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The World's First so the World Lasts

BY MICHELLE SCHWARTZ, TEMPE, ARIZONA / MAY 15

They might be hard to find in the crowd of 71,000, but a small group of Arizona State University graduates attending this week's commencement ceremonies represents a big milestone for the university and the country.

These 13 students are the first to graduate from ASU's School of Sustainability – the first degree-granting sustainability school in the nation. They are pioneers in a new field of study, and their interdisciplinary training provides them the tools to develop real solutions that address the world's economic, societal, and environmental challenges.

It is significant that President Obama, with his message of change, served as commencement speaker on this momentous occasion. "You don't need to be a President to bring change to people's lives," Obama said in a recent address.

Being a sustainability graduate is a good start. Corporations recognize more and more the importance of sustainability to their success. U-Haul International is undertaking initiatives to reduce its carbon footprint while positioning itself as an environmentally-friendly truck sharing company, according to Allan Yang, U-Haul's director of corporate sustainability.

Asked what U-Haul needs from graduates interested in sustainability, Yang cited three things: ability to effectively communicate about sustainability, an understanding of basic business operations, and an ability to understand the triple bottom line – that is, the environmental, social, and economic impacts of the company's business decisions.

This three-pronged definition of sustainability is part of the corporate culture at Henkel of America, Inc., too. The Fortune Global 500 Company, whose brands include Dial, Purex, Renuzit, and more, seeks sustainability aptitude in job candidates as they look to drive their sustainability focus across all levels and business units globally

"We see that consumers are becoming more aware of the increasing issues that are plaguing our planet and it has become an important part of their purchasing decision. Companies, including Dial, need to keep this top of mind. Therefore, we have an increasing need for people with sustainability knowledge and background," said Cynthia Milgroom, Henkel's vice president for sustainability. "Students who receive education around sustainability technology with emphasis on life cycle analysis, carbon footprint and measurement, and who can apply that knowledge to whatever it is they're hired to do, have an advantage in today's market," Milgroom said.

If any graduate is prepared to face such broad expectations, it is one from ASU's School of Sustainability. School Director Charles Redman calls this class, "the first of what we hope will be a long and distinguished line of sustainability graduates," and "the intellectual capital upon which the future depends."

