

UW-Eau Claire: New Sustainability and Climate Action Certificate Program helping meet student interest, global need

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Editor's note: This is one in a series of stories about efforts by UW-Eau Claire's Administrative Office of Sustainability to support sustainability and the value of stewardship on campus and in the community.

The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire's chemistry program is helping Alex Narkiewicz-Jodko gain the knowledge he needs to be successful in his future career, but he says it's a sustainability-related certificate he's earning that may be what helps him stand out when he applies to graduate schools.

Narkiewicz-Jodko, a chemistry major from Green Bay who will graduate in December, is among the first Blugolds to enroll in UW-Eau Claire's new Sustainability and Climate Action Certificate program.

"The certificate will prove that my interests and knowledge don't just lie in the field of chemistry," says Narkiewicz-Jodko, who plans to pursue a Ph.D. in theoretical/physical chemistry. "The certificate shows that I have knowledge in other fields and that I have more 'layers' to myself than just my chemistry degree, so I can, perhaps, bring unique or new perspectives to discussions related to the field of chemistry."

UW-Eau Claire's 15-credit Sustainability and Climate Action Certificate program was offered for the first time this fall. Seven Blugolds are currently enrolled in the certificate program, a number faculty expect will grow quickly in the coming

months.

“Students are really excited about the new certificate, so we are expecting to see substantial growth once they learn it’s now available and they understand more about it,” says Dr. James Boulter, a professor of chemistry in the department of public health and environmental studies.

Sustainability and Climate Action Certificate program

The new certificate program is housed in UW-Eau Claire’s public health and environmental studies department, but it’s available to any student — regardless of their major — who is concerned about the climate crisis and wants to gain the knowledge needed to help create a sustainable world.

It includes classes in 13 academic departments, including programs in the physical sciences, such as biology, chemistry and geography, as well as courses in American Indian studies, economics, sociology, nursing, and communication and journalism.

Including classes from many departments across the campus is important because climate change is a “broad problem that needs many perspectives to solve,” so every field of study has something to contribute, Boulter says.

The program is designed to complement students’ primary fields of study so they can apply their learning from the certificate courses to their future careers, Boulter says. He expects graduates of the certificate program to work in an array of fields, such as research, finance, education and health care.

Narkiewicz-Jodko says allowing students from any major to complete the Sustainability and Climate Action Certificate by taking classes that align with their interests gives them valuable learning opportunities while keeping them on track to graduate on time.

“It allows students to pursue topics they’re passionate about without hindering their college career or having to major or minor in the subject,” Narkiewicz-Jodko says. “They also can complete many of their general education credits by taking classes that work toward the certificate but are in a field that interests them.”

Focus on solving problems

Students who complete the certificate program will understand the fundamentals of

climate science, climate policies and systems, scientific/technological solutions and the societal transitions necessary to address the climate crisis.

The focus on technological and societal changes makes the program more inclusive because it meets the needs of students whose interests lie more in the social sciences than the physical sciences, Boulter says.

The certificate program will be especially attractive to students who already have some understanding of the climate crisis and are eager to help find solutions, Boulter says.

“There is a lot of work to do that we already know needs to happen, so it was important that the certificate be focused on solutions and not just documenting problems and challenges,” Boulter says. “Our goal is to prepare students to go out and solve these problems, not just recognize that they exist.”

Narkiewicz-Jodko says he expects that the Sustainability and Climate Action Certificate program will help him and other students who have an interest in and some understanding of the climate crisis to share information and ideas more effectively with others.

“I always enjoy discussing sustainability and climate action in classes, so this program gave me a good excuse to pursue more of that dialogue,” Narkiewicz-Jodko says. “I hope that with the classes I’ve taken to complete the certificate, I’ll have a better understanding of current climate action/sustainability efforts, and I’ll be prepared to discuss these topics with others.”

Boulter agrees, saying that talking about climate change and sustainability is an important way to promote social change and develop new social norms. The certificate program will help students better understand why it’s important to talk about climate change and learn how to have productive conversations about these issues, he says.

Stepping up to make needed change

Launching UW-Eau Claire’s Sustainability and Climate Action Certificate program this semester is “exciting and timely,” Boulter says.

Climate scientists know the world has a limited window — now about 7-8 years — to address climate issues, so it’s essential to give students the knowledge and tools

they need to find solutions, Boulter says.

While there are a few well-established climate programs at universities across the country, there aren't nearly enough, Boulter says. So, with its new certificate program, UW-Eau Claire is stepping up to help meet a global need for people who understand climate issues so they can help solve them, he says.

"These next few years are so crucial and so significant," Boulter says of the impact of the climate crisis and efforts to address it. "Every business and organization will need to make changes quickly, and many don't have any idea how they're going to do it. So, they need people who are ready to drive change at a high speed, which requires a whole new kind of thinking.

"We're preparing our students to drive the change we need."