

APRIL 9, 2007
Business Week
ENVIRONMENT

The Greening Of America's Campuses

College students across the country are fired up about global warming, and they're gathering online to agitate for change. Is this the next big youth movement?

It was a crisp September night in northern Vermont, and the narrow meeting room on the ground floor of a Middlebury College dorm was packed with students. They had gathered to hear Bill McKibben, resident scholar, author, and environmentalist, sketch out the future of climate activism. Persuading the U.S. government to get serious about global warming would take more than old-style protest marches and rallies, he explained. It would require a new kind of coordinated action, making smart use of the Net.

Seven months later, McKibben and a team of newly minted Middlebury graduates are trying to put this idea into practice. On Apr. 14, they're spearheading a nationwide virtual march on Washington called Step It Up. The campaign will seek legislation to cut carbon emissions by 80% by 2050, far beyond the goals in global agreements such as the Kyoto Accord.

Forcing any such laws through in 2007 is obviously a stretch. But Step It Up's tech-savvy tactics could produce some arresting results. About 1,100 campuses, church groups, and green organizations have already signed up on the campaign's Web site to hold local, climate-related events. One group will ski in formation down the shrinking glaciers of Jackson Hole, Wyo. Another plans a diving expedition in Key West, Fla., to document the threat climate change poses to coral reefs. And at every step, McKibben's "distributed revolution" will not only be televised but will also be YouTubed, blogged, and podcast.

If Step It Up succeeds in drawing together climate activists on campuses across the U.S., it could help catalyze the first mass student movement since the days of the Vietnam War. The activities planned for Apr. 14 could coalesce into "the biggest grassroots environmental event ever," says McKibben. But will it really be more than a green-tinged digital lovefest? Youthful idealism, after all, is as old as it is ephemeral. Over the years, generations of young folks have fallen passionately for issues, only to shove them into the closet with their demonstration banners as they get distracted by mortgages, day-care arrangements, and car repair bills. The "no-nukes" movement of the 1970s failed to rid the world of atomic weapons. And Asian sweatshops and child labor survived the outrage of campus activists in the 1980s.

It is also true, however, that some uprisings fueled by youthful passion--the civil rights movement and the antiwar demonstrations of the 1960s--have altered the

course of U.S. history. Many social scientists, politicians, and business leaders say student-led climate activism could be a third. "It's a significant movement, and the start of bigger things," says Michael Oppenheimer, a prominent Princeton University geoscientist.

Unlike the Earth Day kids of the 1970s, climate activists who belong to the 80 million-strong demographic bulge known as the Millennials aren't hard left or anti-business. Sometimes called Gen Y (teens to mid-20s), they wield a tool kit that includes Excel spreadsheets, administrators' numbers on cell-phone speed dials, and blogs. And their ranks represent a wide swath of disciplines and beliefs, from the 3,000-member Engineers for a Sustainable World to the Evangelical Youth Climate Initiative to Net Impact, a green business school network with 130 chapters. Student groups at 570 schools signed up to take part this year in the Campus Climate Challenge, a campaign sponsored by 30 environmental groups.

For now, most Millennial activists are trying to hit the levers where they live, pushing their colleges to purchase renewable energy and construct green buildings. Students in the University of California system wrote the rule book, three years ago, when they persuaded administrators to buy green energy and embed commitments to green construction in a multiyear, \$7.7 billion budget for new buildings.

"BE CYNICAL...OR EFFECTIVE"

At most colleges, students set more modest goals. At Middlebury in January, 2005, two dozen students founded an activist group that now attracts about 100 students to its weekly meetings. Pressed by this group, Middlebury agreed to reduce emissions by constructing an \$11 million biomass plant to heat and cool buildings. The group also made presentations to trustees, including Felix Rohatyn and Lehman Brothers Inc. ([LEH](#)) Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Richard S. Fuld Jr. "I am a big believer in the audacity of hope," says May Boeve, who helped found the group. "You can be cynical, or you can choose to be effective."

J.P. Plumlee and his fellow activists at the University of Tennessee shared similar experiences. They floated a plan to adopt an \$8 annual student fee to help pay for purchases of alternative energy, and got the proposal endorsed by 4,100 students at the Knoxville school--one of the highest turnouts for any such vote on campus. The students voted to impose levies on themselves that would be transferred to the university to help reduce its dependence on fossil fuels. Two other schools in the area have enacted similar programs, accounting for 24% of the Tennessee Valley Authority's clean-energy sales. Now, four more are following suit. "I used to think global warming was my grandchildren's problem," says the college's chancellor, Loren Crabtree. "But we need to deal with it now, and these young people are our leaders."

Sometimes, the force of students' convictions fundamentally alters institutions.

Last year, Stanford University's Graduate School of Business redesigned its curriculum to emphasize issues linked to the environment and corporate responsibility. "Students are coming to school with a much increased awareness of their impact on society," says Garth Saloner, a Stanford economics professor who handled the revamp.

Now the first wave of Millennials is entering the workplace, and businesses that want to attract the most qualified candidates say they must appeal to students' environmental sensibilities. "They're the future leaders of our company, the future investors, and future consumers," says Lorraine Bolsinger, vice-president for GE's Ecomagination strategy. "Gen Y folks think that the environment is twice as important as the economy. We absolutely have to think about their concerns."

Over the next 10 years, there will be a major exodus from the work world as baby boomers retire. By 2012 there will be just one person entering the workforce for every four who leave, according to Labor Dept. data. So companies ranging from Whirlpool ([WHR](#)) and Ben & Jerry's ([UN](#)) to Google ([GOOG](#)), Hewlett-Packard ([HPQ](#)), and General Electric ([GE](#)) say they must understand what motivates climate activists.

Corporate recruiters are encountering more and more candidates like Ananda Baron. When she applied for a job with Pacific Gas & Electric Co. ([PCG](#)) last year, the 28-year-old student at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management dug deep into the utility's environmental bona fides. Baron says she was impressed by PG&E's clean-energy strategy. But before accepting an invitation to attend a final round of interviews, she set up a 45-minute call with the company's environmental affairs director in Washington. "Business is going to play a role in these issues, and I would like to be there to help out," says Baron, who wound up accepting the job PG&E offered.

What students want is of great interest to companies that serve student communities. Sodexo Alliance ([SDX](#)), which handles food and cleaning contracts for 900 colleges and independent schools, is seeing a 20% annual increase in the number of accounts demanding food that is local, organic, and grown sustainably. Burning gasoline or jet fuel to haul produce thousands of miles from where it's grown is especially galling to students, so Sodexo is finding and partnering with local suppliers and manufacturers.

If Bill McKibben's Step It Up campaign and other such efforts succeed in rallying students behind a single environmental banner, an unexpected force could be unleashed. College kids rarely flock to the polls, but in the past two federal elections their numbers have rebounded. "This is a powerful political generation," says William Strauss, a brand consultant and co-author of *Millennials Rising*. The youth vote helped swing the 2006 midterm elections for green-leaning Democrats, with the addition of an estimated 2 million new, young voters at the polls. In 2008, global warming "has the power to bring voters out of their dorm

rooms," says Steve McMahon, a Democratic consultant.

It's fair to be skeptical about a green alliance of politicians, captains of industry, and campus activists. For every company that commits to going green, a dozen others are trying to "greenwash" their reputations. Students, meanwhile, rail against the ungreen acts of government and industry, but can't be prided from their iPods ([AAPL](#)), made by Apple Inc. ([AAPL](#)), a company that has yet to embrace sustainable manufacturing.

Gwynne Rogers, an analyst at the Natural Marketing Institute in Harleysville, Pa., also questions whether students can preserve their enthusiasm. "For a fleeting moment, you care passionately about a given issue. Then you are exposed to another, and your allegiance changes." But because the students are part of a broader societal shift and will bear the brunt of any climate catastrophe, Middlebury's McKibben thinks climate activism could be one of those movements that makes a difference. "There are a lot of people who are educated about global warming and want to figure out what to do," he says. The students, ultimately, are the mainstream-in-training.