor a project to turn landfill gas into electricity. (G.M. does that!) In a partnership with Conservation

International, the band Pearl Jam offset all the emissions from its last tour by paying to help communities preserve rain forest land in Madagascar. (That also helps reduce poverty and protect endangered wildlife.)

"Our offices are carbon-neutral," said Jonathan Lash, president of the World Resources Institute, which is ready to advise any campus on how to proceed: call (202) 729-7600. "We worked through a broker and identified a school in Portland that needed to buy a new heating system because the old one was very inefficient and created a lot of greenhouse gas." The institute helped pay for the new system, the school saved money and reduced its emissions, and W.R.I. got the offset for its own emissions.

Al Gore eloquently argues that our parents' generation, the Greatest Generation, turned back the black tide of fascism. They fought the war and built the institutions that preserved peace and freedom for a lot of people on this planet. Today's young people, Mr. Gore argues, have a parallel task. Yes, he means you college students.

You need to become what the writer Dan Pink calls "the Greenest Generation," and build the institutions, alliances and programs that will turn back the black tide of climate change and petro-authoritarianism, which, if unchecked, will surely poison your world and your future as much as fascism once threatened to do to your parents' world and future.

This is your challenge. Who will rise to it?

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