

At Berkeley, a student-led class takes a new approach



Sage Lenier leading her class at the University of California, Berkeley. Credit...Irene Yi/UC Berkeley

By [Brad Plumer](#) Jan. 29, 2020 Updated 2:57 p.m. ET

It's no secret that concerns about climate change and environmental degradation are growing on college campuses. That's led students and professors alike to explore novel ways to teach the subject in the classroom.

This semester at the University of California, Berkeley, one of the college's most popular courses is, remarkably, being taught by a 21-year-old senior, Sage Lenier. The class, titled [Zero Waste: Solutions for a Sustainable Future](#), takes a fairly unusual approach — by focusing on practical steps that students can take to shrink their ecological footprints.

Ms. Lenier, a conservation and resource studies major, said she'd been inspired to create the course after becoming dissatisfied with how environmental issues are typically taught. "We'd learn about huge problems like rising greenhouse gas emissions or topsoil collapse, but there wasn't much focus on what students could actually do about it," she said. "We'd end up feeling very depressed."

Berkeley allows students to create and teach their own classes, with approval from professors. Ms.

Lenier [designed a curriculum](#) that walks through the science of modern waste streams, examining the links between our consumption habits — what we buy, what we throw out, what we eat — and problems like climate change. She focuses on steps that individuals and communities can take, like reducing reliance on single-use plastics, adopting more sustainable diets and shifting to a [circular economy](#) that produces less waste and requires fewer resources.

"I wanted to show people that there's a light at the end of the tunnel," Ms. Lenier said.

The course has struck a nerve. When it started in the spring of 2018, 25 students enrolled. But word spread quickly: For the latest iteration of the course, which starts on Wednesday, Ms. Lenier is expecting 300 students. Last summer, her curriculum [won an award](#) at the California Higher Education Sustainability Conference.

The class isn't a substitute for traditional studies of, say, climate science or energy systems. But Kate O'Neill, a professor at Berkeley's department of environmental science, policy and management who sponsors the course, said that Ms. Lenier offered a valuable advocacy-oriented perspective that academics don't always emphasize. "It's a unique model," Dr. O'Neill said, "and she's been able to attract a wide audience beyond the core environmental constituency."