Sustainability touches all facets of our lives, connecting everything from the food we eat to the air we breathe, and classroom activities are no exception. Johns Hopkins’ Global Environmental Change and Sustainability (GECS) is an interdisciplinary major and minor that encourages undergraduate students to gain a more intimate understanding of our planet and examine their interactions and impacts on it holistically. The program culminates with a year-long senior capstone project where students have hands-on, real world experiences that reinforce lessons taught in the classroom, and leave a legacy of change from which they can launch their careers and continue a lifetime of learning.

This past spring semester, one graduating GECS student, Elizabeth Fortson, explored the ecology and sustainability of the Homewood Campus—a heavily human-influenced green space—while also engaging the campus community about its literal backyard. Within the built environment, trees provide habitat for birds, insects, and small mammals, but they also play a pivotal role in human health and well-being. Elizabeth collected, cataloged and analyzed information about various trees that make up our campus ecosystem. This data was organized into a map of the most common and notable species, and identified locations where additional trees would bolster the existing landscape.

Showcasing that environmentalism takes root through collaboration and community, faculty, staff, and students assisted in making correct identifications and organizing educational opportunities. The Baltimore Forestry Division and Tree Baltimore were then tapped to provide trees that were planted by the university’s Grounds Department. In April, “Notable Tree Tours” were conducted during JHU Spring Fair 2015 and in conjunction with Arbor Day. These walking tours connected education with experience to highlight the myriad of ways our landscape supplements not only scholasticism, but the sustainability and vitality of our university, environment, and selves.