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Campus as a Reclamation Classroom: A case study in urban reclamation from Lexington, KY, USA

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As an urban campus, the University of Kentucky campus presents opportunities for hands-on research and teaching in urban reclamation and greening. This talk reports on a project on UK's campus that I initiated as a service- and research-learning project for my lower level honors seminar on Restoration Ecology. Our project site was a landscape strip on either side of a central campus street, immediately adjacent to the building where the class meets. Other than mature cherrybark oak trees, this landscape strip was unvegetated and had experienced significant erosion. To restore the site, we partnered with UK's Grounds and Campus Planning units to 1) reduce soil compaction with a pneumatic tilling system, and 2) develop and implement a planting plan to revegetate the area with native understory plants. For research purposes, we also implemented a biochar/no-biochar treatment and a shrubs/no-shrub treatment. We collected data on infiltration, compaction, and soil chemistry; these analyses will be repeated periodically over time to test for any effects of intervention on these soil physical and chemical outcomes. Pedagogically, this project was successful regardless of ecological outcomes. Students remarked that the project gave them a chance to apply concepts we had discussed in class in a practical or real-world context. Others commented on the value of just getting their hands dirty, or of doing something that they felt would leave a meaningful positive impact on the campus and the community. Every campus has its spaces in need of a little extra TLC—I conclude with an invitation to explore opportunities for implementing restoration and reclamation projects in your own campus and community spaces.

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