

The Pledge: 25 Years (and Counting) of Encouraging Social and Environmental Responsibility

By G. Sherman H. Morrison and Meredith L. Morgoch

From the Go Green to the Occupy Wall Street movements, social and environmental consciousness has become an increasingly important issue in contemporary society. Both movements started with groups of people who gathered to discuss and improve current predicaments of the nation, and both movements have gained international popularity.

A quarter-century ago, a group of young people at Humboldt State University (HSU) in northern California gathered to discuss and improve the perplexities of the nation's future with the idea to create a pledge that focused on bettering society through increased social and environmental consciousness beyond graduation. The idea to create a pledge turned into a program known today as the Graduation Pledge of Social and Environmental Responsibility that encourages schools and their students to pledge the following:

"I, _____, pledge to explore and take into account the social and environmental consequences of any job I consider and will try to improve these aspects of any organizations for which I work."

The Pledge has evolved over the years from a local program to an international movement with participation in ten countries, four continents, and more than 125,000 college graduates who have taken the Pledge. Eighty percent of the 2002 graduating class from Princeton University embraced the Graduation Pledge. From universities, community colleges, professional schools and high schools, students around the world have recognized the importance of the Pledge by actively considering the consequences of their actions in the workplace and beyond.

Mark Murray, former HSU student body president, says the

Pledge is a reminder. "It's not what the education is and what it can do for us, it's what you can do for society with the education."

Consistent with Murray's quote, the Pledge is intended to help students think about how to improve

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their own lives, the betterment of society and our collective future. The Pledge is voluntary, so people take responsibility for their own actions in terms of social and environmental impact, inside or outside the classroom, workplace or residence.

Meredith Morgoch, a senior at Appalachian State University and an Outreach Coordinator intern with the Graduation Pledge Alliance (GPA) recently signed the Pledge, saying, "I signed the Pledge via the Internet while attending Appalachian State University. I became enthusiastic about the Pledge when the realization struck me that it was necessary to become more conscious of my actions in an effort to improve society through a think globally, act locally approach. I also believe the Pledge takes on a transformative leadership role when student leaders become role models of social and environmental responsibility that other can emulate." In addition to her work with the GPA, Morgoch spearheads her own campaign to get Neil Postman's 1985 classic, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, included in high school curricula across the country. The core argument of the book is that over-consumption of media produces people who are more obsessed with entertainment than participating in more constructive activities, like engaging in the political process.

Seeing how Pledge alumni fulfill their commitment to social and environmental responsibility is both exciting and humbling. Take, for example, two alumni from Wheaton College who co-coordinated the Pledge on their campus back in 2005. After graduating from Wheaton with a self-designed independent major in Global Sustainability, Josh Arnold went on to form his own non-profit organization called G.A.L.A. – Global Awareness Local Action. Based in his hometown of Wolfeboro, New Hampshire, the mission of the group is to "translate sustainability education into local action that is practical, effective, and fun." The group's long-term vision is to create a network of communities working together to build local resilience and strengthen social capital. What started as a few educational demonstrations at the area farmers' market, has now become the town's "go to" resource for anything related to green living. One of their most popular programs is the Sustainable Home & Yard Makeover whereby teams of volunteers known as "Sustain-A-Raisers" help install compost bins, rain barrels, raised garden beds, clotheslines, and even solar hot water systems. G.A.L.A. believes that if everyone took these small and simple steps to reduce waste and conserve energy the impacts will add up to the point of really starting to move the needle on

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some of our most pressing environmental concerns like climate change. In the winter months G.A.L.A. focuses education by hosting study circles throughout the state where groups of 8-15 come together to learn about topics like voluntary simplicity, sustainable food systems, discovering a sense of place, and global warming. Through these educational and hands-on service projects, G.A.L.A. empowers people to make a real positive difference in their homes, neighborhoods and communities. Learn more at by visiting the G.A.L.A. website at <http://www.galacommunity.org>.

Jared Duval also graduated from Wheaton College in 2005, having double-majored in Political Science and Economics. He went on to become the National Director of the Sierra Student Coalition (SSC), the nation's largest student-run environmental organization. During his tenure he played a key role in launching the group's Campus Climate Challenge campaign. The SSC was also a leading player in the influential Energy Action Coalition. Interacting with young students across the country, Duval discovered that they were interested in new forms of political activism based on collaboration and empowered engagement. The light bulb that went on for Duval was about how similar this felt to the open-source approach to web development that has resulted in powerful innovations like Wikipedia and the Linux operating system. His expanded thinking on the topic can be found in his book, *Next Generation Democracy: What the Open-Source Revolution Means for Power, Politics, and Change*, published by Bloomsbury in 2010. The goal is to put democracy back where it belongs, with the people rather than with corporations. Duval argues persuasively that open-source approaches to governance would help people participate much more directly in the policymaking process. An example of this kind of organizing is 350.org, an effort run mostly by young people that resulted on 7,300 actions in 188 countries related to climate change on 10/10/10.

These are just a few examples of Pledgers making a difference. From the United States to Taiwan, from California to New York, and from Stanford and Harvard to Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Estrella Mountain Community College in Arizona, students all over the nation and world have become a part of this international movement that focuses on individuals being conscious of the social and environmental consequences of their actions at school, at home, in the workplace and beyond. If you are ready to join this exciting and timely movement, please visit the Graduation Pledge Alliance website at <http://www.graduationpledge.org>.

By working together we can make a difference for both present and future generations.

Did you take the Graduation Pledge of Social and Environmental Responsibility when you were in college? If so, the Graduation Pledge Alliance wants to hear from you! Please contact GPA Executive Director Sherman Morrison at gmorrison@antioch.edu and let him know how you have fulfilled your Pledge commitment.

Author Biographies:

Sherman Morrison is the Executive Director of the Graduation Pledge Alliance. In addition, he is working on his doctoral dissertation about sustainability in higher education in Antioch University's PhD in Leadership and Change Program.

Meredith Morgoch is a senior at Appalachian State University, majoring in Public Relations. She is currently an Outreach Coordinator intern with the Graduation Pledge Alliance.



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