

*A new Earth conversation....* **A new Earth community**

A campus-wide climate initiative at Clark University, launching AY 2017-18

**The world faces unprecedented challenges... so does higher education.**

Our interdependent ecosystem has been de-stabilized by its human inhabitants and the expansion of an industrial economy powered by fossil fuels. The underlying political, economic and social tenets of our world are proving increasingly volatile, destructive and untenable as well.

***How do we educate in a time of increasing uncertainty, instability and injustice?***

***How do we educate now for the world we wish to see?***

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What if students, on their first day of college, found a campus brimming with the palpable excitement of teams (of students, faculty and staff) exploring, acknowledging and working together to address the slow violence of environmental destruction and climate change? To vision and build a just world, one in both human lives and the natural world are valued? What if those students could work, socialize, and reside together in spaces of reflection, inquiry and action?

In this scenario, the University is a site of creative endeavors producing deeper understandings of the past, contributing to life-affirming projects in the present and sharing responsibility for the future. It is a hatchery of ideas grown out of reflection, discernment and practice, incorporated into making new knowledge and thoughtful action. This University cultivates *planetary citizens*. It is **A new Earth community**.

Many universities throughout the world have faculty, students, and institutes working broadly in the field of climate change, including the physical sciences, climate modeling, technological development, information transfer, negotiation and decision-making. Less evident is the role of colleges and universities in preparing individuals and communities to engage with the complexity and uncertainty associated with climate change as a by-product of a predominantly instrumental approach to Earth and its peoples.

We know that climate change poses a profound threat to human health and rights, global economies, social justice, ecological diversity and the vitality of our ecosystem. Still, these risks are not distributed evenly across human populations, but aggravate existing inequalities along racial, economic, and geographic lines. In addition to recognized natural impacts (prolonged heat events, changing precipitation patterns, sea level rise, spread of vector-borne and water-related infections, species extinction, etc.), there is increased awareness of the impact of climate change on human mobility, livelihoods, mental health and well-being. **A new Earth**

**community** seeks creative approaches to being with the challenges ahead, cultivating resilience, and advocating for climate justice (understood as racial and economic justice) in response to the complex and uncertain changes we will face.

A fundamental conversation about the role of higher education in these times underlies the work of **A new Earth community**. As a University, we value truth, reasoning, exploration, discernment, ethical behavior and the search for meaning; we encourage respect, integrity and compassion among our community members; we seek an equitable and sustainable nation, world and planet. Thus we must bear the responsibility of those values in this time of increasing challenge, both political and environmental.

Clark has a deep history of integrative thinking and action on the human / environment relationship. We have an established culture of dialogue and community-building. The times ask that, drawing from those, we re-commit to the unique work of the University in society – that of encouraging its members to be awake and engaged, to vision and act with intelligence, empathy, and creativity, and to stand on the side of justice and in affirmation of our interdependence.

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In that context, for the last year a significant number of Clark faculty have held a deeply-rooted conversation on the question of **climate change and its implications** – in small settings (Councils, TRIOS, advisory group) and more public activities (programs and Teach-ins). As we considered the impact of this existential challenge together, we’ve been asking: *What do these profound changes mean for our responsibility as educators?*

In response to that question, the defining vision has become that of a creative *community*. In addition, **A new Earth community** is defined and realized through an intentional process of **reflection, discernment and action**. This central process is embodied in a number of core elements, activities and spaces:

- **Collaboratives** on topical questions (for academic credit)
- **Council on the Uncertain Human Future** a foundational practice for all involved in NEC
- **An immersion experience in the natural world**
- **First Year Intensive seminars** (FYIs) introducing these questions
- **Mindful Choices** a discernment process for undergrads
- **TRIO conversation events** (faculty, students, joint) on emerging questions
- **NEC Teach-ins and keynotes**
- **A common program and learning space, and a residential space**

**Collaboratives, informed by an experience of Council, are a central and distinctive process of the NEC.** A different kind of learning experience, the *Collaborative* engenders genuine inquiry

and a collective search for insight, and depends on horizontal relationships between faculty and students, and between students.

Organized in pods or small mobilizations, with a major dimension of the work outside the classroom, pods are ecosystems in themselves, which then aggregate over time to create a larger system of exchange and creative action.

Dialogic and emergent, *Collaboratives* move and grow in the spaces between existing curriculum, programs, institutes and other structures – just as the NEC has so far. They are question-based, dynamic, and flexible, and give shape to practices of *reflection, exploration, discernment, visioning* and *action*.

The work of *Collaboratives* aims less at a mastery of a certain body of knowledge than at reaching a deeper understanding of a significant issue through collective practices of listening, respect, empathy and exploration – fostering the abilities to stretch, risk, question, despair and rebound, and discern – and cultivating an authentic arc between *seeking to know* and *choosing to act*.

A proposal to launch a *Collaborative* in a general topical area should be initiated by a team including at least one faculty member and one student. Once convened, members of a *Collaborative* work in three phases:

- **Phase one** *What is the issue, question, dilemma that we want to grapple with?*  
Exploration of a general collective concern, with one or two primary questions crafted together to focus future work
- **Phase two** *What do we need to know now?*  
Detailed, exploration of key issues or questions resulting in more holistic understanding of the issue, as well as moral and ethical debates and commitments within it
- **Phase three** *What do we choose to do, given what we know?*  
Mobilizing of the insights and possibilities gained from collective analysis and visioning; the taking of practical steps, however small, toward building the world they want to create

Using careful consideration, Council practice, social and ecological imagination, and technical ingenuity, *Collaboratives* model practices, processes and policies that can match the urgent need unfolding around us, from local to global scale. These thematically-defined communities cultivate wisdom as well as skills, and put their ideas and principles on the line – in applications from peacemaking and community building to scenarios and models for buildings, landscapes and city planning efforts, often linking to national and global scales.

(See further information and sample topics in the appendix.)

**Participation in a *Council on the Uncertain Human Future* will initiate the NEC experience for every student who joins it**, and Council-type conversations will serve as a ongoing practice and resource for the program. (See appendix)

**Each student will participate in a weeklong immersion experience in the natural world, involving observation, reflection and silence.** These will be held in a variety of locales and develop in a range of formats, but will have in common a simple form of shelter (camping or cabins), the preparation of food, walking only, no electronics, periods of silence and reflection, and journaling, drawing or both.

**Additional program elements include related first year intensives (FYIs), sections of the Mindful Choices course, TRIO conversations, biennial Teach-ins, and additional residential and experiential aspects.** (See appendix)

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In summary, our broadest intention is to develop models of how higher education can contribute to understanding and living with climate change and the uncertainty and injustices it reflects and produces. While many look primarily to solutions through policy and technology, we are eager to make the case for reflection, conversation, community and creative action in the face of an uncertain future – and the human shortfalls and misunderstandings, even *derangement* (Amitav Ghosh), that led to it.

At a time when many question both the cost and value of a liberal arts education, ***A new Earth community*** draws upon the arts and humanities as well as the social and natural sciences to transcend specialized knowledge – to embrace the creativity that emerges from juxtaposition, synthesis, and even contradiction. It builds initiatives and vision rooted in insight gained through reflection, empathy and experience.

Running counter to trends in higher education that seek to measure outcomes and quantify the “valued added” of each new endeavor, we believe that, done right, the process is an outcome, reminding one another of the possibility that comes from *not knowing*. In short, while the urgency of climate change issues a challenge to higher education, the uncertainty it engenders underscores the continued relevance of liberal education well beyond the imparting of skill sets and pre-professional training, while still fostering those elements as part of an integrative and engaged curriculum.

**Clark University is uniquely positioned to take up this work.** A small research university committed to liberal education and challenging convention, it stands at the intersection of action and reflection. We have remarkable synergy between the strong and related centers of expertise (all nationally and internationally connected) in the Graduate School of Geography, the IDCE programs, the Higgins School of Humanities, the Marsh Institute and the Mosakowski Institute; this has been strengthened in the work of ***A new Earth conversation*** between faculty over the last 18 months.

The NEC builds on Clark’s strengths. It draws from our rich history considering the human / environment relationship, and brings work already underway into more intentional relationship.

A large number of faculty already focus on issues of environment, climate, and social justice; we have a strong track record in convening work across the disciplines through the Higgins School and the Difficult Dialogues initiative. We are ready to convene people within the University, work with partners in the community and region, and across the worlds of academia, business and government as well

Conveners / authors	<b>Sarah Buie</b>	V&PA / Higgins School	
	<b>Ellen Foley</b>	IDCE	
	<b>Amy Richter</b>	History / Higgins School	
	<b>Deb Robertson</b>	Biology	
	<b>Rinku Roy Chowdhury</b>	Geography	
Core leadership	<b>Ed Carr</b>	IDCE	
	<b>Chuck Agosta</b>	Physics	
	<b>Tony Bebbington</b>	Geography	
	<b>Jim Gomes</b>	Mosakowski Institute	
	<b>Steve Levin</b>	English	
	<b>James Cordova</b>	Psychology	
	<b>Dianne Rocheleau</b>	Geography	
	Advisors	<b>Dave Correll</b>	GSOM
		<b>Rob Johnston</b>	Marsh Institute
		<b>Karen Frey</b>	Geography
<b>Chris Williams</b>		Geography	
<b>Jody Emel</b>		Geography	
<b>Robert (Gil) Pontius</b>		Geography	
<b>Srini Sitaraman</b>		Political Science	
<b>Jenny Isler</b>		Sustainable Clark	
<b>Jessica Bane-Robert</b>		LEEP and Writing Center	
<b>Amber Murrey-Ndewa</b>		IDCE	
Student advisors	<b>Ilanah Taves '16</b>	Geography undergrad, IDCE grad	
	<b>Hannah Silverfine '16</b>	Geography undergrad, IDCE grad	
	<b>Maddy Doyle '19</b>	Psychology undergrad	
	<b>Savannah Cooley '16</b>	Economics undergrad, GIS grad	

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## **COLLABORATIVES**

Imagine a beehive of activity characterized by autonomy, community, creativity, commitment and grit – and a sense of purpose and justice. These are the NEC *Collaboratives*.

***Collaboratives, informed by an initiatory experience of Council, are a central and distinctive process of the NEC.*** They are question-based, dynamic, and flexible, and embody a flow of *reflection, exploration, discernment, visioning* and *action*. They interrupt habitual thinking, engender genuine inquiry and a collective search for insight, and depend on horizontal relationships between faculty and students, and between students.

*Collaboratives* can be seen as expanding networks of interaction and exchange. Facilitator teams (faculty and student) begin by convening councils and workshops around a relatively open topic, allowing the concerns and questions of the group to emerge. After discerning their own curiosities, capabilities and collaborative opportunities, the group conducts research to deepen their resources and understanding; from there, new questions and insights may emerge, and specific projects, actions and collaborations develop. At some point, local experiments make link to those in other places through networks of students, faculty, and alums as well as related social movement and government actors, and to national and international Council networks as well.

Clark is unusual in its quorum of faculty and others ready, able and willing to cultivate such networks. We can model the feasibility and power of this process – a means of cultivating collective wisdom undergirded by expertise and political will.

Sample *Collaboratives* include:

### **Food Systems and Climate Change** Dianne Rocheleau

The role of food production in the generation of greenhouse gases is pivotal, with effects both direct and indirect. This *Collaborative* addresses the full range of these effects and their significance, separately and combined. Thematic areas might include: 1) accessing and mapping the “footprint” (in energy, deforestation, land degradation and greenhouse gas) of food consumption in Worcester; 2) considering the scope to reduce that footprint, while increasing the nutritional content and equalizing access across socio-economic groups; 3) culinary and nutritional implications of applying these criteria, with a focus on both traditional recipes and recent innovations; 4) the impact of these decisions on labor and social justice. The group would use questions posed, data generated and insights gained to conduct workshops on alternative pathways to satisfying demand for the same foods or to consider substitutes, and the impacts of these both locally and at large scales.

**Beyond the population bomb** *Rethinking population and the environment in an era of climate change* Ellen Foley

The *Collaborative* will examine gendered and racialized ways that environmental thinkers have framed population in relation to resource scarcity, food insecurity, conflict and violence, environmental degradation and climate change. We will explore how these discourses influence environmental activism, impact sexual and reproductive health policy, and fuel anti-immigrant rhetoric, while obscuring the complex contributors to environmental problems. Finally we will look to reproductive, environmental and climate justice movements to find frameworks that take action on environmental issues while fighting for social justice, and will develop a working relationship with one or more of them.

**Climate Change and Global Thought** Stephen Levin

This *Collaborative* will explore the idea of 'ecology' in cross-cultural perspective, with particular consideration to literary responses to climate change in different cultural and political contexts. We will think comparatively about the representation of ecological crises, and about likenesses and differences in literary portrayals of environmental thought—including relationships between human and non-human species and objects. Among topics for consideration will be dominant modes of extraction and commodification, regimes of energy and power, understandings of waste and disposability, and models for food production and consumption. Representative local practices in one or more of these areas will be identified, researched, and engagement with their work explored, with possible reforms and innovations pursued.

**Indigenous Movements for Land and Earth** *The Case of Standing Rock, the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the #NoDAPL resistance movement* Amber Murrey-Ndewa

Countering months of resistance from a coalition of thousands concerned about the effects of the pipeline on water and quality of life — the Sacred Stone, Red Warrior, and Oceti Sakowin Camps brought together under the banner of #NoDAPL – President Donald Trump signed an executive order in his first week in office ordering the US Army to expedite review and approval of the Dakota Access Pipeline. He also requested the Keystone XL operator to resubmit its contentious permit application. The struggle at Standing Rock exposes the long and entrenched relationship between settler colonial extractions and environmental destruction and disrepair, in which Indigenous peoples are the “first line of defense” in the face of anthropogenic climate crises. This *Collaborative* will convene (through research and conversation) the perspectives of faculty working on oil extraction and violence (including climate violence and colonial violence); students, faculty, staff, community who stand in solidarity with Standing Rock Sioux nation; and members of FANG, SURJ, and Greenpeace. Support of existing action and avenues for further action will be explored.

**Water and the City** *A Socio-hydrology of Worcester and New England* Rinku Roy Chowdhury

The collaborative will offer participants an historical and contemporary deep dive into the social relationships between our city-region and its water (as lifeline, right, cultural and ecological



resource, economic engine, waste, and central to politics, regulation, management and future climate vulnerability and resilience). Worcester will be a living laboratory in exploring regional hydrological history (also linked to climate) and development, as well as current issues in water and wastewater management, conservation, and planning. An in-depth study of local neighborhood and urban-scale socio-hydrological change (e.g., Coe's Pond, others) may be part of our work.

**Expanding Collaboratives Across Constituencies** Srinivasan

On the major issues of our time, including climate change, academic communities need to expand the connections and the range of input we receive. The increased political polarization of our society makes these issues more vital than ever. Involvement with a broader audience will enable us to understand the ideas, feelings, and views of a much wider range of people within the larger Worcester area, and by extension, a broader range of Americans as a whole. In this *Collaborative*, we invite participants into extended conversation around a selected issue or a related set of issues. Participants could be from the Worcester city government, or mayors / managers of nearby towns and other stakeholders engaged in the day-to-day business of energy, environment, public health, sanitation, and refugee and immigrant re-settlement; it could also include members of other universities, high schools, other academic establishments, and members of the community. All can contribute to understanding and building collaborative collectives across different spectrums; the dialogue process will be structured so as to encourage the development of collaborative projects.

## **COUNCIL on the UNCERTAIN HUMAN FUTURE**

While our knowledge of the scientific consensus on climate and its wider contexts has grown substantially, at least in academic circles, we as a society have been reluctant or unable to acknowledge the threats posed by climate change, address its implications and consider how we might respond. Awareness that anthropogenic global climate change poses grave challenges to the living systems of the planet and to the survival of human civilization has increased, yet a collective reckoning with its implications continues to be elusive.

The **Council on the *Uncertain Human Future*** was formed toward that end. Initiated as a project of the Higgins School of Humanities within the Humanities for the Environment (HfE) initiative of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), it was first funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. A trans-disciplinary group of distinguished humanities scholars, public intellectuals, writers and artists were invited to engage these concerns, cultivate a capacity for the questions in an extended dialogue, and return to a larger public with insights, individual and shared. The initial questions Council members were invited to consider were: ***What is taking place on the planet, and why? What are the implications for humans, the Earth and all living things? How do we choose to conduct ourselves in the face of grave danger and uncertainty?*** Learn more at <http://councilontheuncertainhumanfuture.org>

The national **Council on the *Uncertain Human Future*** first met in three two-day retreats over the course of 2014. The retreats were held in a Council format, a process of intentional speaking and listening that supports a creative and trustworthy exchange among the participants. Each Council retreat was preceded by a public event featuring outside speakers and, where possible, by a dialogue between Council members and these speakers. Since then, the national Council has held a reunion gathering (February 2016) in which the sessions were filmed, and recently released a film *Listening for Signal* (funded by the Kaiser Foundation). The creation of *A Reader for the Uncertain Human Future* is underway, with publication anticipated in the next year.

Additional Councils have been held at the University of Edinburgh (2016), the National Center for Atmospheric Research, NCAR (2016), and three faculty Councils have been held at Clark (2015, 2016, 2017). Two Councils have been conducted among student groups at Clark, and another is planned. A number of additional Councils are in the works. Council reunions for the national, Edinburgh and NCAR Councils have just received funding from the Reynolds Foundation.

Through the **Council on the *Uncertain Human Future***, we acknowledge and stay with what we come to see about our planetary situation, allowing vision and action to emerge from that place of reckoning. In a gradual collective way, new creative insights and collaborations become possible. The UHF Council is foundational to the New Earth Community (NEC) and will be one of the first experiences students have as they enter it. Thus the work of *Collaboratives* and other curriculum and programs will draw from this depth of reckoning and insight.

## **FIRST YEAR INTENSIVES (FYIs)**

A set of FYIs around an expansive set of topics related to the climate challenge will be cultivated for students interested in participating in the NEC. A number of these already exist (Karen Frey, Elli Crocker and others) and we are in the process of encouraging others. We aim for ten FYIs relevant to the NEC to be offered every year.

## **MINDFUL CHOICES ENVIRONMENTAL FOCUS**

*Mindful Choices* is a program that creates a space of reflection for undergraduates as they consider their education and vocation. Based at the Higgins School of Humanities and launched in the fall of 2013 with funding from the Mellon Foundation, the *MC* curriculum is a unique integration of writing practice, artistic exploration and dialogue around a set of questions. The *Mindful Choices* program has become an important resource for students during their time at Clark and/or as they prepare to graduate; the sessions offered each term fill quickly.

The course encourages a process of listening, claiming vision and having agency; it emphasizes the possibilities of the arts to explore intangibles in a tangible way, and materials as a way to locate ideas. As they take up both personal and collective concerns, students develop a level of trust and deepening engagement over seven weeks of class meetings and a night retreat.

A number of faculty include aspects of the human / nature relationship in the course. They include the climate crisis as a context for students' choices for their lives and work, and reflected it in the course priorities and questions. As we develop the NEC, we will seek to offer at least four sections each term with this environmental focus.

## **TRIOs**

TRIOs are a series of conversations among the faculty, sparked by a common climate-related question offered by the TRIO members; eight TRIO conversations have been held over the last eighteen months. TRIOs will continue as a regular aspect of the NEC, both as faculty development and to expand the NEC-related faculty community. We see them expanding to include students, both among themselves and with faculty.

As the *new Earth conversation* took shape over the last 18 months, the TRIO practice has brought faculty together to explore the climate issue and their concerns in new ways. For each event, the three faculty members meet in advance to discern a question they would like to explore together. At the event, they offer the question to the group, and briefly share their own thoughts before speaking together and then opening the conversation.

Examples of past questions include: *In addition to the ethical imperative to engage meaningfully*

*with climate change, how can we imagine our political engagement with it as individuals and as a community? What changes can we effect in the current political discourse on climate change? What do we think of as inevitable and how do we get beyond that notion of inevitability? What sort of possibilities might lie in undoing our sense of the inevitable?*

## **TEACH-INS, KEYNOTES and PUBLIC PROGRAMMING**

The NEC has sponsored two campus-wide Teach-ins over the last two years (2015 and 2016). For each Teach-in, nearly 45 faculty members offered sessions or sat on panels, and between 500 and 700 members of the community participated. <http://newearthconversation.org/#> It is hoped that a Teach-in can be planned biennially – the next one to take place in the spring of 2018.

In addition, a number of public programs have taken place, including talks by our own faculty and special guests (Naomi Klein, others). A regular series of public programs will bring a range of thinking and resources to the NEC community, as well as further a sense of community.