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Our Generation, Our Planet

Grace Tam

Valparaiso University, Grace.tam@valpo.edu

Evan Knowles

Valparaiso University, Evan.Knowles@valpo.edu

Michael Bim-Merle

Valparaiso University, mike.bimmerle@valpo.edu

Thomas E. Palmer II

Valparaiso University, Tommy.palmer@valpo.edu

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Student Perspectives

Something that has become abundantly clear to me in this fight for sustainability is the difference between learning and doing. I have seen several different approaches working toward the same goal, but making staggeringly different progress.

We are so painfully behind in the US in terms of taking action against climate change. As Americans, we want to do well morally, so that we feel better about ourselves. We do just enough to give ourselves a pat on the back. This means that we think by merely talking about an issue, we are doing our part. In many other countries, citizens are walking the walk. Back in 2010, I first learned about the concept of composting. It didn't happen in a classroom or from my immediate family doing it. I first learned of it when visiting a cousin in Amsterdam who had a compost system in her backyard. Something so commonplace in other countries was something I had to wait a decade to even discover. It was not being hidden from me, yet because this as well as many other practices are not as common in the US, they are not instilled in our future generations. We need to get used to little inconveniences for the greater good. This is a collective effort. I understand that it is easy to point to big corporations and ask for change, but the difference that we make as individuals is nonzero. Although things are happening, it is too little and almost too late. It all stems back to how we are taught. I learned more about sustainability through one course I took in Costa Rica than I have throughout my entire American education. Although the course material is different from what I am learning here, it is how the mindset of their society is taught that really stuck with me. I was taught that the concepts and strategies that I was learning in my class could be accomplished on both small and large scales in my own life. We were taught through an extremely hands-on approach. I learned about biomimicry by conducting environmental sectoral analysis in a park and designing from what we observed. When we learned about permaculture, we visited a permaculture farm in a cloud forest on a weekend field trip. During that trip, we made real improvements to the farm's operations after studying that chapter the previous week. In a US

classroom, I've discussed high level environmental concepts that are common sense to anyone who knows the triple bottom line/3 pillars of sustainability and made no tangible changes.

In Costa Rica, there is a societal mindset toward sustainability. There is a collective push to save their environment. It is much easier to make changes when communities are directly impacted and results are measurable. The idea of a small change such as composting is a lot more enticing when the rainforests being destroyed or the cloud forests disappearing are in your backyard. Areas like California have pushed ahead in sustainable efforts due to the fact that they are already seeing the effects of climate change through wildfires, water scarcity, and other extreme weather events. Here in Indiana, we hardly hear more than "record rainfall/high temperature/-40 windchill." That isn't enough for many Midwesterners to connect the dots on a personal level. Once the problem hits too close to home, maybe we'll find the time to pay attention.

GRACE TAM
VALPARAISO, INDIANA, USA
SENIOR, INTEGRATED BUSINESS AND ENGINEERING

After COP26, the United Nations Climate Change Conference in November of 2021 in Glasgow, the world was left with promises from leaders – pledges they cannot trust. At the previous landmark UN Climate Conference, COP21 in Paris in 2015, world leaders committed to climate targets that fell miserably short. The failure to meet those climate objectives has cast a shadow on any future commitments. Not only that, a failure to follow through on climate promises can spark doubt in leaders' abilities to perform other aspects of their jobs. Still, leaders from national governments and global corporations came together again at COP26 to tout their commitments to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2050. These new pledges present an opportunity for national and business leaders to set themselves apart as not just leaders in a reinvigorated fight against climate change, but as leaders on all accounts.

Trust is a universal requirement of all leaders to perform their jobs. It "stands as the primary foundation for which all leadership ability is built upon - without trust, a leader's capability to lead efficiently and effectively is crippled" (Harper, 2017, p.23). For example, companies need shareholders who trust management to fulfill their promises. Management that can't meet the targets they have given themselves are logically unworthy of financial investment. Politically, leaders in democratic governments must maintain trust from their constituents in order to remain in their positions in government. Voting in a democracy is based on trusting politicians to fulfill campaign promises. If a politician fails to do what they have agreed to, there is little reason for their constituents to keep them in office. Maintaining trust is integral for corporate and political leaders, as inefficient and ineffective leadership points to a need to changing those in power.

Leading up to the event in Glasgow, many countries committed to more aggressive climate targets than those laid out in previous years. Those new targets cover around 90% of global emissions and 71% of the global population (New Climate Institute & Climate Analytics, 2021a). While these new targets are encouraging, based on the performance of most

countries that committed to the Paris Agreement's 1.5-degree Celsius goal in 2015, the past indicates they won't be met (New Climate Institute & Climate Analytics, 2021b).

Not only have national commitments failed to hold up to scrutiny by climate scientists, but corporate climate pledges have also often missed the mark as well. For example, scope three emissions (i.e., collateral emissions), while admittedly difficult to account for, are all-too-often ignored in corporate pledges. So, if companies produce net-zero emissions targets that don't include those scope three emissions, they will not be truly carbon-neutral.

These new climate change commitments are perfect opportunities to rebuild trust. Why? The entire world is watching. All who have developed new climate targets can make the effort to reach them and, in turn, help themselves and their organizations rebuild and maintain public support. They can do so by developing clear emissions targets and keeping active updates on their progress. Progress transparency will be a great tool to increase accountability and indicate that business and national leaders intend to fulfill climate promises.

As the world moves past COP26, devastating climate change issues are of increased concern for many. Whether or not the leaders of our world will make the changes necessary to curb that concern, only time will tell.

EVAN KNOWLES
CHESTERTON, INDIANA, USA
GRADUATE, FINANCE

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The greatest intellectual gift humanity has received is the ability to learn. We learn from the day we are born to the day we die. Life presents a constant source of opportunities to acquire knowledge, whether realized or not. As human beings, we learn in many ways. We learn from educational pursuits, experiences, and attempts at innovation, but the most excellent teacher will always be our mistakes. Making mistakes is part of life; it's part of being a fallible human being. We have the ability to admit when we are wrong and move on to bigger, better things with that newfound knowledge. However, there is one trait we must have to learn from our failures: responsibility. The first step in fixing a mistake is admitting that there was one; admitting to something we may not be proud of takes courage and a desire to make things right. It's much easier to make excuses and never make amends to what we have damaged. Accountability must occur.

The actions taken at the COP26 in Glasgow, UK, genuinely represent an effort to take responsibility for what the human race has done to the planet. We have seriously compromised our habitat as well as that of plants and animals. There are no longer viable

excuses for ongoing destruction especially since so many green alternatives are available. The eye-opening science of the current situation does not lie. Carbon emissions have caused carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere to rise from 277 parts per million in the 19th century to 412 parts per million in 2020, according to “The Economist.”

It won't be easy to change our lifestyles to effect meaningful environmental preservation. We like to blame all our climate problems on multi-national corporations that generate harmful emissions. We fail to realize that these corporations exist because they provide for the markets we create through our demand for more products. We, as Americans and top carbon emitters, will have to make uncomfortable changes; our rampant consumerism must be curbed. We have to take responsibility for the fact that unbridled greed has threatened our very existence.

The COP26 meetings and resulting joint agreement reflects a collective effort to not only assess and discuss the obvious problems, but to take immediate and transformative action. As developing nations are paying the highest price for the excesses of developed countries, part of this action must involve assistance to those nations. Whole island nations are facing extinction as rising sea levels consume their very shorelines. Thus, every country, community, corporation, and even person must take responsibility for their contribution to this existential threat. There is no time for bitterness, but a shared urgency to reverse the harm created. It's now time to move forward together, employing sincere efforts to reduce our collective carbon footprint. It's a time to admit to the damage we have caused and move forward with renewed urgency and determination.

MICHAEL BIM-MERLE
MICHIGAN CITY, INDIANA, USA
BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

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The road to Glasgow has been a difficult one. Since COP21 in 2015, many major events have shaken the world. Whether it was former President Donald Trump abruptly pulling the United States out of the Paris Climate Agreement or the multiple climate disasters that have stricken the world, particularly over the past five years, the wake-up calls are unending. In addition to such setbacks, the world has had to cope with the pandemic which left no country untouched since lock-downs went into effect beginning in 2020. Rectification of these setbacks and warnings must be accomplished to persevere as a planet, offering opportunities as well as challenges.

Covid-19 might indeed be the kick starter to meaningful change. It has given us a reason to think differently as a planet – a reason to change the current path we are on to prevent recurrence of illness and forestall a growing existential threat. The pandemic has given us pause to reflect how we can shape the future of our planet drastically. Countries, businesses, and individuals must radically change their practices to reduce the prevalence and acceleration of greenhouse gases to significantly benefit the planet. However, if we cannot make progress at world summits such as the COP26, then many entities will not engage to

putting these initiatives in place. The measures established in Glasgow will undoubtedly benefit the world greatly however, they fall short of their desired targets.

The positive impacts of COP26 are represented by the following points of consensus: a pledge to stop and reverse deforestation by 2030, a pledge to reduce methane emissions by 2030, a pledge to stop the production of vehicles powered by internal combustion engines by 2040,



and an agreement to shift away from the use of coal. These are significant accomplishments for the world as a whole. Acknowledging the disparate allocation of resources, an additional agreement was reached to give developing countries over 100 million dollars a year to help them transition to clean forms of renewable energy. However, last second changes to the document are extremely disappointing. The cessation of the use of coal was re-written – predominantly as a result of India's and China's insistence

– to refer to a phasing out of coal. The continued use of coal will be detrimental to the environment and countries that are relying heavily on this fuel; rather, the consequences of continued coal use must end. Transitions to renewables and electric vehicles, incentives to innovate carbon-removal technologies, and policies requiring the reduction of methane must be implemented. Countries around the world should use this pandemic pause to realize the existential emergency and engage in meaningful and collective action. Building back better must be the order of the day.

If we as a global community fail to seriously improve our climate awareness in the following years, then we will continue to face ever growing repercussions for our inaction. Extreme weather events will intensify; the management of which will become untenable. Global temperatures will continue to rise, creating a climate refugee crisis the world has never seen and is ill-equipped to handle. It is our duty to reverse this progression in order to guarantee next generations a habitable planet.

THOMAS E PALMER II
SACO, MAINE, USA
SOPHOMORE, FINANCE

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