

This is Eastern Michigan University's Career Corner. Welcome to season three, Major Choices and Career Decisions.

Welcome back to the Career Corner podcast, and our season devoted to major choices and career decisions. Today, I'm super excited. When planning this season, we really wanted to address some of the top questions and areas of interest that we hear from our students every day.

So in my time here at Eastern, working with hundreds of students, I've had the opportunity to have these conversations with various students, and really dive into their interests. And I keep hearing a recurring theme. This idea of pursuing green careers keeps kind of coming up. They recognize that there is a sense of urgency around topics relevant to the environment, our climate, sustainability, conservation, and other related topics.

So in correlation with that particular area of conversation, I really wanted to address this particular issue. And I couldn't think of anybody better than my good friend Lisa Yee-Litzenberg. Lisa has spent over 25 years as an environmental professional, and she is the president and CEO of Green Career Advisor, a small company launched in 2016 to help people find and secure their dream green jobs. Prior to that, she led the University of Michigan's School for Environment and Sustainability Graduate Career Services for over 10 years, assisting thousands of students in succeeding in their career searches. She built the school's career services from the ground up, and has developed key connections with thousands of green employers across the country and globally, and is a certified Global Career Development facilitator.

Before working at University of Michigan, she spent 12 years working with the National Wildlife Federation on water policy and biodiversity conservation issues with national, tribal, and state governments, student organizations and local grassroots conservation groups. Lisa also developed a passion for mentoring and training students and women as environmental leaders to grow in the organizational capacities and the diversity of several NWF state affiliates. Her last role at NWF was leading the Great Lakes wolf recovery program.

Outside of work, Lisa is an avid soccer player and nature nerd who loves camping, taking walks in the woods, traveling the world. She is passionate about making a difference in ocean conservation, climate change, and transforming the world's economy into a circular one, where we design out waste and pollution, keep products and materials in use, and regenerate our natural systems. So if

that doesn't describe how credible Lisa is, or how I should say incredible Lisa is, I don't know what does. So first of all, welcome, Lisa.

Haha. Thank you, Brad. I'm happy to be here.

So we are so excited to dive into this episode and really kind of peel back some of the intrigue regarding green careers, and some of the amazing opportunities that our students can really dive into. But first, I really wanted to just get a kind of background from you on really what got you interested in pursuing this passion of green careers, and then also now taking it a step further and guiding young professionals and aspiring professionals now to do the same.

Yeah, well, I would say I care deeply about the environment. At a young age, I spent a lot of time outdoors, so developing my love for the environment from spending time outdoors, which I think many people do develop their passions that way. So at a young age, I knew I cared about the environment and biodiversity in general. But then when I started at the University of Michigan, I wasn't sure of what degree program. And I think many students can relate to that, right, not knowing what they should major in or what they can focus in on.

And there was a class that I took on general ecology that was looking at tropical rainforest destruction. And it was in that class that really, it solidified for me my passion for wanting to do something to protect the natural world. In that class, I learned a lot about rainforest destruction, how much biodiversity was contained in tropical rainforests, and how quickly we were losing all of these species and natural ecosystems.

So that's really what sparked my interest. And then in college, afterwards, my first job was working at the National Wildlife Federation. I spent 12 years working in various roles on conservation work in the Great Lakes region, and at the national level, as well.

That job at National Wildlife Federation in the Great Lakes office took place in Ann Arbor, where I went to school. And I would often walk through the campus, and I would run into a professor of mine, a former professor of mine. Quite a few times I would run into him every now and then. And he would always say to me, oh, Lisa, our one graduate who actually got a job in the field.

And that really stuck with me. And at first, I thought, oh, ha, that's funny, he's joking. But after a while, I started to be really upset that, wow, there's all these passionate people like me wanting to do something to help our environment, but unable to do so because they are not sure what the jobs are or how to find that job.

So at some point after working 12 years at National Wildlife Federation, I had the opportunity to kind of shift my career and reinvent where I was going. And that was a big piece of my thinking. I thought back to that time, and the need for someone to help students find their way in green careers. And so that's really how I envisioned a role where I could help coach these students.

And then when I thought who would hire me, the school, you know, where I had gone and where obviously there was a need for that. I ended up hearing about a job that wasn't posted, but like two months later, a job appeared for this very role. I think it was the first formal role they had for a person to lead the career office. And so I took that on, and really haven't looked back since then.

Wow. You know, what I love about that story is the fact that that interaction that you had with that faculty was really a life-changing event, and at the time, it was one of those things where it was maybe a little bit confusing in terms of how do you take it, and now, being able to reflect back, it was one of those things that really served as a catalyst because it inspired you to meet a need that was clearly evident just in that one comment, you know?

For sure. That's a defining moment.

But I love that, and I love how you were able to now take this passion and now pivot and be able to say that, OK, well, there's clearly a need to address this issue, and I already have this platform now to stand on with this new position now. And I love how you just kind of took the ball and ran with that. So amazing work.

So in kind of getting into the topic today, we want to kind of talk about really what green careers are. And so some students really, they might hear that term, but they really don't know what it means. So how do you define green careers?

Yeah, I would define green careers very broadly. I would say there's a tremendous need for anyone who cares about the environment to look for those opportunities. There is a place for you. I work with students who are interested and also career professionals interested in things like natural resource management, habitat conservation, endangered species management.

There are roles in the green career fields for sustainability work, corporate sustainability roles at companies, sustainability roles at universities, at city government offices, environmental policy work and advocacy work. There's huge roles for those opportunities. People interested in law, environmental law, I think some of the biggest differences you can sometimes make is through environmental litigation. There are a lot of roles for that.

Renewable energy fields, you have engineers and people with strong technical skills to lead efforts to increase our use of renewable energies. You have people in green building careers, architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning. In urban planning, you see a lot of people working to help develop innovative ideas to address climate change, climate change mitigation and adaptation. Environmental education and outreach, and plenty of others. Those are just a few to name.

Wow. Wow, so many different opportunities. And like you said, it just covers such a vast spectrum. And I think it's really empowering for our students that come in with very diverse skill sets to be able to kind of say, no matter what angle that you attack this, these challenges, like climate change, for example, there's so many different ways to tackle a challenge from multiple different angles. So I love that. So one of the things that I was kind of curious about is what are some of the occupations now that students might already have a lot of familiar with, or familiarity with that might be really kind of pushing more into kind of going green and doing things that are environmentally friendly?

Yeah, sure. So I had started to say that there are roles like, let's say, a landscape architect or an urban planner. Those are somewhat familiar careers, career paths that people can take. They are becoming greener these days, as there is a move to address climate change. So as climate change starts to affect cities, especially coastal cities, where you see sea level rises-- you also see in many other non-coastal areas where there's increased flooding from increased hurricane events and things like that-- cities are having to find ways to adapt to that so that their infrastructure is not affected or they're not losing millions of dollars from flooding events, combined sewer overflows that are overflowing and flooding.

So landscape architects, urban planners, for example, are becoming greener now. They are involved and being hired by these city governments to find innovative ways to imitate nature, in some cases, to create green spaces, rooftop gardens, rain gardens, bioswales to capture water and purify runoff before it goes to our lakes and our rivers and oceans. So there are a lot of roles for these traditional jobs to become greener and help address pressing climate change work.

I will also say, on the mitigation side, so looking at how to slow, perhaps, climate change effects, some of these landscape architects or urban planners might be working in the transportation sector, trying to increase electric buses and cars for the city fleets, increase sustainable transportation, public transportation, reduce parking and driving in the cities, increasing bike and pedestrian paths, creating more green spaces and parks.

And then another area that I could highlight as something quite different would be let's say you're a

typical clothing retailer. Everyone's familiar with those sorts of roles. But in this new age, we're finding new markets, many of the companies are starting to look for new markets to make sure that a lot of the clothing doesn't go to waste. So a lot of clothing, for example, gets returned for one reason or another, and those might just go into the trash, typically.

But companies are looking for new markets to sell maybe some of the returned or used clothing items so that they continue in circulation. And then also looking at end of life for some of their clothing products. Could they be recycled into new materials or new products? That's part of the new circular economy that we're seeing is growing jobs and interest from people in working in those fields.

Mhm. Yeah, and what I love about that, too, is that last point that you made right there, is that this is job creation right here. This is being able to meet these challenges and modify existing roles and, in turn, be able to do things that are environmentally friendly, that are focused on conservation and all these types of issues that are important, and needing the skills to be able to meet those demands. So I love that.

Now kind of switching gears here a little bit, those are a couple of things that are out there that are transforming as we speak. Are there maybe a couple of maybe new and exciting green careers that are on the horizon that are maybe just getting started, that are new and innovative?

Yeah, for sure. We see a lot of the people that I work with, in some cases, are amongst the first in their field, perhaps, or one of the first in their field to start some of these new and innovative careers. I think as we see the new administration go into effect in terms of implementing some of their climate change work, we're seeing the US rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement, and President Biden is going to be implementing a lot of his agenda to help shift us away from fossil fuels to renewable energy.

So we're going to be seeing a lot of jobs created. I think he has a plan to create 10 million new jobs in renewable energy and green fields. So that's something to keep an eye on. So we'll see a lot more jobs going to the development of solar and wind energy, creating increased efficiencies to produce more and more of those renewable energies. Also, battery storage will be critical to store those energies created from renewable sources, and then to be able to use them later.

Yeah.

We will see-- the US is not doing a lot right now in offshore wind, but that's a huge area of growth that

I envision will be happening in the next few years, where we can grow a lot more offshore wind. So there will be needs for technicians, engineers, researchers, policy analysts to work in those fields to help promote and grow these renewable energy, as well as electric cars. We're seeing a lot of states, like I think California is making it illegal to buy-- they're phasing out, basically, fossil fuel cars, and shifting completely to electric cars in the future. So there'll be needs for engineers, technicians, again, policy experts to work on electric cars, and the development and rollout of those.

The other area, too, I started to talk about circular economy. I think that's a huge area of growth potential in the next number of years, where we are looking-- by circular economy, I mean these are opportunities to change the way we do business and the way that our economy operates so that we are not just creating products and sending them into the garbage when we're done, but a circular economy and roles that will involve the circular economy look to design out waste and pollution, they look to keep materials in circulation, and also to regenerate our natural systems.

So for example, farming. I've heard the United Nations say that, within 60 years, the way that we're currently doing our industrial farming, our soils can't take that high level of chemicals that we're applying to our soils, and we're basically killing our soils. We might not be able to farm within 60 years the way we're going.

So I imagine, with the circular economy, there will be roles to change the way we do agriculture so it renews our soils and is more sustainable. I would envision other areas and industries where materials scientists are looking at ways to reengineer plastics, and plastics that are recyclable or bio-based plastics, for example. So those are a couple of areas.

Wow, wow, absolutely incredible. So many different exciting challenges that are on the horizon. I really, really love the emphasis now being placed on renewable energy. And I agree, I think it's an exciting time for many of our students, particularly with this new administration and the emphasis on the new job creation that's going to come from that. I believe it's a very, very exciting time to get behind it.

So let me just ask you, in terms of advice to this next generation, to current college students that have a focus on this, that are listening to this podcast today and maybe getting excited and going, oh my gosh, you know, wow, look at all these amazing opportunities for me to use my skills, what are maybe some of those areas and skill sets and knowledge and expertise that students can acquire during their coursework here so that they can segue and be successful and to work in the green careers?

Yes, so that's something I look at and think about a lot. When I worked at the University of Michigan, I did a lot of work to think about what are those skill sets that students need to be competitive. And I think at Eastern Michigan, you guys do a great job, as well. But thinking about analytical skills, you see that a lot, where people will have to be able to use data and science tools to make sound decisions as they move forward on some of these renewable energy careers, being able to use-- in more analytical careers, you might be using Excel spreadsheets and doing calculations and analyzing data and being able to use models to project out what might happen in different scenarios.

I would also say communication skills. I would say that's number one across the board. Almost every position that you look at will involve strong communication skills in one fashion or another. And by communication skills, I mean both the ability to communicate verbally in teams and externally in public speaking presentations, but also in written communication. So whether that's concise memos to compelling reports, social media content, all of that would be communication skills.

So those are really critical. Students should be looking to develop those. So if you're not a strong writer, you have the opportunity, perhaps, to take some additional writing courses that would serve you very well to do that, because that's the basis for almost every job. I would say look for courses where you can work and look at real-world case studies on environmental issues that are happening current day so that you can get some experience in real-world sustainability challenges and solutions.

Relevant software, that's important to look at. I encourage everyone to look at job postings. As you're going through school, if you're not really sure what careers are for you, look at job postings, green job postings to get ideas of what might be exciting, and then look at what skill sets, what software that is required for these roles. And those are the opportunities to go and seek those out and take those classes while you're in school now.

And then lastly, I would say the ability to work in interdisciplinary teams is much needed. Sometimes you're doing solo work, too, so being able to work both independently and motivate yourself, but also the ability to work in teams with people from different disciplines. Could be science and engineering, could be policy, whatever, but the ability to come together on a multidisciplinary team to solve challenging problems, because that's what it's going to take to solve a lot of these really tough environmental challenges that are facing us today.

Yes, excellent points. Excellent points. And I think the things that were resonating there for me were the NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers) career competencies, so many of them

that you listed, the communication, the ability to work in diverse teams to tackle challenges, the critical thinking, the problem-solving, I mean, these are essential I think across the board, but even more so in these green careers because these are big challenges. And you're going to need a lot of brilliant minds working on them together. And so all of those things do sort of intersect.

In addition to the coursework, right? That is very important. But you should also be thinking about gaining hands-on experience wherever you can. I will say that is super critical in terms of making you marketable when you're off searching for internships or jobs, competing against people who have these experiences.

Wherever you have the chance, do an internship or two. Work on team projects that have some applied aspect to a real-world environmental or sustainability challenge. And ideally, if it's applied to a real-world organization that you're working to provide the solutions to, even better. And then volunteer roles, student leadership roles, all of those are very important to help make you more marketable in your field.

First of all, I have to sing Lisa's praises here. Obviously, she is one of the top, if not the top expert in this particular area. I encourage all of you to go to her website, www.greencareeradvisor.com. Amazing collection of resources on her Resources page.

But in addition to those resources, let's say students really are listening today and very fascinated just about learning more about some of these opportunities, and learning more about where to find some current news and current trends. Are there any specific resources that you would endorse?

Yeah, a couple. I would say LinkedIn groups, professional groups are a tremendous place to find a community of professionals. So I am a member of-- not saying that you would join this many, but I'm a member of 90 different LinkedIn professional environmental sustainability groups. So there are groups on circular economy, on climate change, on sustainability.

Join some of those groups, and those are great sources where you can hear from leading industry or employer professionals who are working in this field what are some up-and-coming engaging issues, innovative solutions and ideas. So follow those for sure. Follow company pages, companies that interest you. Follow their pages, as well.

And then I would say consider joining some professional environmental associations. Those are places where you also have professionals that are part of this association that hosts professional conferences that share a whole bunch of up-and-coming issues that you need to be aware of. So if

you join those associations, you can also add those to your resume, which shows an employer that you really keep up in your field professionally. And that's impressive. So those are a few tips.

Wonderful. Well, as I said, I think my head is blown today with the amount of great content that you shared with us today. And I hope our listeners really benefited from it, as well. We just want to thank Lisa again for just some incredible insights today on green careers. And now, moving forward, we have some amazing episodes planned for the rest of this season. So we hope that you're going to stay tuned.

So keep track of the upcoming events that are going on with that. And again, if you want to meet with any of the career coaches in the University Advising Career Development Center, make sure to schedule those appointments on Handshake. We would love to meet with you and maybe dive in with you to discuss green careers, or any of the others that you have interest in. Until then, stay safe, stay healthy, and remember that we support your goals.

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