



## **Winthrop University Office of Sustainability**

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### From Washington to Winthrop: True Sustainability

Chris Johnson, Sustainability Coordinator for Winthrop University's Office of Sustainability

Chris Johnson had an awareness for the natural environment from an early age. He grew up in Pennsylvania near one of the first oil drills in the country. His mother studied environmental education, and his grandparents owned a sawmill. Wealth from the oil industry enabled Pennsylvania to enjoy a prosperous era of large homes and stately buildings. Chris developed his love for architecture from being around such remarkable buildings. His interest expanded further when he realized the correlation of architecture and design to social, economic, and ecological issues.

After graduating high school, Chris pursued an undergraduate education in interior design and architecture at Winthrop University. While at Winthrop, Chris completed an internship program in Washington, D.C. during the Clinton administration where Chris was a part of the President's Council on Sustainable Development. This experience opened his eyes to the often-overlooked connections concerning sustainability. "Sustainability cannot work alone. It has to be integrated with social equality, economic vitality, and ecological integrity.

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These interconnected lenses can help better explain true sustainability,” says Chris.

During his college years, Chris was able to conduct architectural research in South Africa. “My focus was to look at what transpired after the apartheid government was abolished in terms of architectural structures. I wanted to know how the architecture had changed in response to the poverty and conditions that occurred,” says Chris. A few years later, he attended a presentation at Winthrop on the humanitarian crisis in South Africa. “The presentation really made sense. I actually saw some of the social conditions and architectural changes that the speaker discussed,” says Chris. Chris continues to emphasize the connectedness between social and economic issues, such as those in South Africa, and their effect on sustainability efforts and overall change.

Today, as the Sustainability Coordinator for Winthrop’s Office of Sustainability, Chris is developing programs to improve student awareness on sustainable lifestyle options and to educate them about the true definition of sustainability. “Sustainability is not isolated...all disciplines need to at least begin to develop an understanding on what sustainability actually is. Our culture tends to make decisions based on old ways of thinking. True sustainability requires new thinking,” says Chris. He encourages students to discover hobbies that encourage sustainable habits.

In his spare time, Chris participates in marathons across the United States observing and learning from the natural environment. Books on environmental conditions and sustainable efforts throughout history, including *Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World* by Louis Fischer and *Serve God Save the Planet* by J. Matthew Sleeth, Md., line the shelves of his office. He strongly encourages students and faculty to add such literature to their reading lists,

emphasizing that learning about real-life implications of poor sustainability can truly change the way we think and act. Even something as simple as deciding not to drink from non-recyclable straws can improve the environment by eliminating toxic and dangerous objects from the ocean and other bodies of water where animals might mistake such objects as food.

For students interested in learning more about the interconnectedness of sustainability throughout the world, Winthrop offers a sustainability course (SUST 102), as well as the option to minor in sustainability. Campus organizations promote sustainable practices. Chris is the faculty advisor for Winthrop's Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC), a national, student-run progressive organization that focuses on grassroots democracy to uproot environmental injustices.



Chris collects recyclable trash at the 2015 Homecoming tailgate events

“It’s okay to learn more for ourselves, but it’s about educating the people who don’t know anything about [sustainable practices],” says Chris. The organization is in a recruitment stage to draw more student interest. To learn more about SEAC, Winthrop’s Office of Sustainability, or ways to be more sustainable, contact Chris at 803-323-2389 or email him at [sustainability@winthrop.edu](mailto:sustainability@winthrop.edu). You can also visit the Office of Sustainability at [www.winthrop.edu/sustainability](http://www.winthrop.edu/sustainability) to find out ways you can contribute to a more sustainable campus and environment.

Chris wants to leave one final note for Winthrop students to think about: “Don’t be afraid of sustainability.”

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