# The Lifestyle Project

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## ABSTRACT

The Lifestyle Project is a way for students to learn about environmental alternatives by modifying their own lifestyles. It is a three-week exercise for students to reduce their impact on the environment by changing the way in which they live from day to day. The project has fairly rigid parameters, allowing students to achieve a gradual but definitive change in their everyday habits. Students choose three categories from a list of six: heat, garbage, electricity and water, driving, eating, and activism. They write about their experiences in journals, which are incredibly insightful, illustrating just how profoundly the project affects them. At the end of the project, students have had an experience that may be life altering, affecting not only the students themselves, but also their friends and families. We felt that we unexpectedly stumbled across a real solution to an environmental problem.

Keywords: energy conservation, water conservation, waste reduction, environmental education.

## INTRODUCTION

The Lifestyle Project was created in 1993, borne out of a physical geology class discussion about Earth's resources that left students and teachers alike wondering about a creative approach to environmental awareness. The project was conceptualized rather hastily and was presented to the students during the following class. The vast majority of the students loved the idea and opted to take on the challenge. What followed was quite an amazing experience in education, wherein we all came face to face with our personal environmental decisions and experienced both triumphs and frustrations. When we read the students' journals that recorded their actions, thoughts and feelings throughout the Lifestyle Project, we were incredibly moved. Over the years the Lifestyle Project has been modified, offered in an additional course, and taught by several instructors. It has become a fixture in both our physical geology and environmental science courses.

## OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT

The Lifestyle Project asks each student to choose three different ways in which they are interested in changing their habits. The possible categories are: use of electricity and water, heat, automobile usage, food consumption, waste production and environmental education or activism. For each category the rules are clearly defined, such as turning down the heat three degrees or eliminating the use of the car. Each week the project becomes more rigorous, as the students have to meet the requirements more frequently. For example, during the first week of the project students who have chosen the automobile usage category must spend two days without driving their car. Instead they must seek alternatives such as the campus bus, walking or bicycling. During the second week they must forego the comforts of their cars for three days. For the third and final week, they must leave their cars parked for four days. The idea is a gradual but definite change that follows a structure, rather than simply telling the students to drive their cars less.

## METHODS OF INCORPORATING THE LIFESTYLE PROJECT

For the project to be successful, some context should be provided within the course. This can be achieved several ways. Three options are presented here, which can be used alone or in combination. The critical point is that when the project begins the students need to be eager to take on the challenges. Otherwise they will not have enough incentive to really try out the alternatives that the project offers them.

Originally the project was introduced in a laboratory discussion about energy resources. We set up a mock town meeting to discuss a fictional campus-wide energy shortage and how to overcome it. Faced with the idea of adding a coal burning or nuclear power plant, or the complications of carpeting the campus with solar cells, the students realize that no form of energy is without significant environmental impacts. The notion of conservation arises during the discussion, and the students are challenged to see for themselves if conservation can really work.

Alternatively, the project can be introduced with a baseline assessment. The students are asked to rate their environmental impacts, and then to take an Eco-rating Quiz. The quiz is a multiple-choice questionnaire relating to the categories included in the lifestyle project. At the end of the quiz the students score themselves so that the feedback is immediate and often shocking. Very few of the students have a low score indicating a low environmental impact.

Another way to introduce the project is quantitatively. The students are provided with worksheets to record their consumption of energy, water and food, and production of waste for two days. After the students have recorded their activities, they are given spreadsheets so their records can be converted into BTUs of energy, gallons of water and pounds of garbage. We provide them with all the formulae and conversions they need to complete the calculations (available at http://www.skidmore.edu/~jthomas/lifestyleproject), but they collect the data, do the calculations, and analyze the results. The figures are eye-opening and students begin thinking about their impacts on the environment.

The Lifestyle Project assignment is then introduced to the students. The assignment reflects the changes we've made to it over the years, but the categories or details can be changed or modified to fit a particular course, audience or campus.

## THE LIFESTYLE PROJECT AS IT IS PRESENTED TO THE STUDENTS

Our discussions in class have left us thinking about changes we could make in our lifestyle that would be beneficial to the environment, would be realistic to make, and might even improve the quality of our lives.

**The Rules:**

1. The idea of this project is to make changes in your lifestyle that will have a beneficial effect on the environment. The changes aren't difficult, but they are significant. Mostly they will require planning and thinking about your actions.
2. You will slowly increase the degree or frequency of the changes, week by week, for a total period of three weeks. You can pick which days will count as your "project days."
3. You will keep a journal with entries for each day that you complete your project requirements.
4. For whatever reason, you can bail out part way through and complete an alternative assignment instead.
5. The Lifestyle Project involves making changes to your personal lifestyle. If you feel that these changes might negatively affect your health, happiness, and well being in any way, or if they conflict with your religious or philosophical beliefs, then you may choose another assignment.

Choose any three categories from the six choices below. Don't pick something that you already normally do, as the idea of this project is to make changes. Some changes won't be possible in your particular living situation, so obviously you can't pick those.

## THE CATEGORIES

**HEAT** - Expand your comfort zone by turning your heat down 3 degrees Fahrenheit from its normal setting. Continue lowering the heat by 3 degrees every week until you have reduced it by 9 degrees at the end of three weeks. The heat reduction applies for the entire week. This option is limited to those who have control over their own thermostats and who have cooperative housemates!

**GARBAGE** - Spend each project day producing no waste at all. You will have two waste-free days the first week, then three days the second week and four days for the last week. The idea of reducing your input to landfills follows a certain hierarchy. The best thing is to *reduce* the amount of garbage you make by simply using less, buying less, and wasting less. The second option is to *reuse* whatever you can to avoid buying new things that will eventually end up as garbage. *Recycling* is the last option, to be used only when the first two options fail. So on your waste-free days you must live by these rules, and not contribute anything to the landfill on those days. Even though some types of plastics are recyclable, if you aren't able to recycle a particular type of plastic, it counts as garbage. Make sure you write on both sides of the paper, make copies only when necessary, and use the backs of old paper instead of using a fresh sheet. It is considered cheating to just hang on to something until you're given waste-free days pass, and then throw it out. Toilet paper does not count as garbage; it goes to the wastewater treatment plant, not the landfill. Cigarette butts are exempt from this category as well, because quitting smoking is beyond the scope of this project. However, all butts must be put in the garbage can, not on the ground or out your car window.

**ELECTRICITY AND WATER** - Trim the fat off your excess energy consumption by reducing your water and electricity needs by at least 50%. To do this, you can do the following things: turn the lights off when you're not around; turn on only one light instead of two; study next to a window; leave the TV and the stereo off; cook meals that don't require lots of burners at once or long cooking times; use the microwave instead of the stove or oven; take a shower at half the usual duration; turn the water down in the shower so it's not full blast; take a cooler shower; don't leave the water running while washing, shaving, brushing your teeth, or washing dishes; skip the blow dryer and electric razor; don't use any unnecessary appliances; run the washing machine and dishwasher only when totally full; and hang laundry to dry instead of using the dryer. If you do all of these things it is possible to cut your consumption by 50% or more. The first week, you'll do this on two days, and you will add one more day each week, until you have four days for the last week.

**LEAVE THE CAR AT HOME** - Experience the thrill of the outdoors by riding your bike, walking or taking the bus in your daily travels. Hitching a ride with your friends or roommates does reduce the amount of driving, but is also just too easy, so avoid that option unless there are no other alternatives. You will start with two days and increase the number of car-free days per week by one, until you have four days of bike riding (or whatever) during the last week.

**EAT EFFICIENTLY** - The production of meat requires a large amount of water and energy, and also produces considerable waste. Approximately ninety percent of the grain grown in the US is fed to livestock. If you ate the grain crop directly, instead of the livestock, you would be using resources more efficiently. For example, 16 pounds of grain fed to beef cattle produces only one pound of edible meat (Cunningham and Saigo, 1999). The majority of the calorie content is used up by the animal for metabolism. This means that you ingest only about 6% of the original calories produced by the grain crop. Another way of looking at this is by the amount of water required to produce different foods. For example, it takes 160 gallons of water to produce a loaf of bread, but it takes 2,500 gallons of water to produce one pound of beef (Cunningham and Saigo, 1999). By reducing the amount of meat that we eat, we can have a smaller environmental impact. So, for your first week, spend two days feasting on healthy and delicious fruits, vegetables, nuts, and grains, and yes, even cheese doodles; just cut out the meat on these days. Add one vegetarian day each week, until you have four days by the end of the project. You should also be very vigilant about not wasting food during the project. Think of all the resources that go into the production of the food that are wasted if food is thrown out.

Note: If you eat a balanced diet otherwise, you don't need to worry about getting enough protein without meat. An average adult needs about 40 grams of protein per day (Cunningham and Saigo, 1999). Vegetarian

sources of protein include whole grain bread (4 g per slice), beans (7 g per serving), pasta (7 g per serving), peanut butter (7 g per serving) and yogurt (11 g per cup). In any case, you should consult a physician or nutritionist before making changes to your diet or if you have any questions about your ability to complete this aspect of the project.

**CREATE YOUR OWN CATEGORY** - There are many different things that you can do to lessen your impact on the environment or to have a positive effect on the environment. Be creative and come up with your own way of making a difference. You could write letters to your senators, volunteer with the Sierra Club, spend time cleaning up the woods, set up a carpooling system or recycling system in your dorm or workplace, find ways to educate others about the importance of conservation, or change your lifestyle in a way not described in the categories above. Invent your own category and discuss it with your instructor before the project starts.

## THE LIFESTYLE PROJECT JOURNAL

The students keep a journal of their activities in the project with one entry for each day of participation. Journal entries include exactly what they did to meet the requirements of the project, such as their thermostat temperature, the length of their showers, their mode of transportation and their diet. Students are also asked to describe how the lifestyle changes affected them. Reading the journals has become one of the highlights of the semester. It's a real privilege to gain insights into the actions, thoughts, and lives of the students. Often a student will write a long saga about the attempt to make it through 24 hours without producing garbage by avoiding over-wrapped junk food, using a cloth towel instead of paper towels, writing on the back sides of junk mail paper, only to be foiled by a late-night fast food wrapper and a pile of greasy napkins. The journals are collected weekly and returned within two days. The instructor writes plenty of comments, suggestions and encouragement in the journals. Students are encouraged to make the journals themselves environmentally-friendly, so they are often e-mailed, or written on the back sides of scrap paper, or constructed entirely of materials that were destined for the landfill. The journals are also the basis for grading the project. For each week of the project the journals are graded out of 10 points. There is usually a homework assignment added to the project each week, such as calculating the BTUs for shower use or computer time. The weekly grade is based on the completion of the homework assignment and also on the quality of the journal and the degree to which the student is adhering to the project. It is difficult to assign a letter grade for something so subjective, but some criteria include the effort the student puts forth, the depth to which the students describe the details of their project, their sincerity and the commitment they demonstrate.

## THE ACTIVIST PROJECT – ANOTHER PROJECT OPTION

This option is offered to students who are interested in becoming more active in campus environmental issues. The activist project provides an alternate project for students who feel they already lead an environmentally sound lifestyle, or for students that are not interested in changing their personal lifestyle. Students are encouraged to investigate an environmental issue on campus. Examples include junk mail overflowing from campus mailboxes, waste reduction from the dining halls and campus recycling. Before embarking on a project, students meet with the instructor to help them organize their plan and generate solutions. Students use weekly journals to record their plans, meetings, phone calls, and any roadblocks that they encounter. At the completion of the project, students give a short presentation to the class about the results of their efforts.

## RESULTS

The impact of the project is greater than we could ever have expected. The students don't realize what they are getting into at the start. It looks easy, but it is not! The most compelling way to illustrate the results of the project are with the students' words themselves. At the beginning of the project, students reflect on their typical lifestyles, "I love long, hot showers, and I listen to my stereo and watch TV constantly. I leave Christmas lights on in my room most of the time because I don't like coming home to a dark room." "My thermostat is usually set at 85 degrees because I am from Florida." "My car is my life. In two years I put seventy thousand miles on it." The first week of the project is difficult for students, many of who have never conceived of the idea of conservation until now. "My general mentality was really challenged. I was constantly stopping myself from doing things I do everyday. By the end of the day I was questioning everything I did." The project challenges the students to come up with new alternatives to their usual habits. "As we were headed to the parking lot to drive downtown I realized it was a project day and I couldn't use my car. At first I was upset that I couldn't just do what I wanted, but then I decided to walk and my friends agreed to walk with me. We ended up having a nice walk and just had some time to relax and talk." The students become suddenly awakened to the impacts of their everyday habits. "It seems impossible to not produce garbage for even one day. At first it didn't sound like a big deal, but after trying it for just this first day I realized just how much garbage I normally produce! It's embarrassing!"

As the project continues and becomes more rigorous, students find themselves defining new habits and rituals. "Today I cut my showering time down to four minutes. I don't know how I used to spend 20 minutes in the shower. What ever did I used to do in there?" "I actually had to catch myself at least three times between Wednesday and Thursday where I just lazily kept the water running. As corny as this sounds, I stood there looking at the drain while brushing my teeth and felt badly that all that water had gone down – unused."

The effects of the project spread further as the project goes on. The students are excited to share their new habits and ideas with roommates, friends and family. "When I went home for break I went around the house turning off the lights and my Dad just about fell over. He said he's been yelling at me all my life to stop leaving lights on and now I was reminding *him* to turn them off!" As the lifestyle project progresses into the third week, the students are usually seeking more and more ways to conserve. "I have noticed that a lot of the sinks drip in the dorm bathrooms. Using my plumbing skills learned from my father I tightened the washers and a few other

gadgets. Now, there isn't a single drippy faucet in Kimball Hall."

There are many additional benefits offered by living a simplified and conservation-oriented lifestyle, such as increased self-esteem, health benefits and economics. "This whole new routine, by the way, was a major accomplishment for me, and after it happened I was psyched!" "I didn't buy snacks at the school store. I got an apple instead because it's healthier, cheaper, doesn't come in packaging, it's locally grown and transported in reusable wooden crates, not bags."

The students also realize that the steps they are taking do add up and make a difference. It becomes evident that their actions are potential solutions to environmental problems. "I think it is amazing that I was able to not produce garbage for nine days during the project while the average American creates over four pounds of garbage each day. It did require some planning, but I did not find it that difficult, and I think it is definitely worth that small amount of effort. If everyone put in a little effort to reduce their garbage, it would make a tremendous amount of difference in the environment."

The students meet the end of the project with mixed emotions. They are relieved to regain their freedom, but are sad to no longer be challenged by the project. Yet it is nearly universal that they express a new and unshakeable awareness for how their decisions and actions affect the environment. "I am so aware now that I cringe when I see lights on that shouldn't be, and when people take more napkins than they need. Will I always be like this?" "The first few days of participation were difficult because the initial breaking of habits is the hardest part. As the days passed, and more changes were required of me, the first changes became habit. Now it seems that I have picked up a whole bunch of new habits. However they're good habits for a change. I never thought I would develop habits that were actually good for me and good for the earth as well." "All of the categories I picked seem so easy and trivial now, although they seemed almost impossible at the start." "I find it painfully ironic that a class I took only to fulfill the science requirement will have a stronger impact on how I actually live my life, day to day, than any other class I've taken."

The results of the activist projects have also been very positive. Student projects have lead to a renewal of a campus-wide recycling program and periodic improvements in recycling. One student did a project on composting dining room waste. He then did a semester long independent study on the same subject. He became the campus composting expert and investigated various ways to compost waste. The end result will be a self-contained composting facility on campus that will be a highly visible environmental project. In addition to reducing waste, the compost will also reduce the use of artificial fertilizers on campus. One of the apartments in a campus development has been converted to an Environmental Lifestyle living unit. The residents of the house have an organic garden and collect composting material from all the other apartments in the complex. Several students have worked in the North Woods, a wooded laboratory area north of the main campus, to monitor or mitigate human impacts. Some have worked with local environmental groups and then gone on to intern with them.

## CONCLUSION

We have found the Lifestyle Project to be an invaluable part of our Physical Geology and Environmental Science courses. To be most successful, the project requires a commitment from the instructors as well as the students. To keep the momentum up throughout the project, we provide encouraging feedback in the journals, we do the project ourselves, and we relate environmental tips to the class throughout the project. At the end of the project, rough calculations are presented to the class to show them how much energy they saved collectively. After ten years and over one thousand students, the quantity of resources saved is truly impressive. In the end, the educational and environmental experience of the lifestyle project is quite valuable for everyone involved.

Even though our lectures range in size from 60-120 students, we often keep in close contact with the students after the end of the classes. Many of the students keep up their lifestyle changes after the project is over. We have heard many anecdotal stories about how the Lifestyle Project is still affecting the habits of the students. In a 1996 survey of students who had completed the project during the previous three years, 81% reported they had changed their habits in permanent ways. But, yes, there is a minority of students who drive across campus to eat a hamburger the minute the project is over.

For more information on the lifestyle project, please visit the web site at http://www.skidmore.edu/~jthomas/lifestyleproject. The web site includes materials used to introduce the lifestyle project, spreadsheets to calculate energy and water use, the project assignment and variations of the project, and results of a post-project student survey.

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## REFERENCE

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