

## **The Purpose, Design, and Evolution of Prescott's PhD Program in Sustainability Education**

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**Abstract:** This article examines the purpose, design, process, and operations of Prescott College's PhD Program in Sustainability Education. It describes how students come into the program, participate in foundational course work, operate within a cohort framework, and provide feedback and support for each person's response to shared readings and assignments. Students review and revise their proposed program plans, engage in mentored study with experts in their fields, and formulate a dissertation plan and research design under the supervision of a core faculty advisor and a doctoral committee who will review and approve these documents and their final product. Throughout the program, there is an emphasis on social and environmental justice, cross cultural awareness, transformational learning, experiential education, project based program design, and community development in their home institutions and environments. This article presents the vision embodied by Prescott College, and this program in particular, for exploring and addressing the predominant social, political, ecological, and spiritual challenges of our time within a local and global context. Essential to this is a recognition of our interdependence with all aspects of the more-than-human world and our role as humans on this planet. Our hope is that our students will serve as change agents for a sustainable future

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## **The Purpose, Design, and Evolution of Prescott's PhD Program in Sustainability Education**

### Background

The purpose of the PhD program in Sustainability Education at Prescott College is to develop scholar-practitioners who have command of the background for this transdisciplinary field and actually put into practice the principles and practices that enlighten this field. Drawing upon decades of exploration into the diverse dimensions of sustainability, sustainability education seeks to integrate these many perspectives and areas of inquiry to provide guidance on how these values can be communicated to a diverse audience. This means examining methods of inquiry, methodological approaches, and theoretical assumptions that cover the gambit from quantitative to qualitative, transmissive to transformative, analytic to intuitive, theoretical to experiential.

In this four year (minimum) program which is in its 11th year, students take a year of required foundational coursework with a survey of ecological, economic, and social justice aspects of sustainability (3 E's). This is complemented by an exploration of educational theory and practice with an emphasis on experiential, transformative, and adult learning approaches to address how to communicate awareness of sustainability issues and potential actions to all ages and backgrounds. This includes an examination of subjects as diverse yet central to the integrative nature of the program as deep ecology, ecopsychology, self-sustainability, integral theory, and servant leadership. Students also explore different methods of inquiry and research while formulating questions for further study and development of their dissertation focus.

Prescott's PhD program in Sustainability Education is based on the premise that students will outline a clear vision of what areas of investigation and application they wish to pursue at the beginning of their program. This may change through involvement in the give-and-take of the shared cohort learning process. That process includes engagement with other students and faculty in dialogue about central issues and topics related to their specific programs and sustainability in general. From this dialogue, in a process of continuous learning, a further clarity of purpose and intention will most likely emerge that will drive each individual's program and reinforce the synergy of the group. If given freedom and support to unfold, the collective endeavor of exchanging perspectives, researching options, and defining priorities can also be the source for uncovering new interpretations of problematic issues and originating new means to approach effective action. The individual research, critical discourse, and reflective dialogue can generate new levels of understanding and commitment to a common purpose of promoting Education for Sustainability and Education as Sustainability.

One of the strongest elements of the Prescott College PhD program is the use of the cohort model as a vehicle for group development, mutual dialogue and feedback, shared coursework and projects, group cohesion and support throughout the program. The Prescott PhD Program does this by following a cohort-based learning model where students and faculty share personal visions and values, co-create the structure and format of the cohort process, and dialogue about critical issues related to adult learning and sustainability education. The ongoing dialogue among students, faculty, and other resource faculty is at least partially shaped by students' different learning styles, needs, expectations, and potential collaboration on projects. This free

flow of information and ideas aids the formation of a collaborative learning environment (communities of practice) where each participant is a resource to other members of the community and to the institution as a whole.

Doctoral students are also invited to participate and assist in facilitating the annual Sustainability Education Symposium and explore through this medium how to make sustainability education tangible and real to students and guests in a variety of fields. Continuing students help develop and model the adult transformational learning process for new cohorts in the doctoral program through their presentations and workshops during the symposium. Cross cohort interaction and sharing is a valuable resource for students and faculty alike. Students also participate and take leadership in the publication of the online *Journal of Sustainability Education* that draws submissions from across the disciplines and around the planet. This interaction among cohorts and students at all levels serves as a stimulus and inspiration for creative research and dynamic projects in communities outside academia.

### Vision

The larger purpose of the PhD program and the motivation underlying its design is to be part of the transformation of our society and Western culture and the creation of a new vision of our place on the planet and the responsibilities this entails. Through immersion in a shared background of educational approaches and priorities, knowledge of environmental and economic factors affecting sustainability, and social justice issues that expose inequality and oppression throughout human society, students are encouraged to open their eyes to the reality and dysfunctions of the systems we humans have created and begin to visualize alternative models and strategies.

A major component of this is realizing our connection with the natural world and interdependence with all beings and aspects of our planet (and beyond). An element of this is an appreciation for and further development of our ecological identity as members of this planetary community. Each of us has an “ecological self” based on the environments in which we have been raised and our awareness of our connection to both living and nonliving elements of the larger living system. This awareness impacts how we act to preserve and protect those resources that support our ongoing existence and to create the human systems that allow us to continue as a species living in harmony with all other beings. Understanding the evolution of the universe put forth by current scientific discoveries as well as our development as humans (and our societies) is essential to be a full player on the stage of sustainability education.

This growing awareness of our role as change agents and of the threats to our existence is beginning to be recognized by many entities from local communities to corporations to governments seeking to improve our impact on the planet through acceptance of the evidence of these conditions and efforts to ameliorate their impact. Central to this is an examination of leadership approaches and strategies that can lead to significant changes in the way we live and act. A large question for the PhD program and its participants to address is how we are to live in a world that is threatened on all sides by wars, climate change, population growth, and poverty.

These are the predominant social, political, ecological, and spiritual challenges of our time. How we are to confront these challenges requires deep thinking and a reconfiguration of our priorities to accommodate vastly changed and rapidly changing world conditions highlighted by the twin threats (and opportunities) of climate change and globalization. This requires reviewing our assumptions about leadership (and human society in general) and what this encompasses—a shift in worldviews that places priority on our relationship with the natural world and how we view the sufferings and wellbeing of vast numbers of the world's ever growing population. This is a mission we must take on locally and globally.

In reviewing the 11 years in which this PhD program has been in operation, the successes and impact of our students and graduates is remarkable. These people, who range in age from their 20's to their 60's+, are innovating in the way that organizations are run, students at all levels are taught, and communities are engaged in positive change actions. Through the significant personal epiphanies and transformations students experience through their studies, with the mission and goals of the program, and through the research and projects conducted in their communities, students are empowered to challenge existing norms and practices. They are inspired to innovate with new approaches and practices that have the power to transform the hopes and promises of The Great Turning, as called for by Thomas Berry. This is a gradual process of shifting our focus from production to generativity, growth to right livelihood, and conflict to collaboration.



