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## Course links ethical concepts and sustainability



Evan Selinger

Over the past two decades, sustainability—generally defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs—has become a buzz word in discussions surrounding environmental quality, climate change, pollution prevention and global justice. It is also now used to describe a growing academic and research discipline that combines aspects of engineering, science, economics, public policy and philosophy to promote better understanding of the integrated and complex consequences of human action.

However, disagreement exists over the practical meaning of sustainability, and questions remain as to why citizens, government and industry should view it as a priority. This debate has hampered efforts to implement sustainable principles and it has slowed efforts to create educational programs in the area.

“Unlike more clear-cut fields such as engineering or physics, sustainability is an amalgamation of multiple disciplines and there is significant debate over which aspects should be dominant,” notes Evan Selinger, assistant professor of philosophy at RIT. “Some experts view it simply as a technical concept that can be applied to specific problem sets such as making a production process more energy efficient, while others see it as a broader moral idea that can assist society in changing how we act towards our surroundings.”

This dichotomy in the definition and implementation of sustainability is the focus of several projects that Selinger, an expert in the philosophy of technology, is undertaking at RIT.

He is currently offering a course in sustainability ethics that examines the different definitions and theories of sustainability and its key ethical concepts, and that critically interrogates how technology may advance or hinder sustainable living.

The class aims to engage students in a dialogue surrounding the key sustainability questions and to promote greater understanding of the main issues in the field.

The course is a component of RIT’s new Ph.D. program in sustainability and is also offered as an elective course to all RIT undergraduate and graduate students.

“Before we can use sustainability to transform our society we need to develop a better understanding of what it means and why it is important,” Selinger adds. “It is my hope this course will help our students—many of whom are interested in careers in the field—better answer the pressing questions for themselves and ultimately contribute to the broader debate in their professional lives.”

On top of his teaching efforts, Selinger is also co-directing a conference on sustainable ethics, which will be held at RIT on May 1. The event is being organized with Wade Robison, the Ezra Hale Chair of Applied Ethics, and Ryne Raffaele, the academic director of the Golisano Institute for Sustainability, and will feature leading experts in environmental ethics, the philosophy of technology and sustainable development.

It is sponsored by Provost Jeremy Haefner; Dean Robert Ulin; Nabil Nasr, director of the Golisano Institute for Sustainability; Mary-Beth Cooper, vice president for student affairs; and the Ezra A. Hale Chair in Applied Philosophy and the Mellon Foundation. Selinger hopes to develop the conference, which is free and open to the public, as an annual academic symposium. For information, visit [www.rit.edu/cla/ethics/Sustainability.html](http://www.rit.edu/cla/ethics/Sustainability.html).

“Not only are ethical considerations central to how we define sustainability, but advancing our understanding of sustainability ethics also will help us develop the discipline of sustainability in such a way as to keep attention on the entitlements that all members of society deserve.”

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Will Dube

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