

Sustaining Environmental Justice on and Around the Campus

Summary by Lisa Fernandez

Panelists

Vernice Miller-Travis, *Executive Director, Groundwork USA*

Mark Mitchell, M.D., *President and Founder,
Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice*

Colleen Murphy-Dunning, *Director, New Haven Urban Resources Initiative*

Moderator

Eliezer (Lee) Cruz, *Senior Philanthropic Officer,
Community Foundation for Greater New Haven**

*Workshop organizer

This workshop explored the concept of environmental justice as a framework for understanding the role of colleges and universities as civic leaders in the towns where they reside. How “just” is sustainability in higher education today? What kind of burdens are there to mitigate, and responsibilities are there to share, between town and gown? The workshop began with a national perspective on these challenging issues informed by the case of Columbia University, then tackled Connecticut themes, and finally honed in on some examples of how Yale University is addressing environmental stewardship in its host city of New Haven.

UNIVERSITIES AS PARTNERS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AT COLUMBIA

Vernice Miller-Travis spoke of her experience as an entering freshman at Barnard College and Columbia University in 1977, and how much it pained her to learn about the University’s complete disconnect from the surrounding Harlem neighborhood where she had grown up. Columbia had created what Miller-Travis termed a “fictional community” called “Morningside Heights,” constructed by the university as a separate entity from the surrounding Harlem community in which the university was located. Making the very rich history and resources of Harlem invisible to the university constituency created a tense relationship between Columbia and the local community. Miller-Travis emphasized the need for universities to engage with the local community as partners, not as places to avoid and wall the campus off from.

The environmental dimension of the relationship between town and gown often develops over the issue of sprawl or “university creep.” Universities tend to want to develop and grow, and Columbia is no exception. In 1988, Miller-Travis co-founded a community-based environmental justice group – West Harlem Environmental Action – to advocate against the siting of multiple facilities in her community that were adversely affecting the quality of life of the residents. A perverse result of the group’s eighteen years of success in making West Harlem a less polluted community is that Columbia is now planning to build a new campus “smack in the middle” of the West Harlem community. The new campus would occupy more square footage than the World Trade Center occupied in lower Manhattan.

Sustainable development cannot occur as long as there is poverty and massive inequality between the university and the surrounding town. It is incumbent upon the university to squarely address the equity issues along with traditional environmental considerations. While the problems are difficult, universities should not feel immobilized. There are a variety of ways to build partnerships that will improve the quality of life for town and gown. These include joint efforts in the following areas:

- addressing the development and preservation of green space;
- reclaiming community Brownfield sites;
- requiring students to engage in local service learning projects as a graduation requirement;
- urban reforestation and green space creation;
- urban agriculture and sustainable local food supply;
- sustainable and green design of low and moderate income housing;
- reducing solid and hazardous waste outputs of the university;
- mentoring neighborhood youth in environmental studies and environmental careers;
- providing incentives for faculty and staff to live in communities adjacent to campus (such as the program at Clark University in Worcester, MA).

Finally, for any campus sustainability effort to ultimately be successful, the inclusion of racial, social and economic justice as fundamental components of these efforts is paramount.

A VIEW FROM CONNECTICUT

Like Columbia and Morningside Heights, the University of Connecticut (UConn) created a name (Storrs) for its main campus location. However, there is no town in the state by that name. Mansfield is the local town, although this is not commonly known or acknowledged. Making the “town” disappear seems to be a habit that dies hard with universities, which so often wield far more power and resources than the municipalities that host them. This is one impetus driving the field of environmental

justice, which aims to overcome the disproportionate burden of environmental impacts poor populations bear.

Dr. Mitchell founded the Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice in 1998. Currently, offices are located in Hartford, New Haven and Bridgeport. Demographically, the state is 78 percent white, with 9 percent Latino, 9 percent black and about 3 percent Asian. It boasts the highest average income in the country. This state-wide picture contrasts greatly with that of Connecticut's cities, which are majority populations of color and have among the very lowest income averages in U.S. cities with populations over 100,000. The geographic correlation of point source air pollution emissions and minority population is almost perfect in Connecticut. Some of the results of this pattern are that asthma rates are 50 percent higher in urban schools; deaths from asthma are six times the average for young black males; and 84 percent of lead poisoned children in Connecticut are Black or Latino.

The major environmental justice issues in Connecticut are:

- **Air pollution** – 40 percent of air pollution originates outside CT's borders;
- **Diesel exhaust** – this fuel produces air toxins that contribute to lung diseases and cancer;
- **Waste disposal facility siting** – landfills and incinerators are disproportionately sited in low-income communities of color;
- **Lack of regulatory protections** – CT has no law mandating the equal distribution of pollution sites.

Environmental justice issues on college campuses specifically encompass the following areas:

- **Electric power plant fuels and siting** – tend to be on the periphery of universities, disproportionately affecting surrounding populations instead of university-affiliated ones;
- **Campus sprawl**, including parking; private ownership and operation of diesel bus systems; and an overall lack of connection to public transit systems. The latter situation isolates students, adding to the impression that the university is not part of the local municipality and making it more difficult for students to enjoy urban life.
- **Waste management and the toxicity of waste** – 82 percent of trash in CT is burned and so is a significant amount of sewage sludge. Emissions contain toxins that everyone breathes. Campuses also produce a significant amount of food waste that could potentially be locally composted or even donated to charity but is not for lack of management systems in place to do so.

College campuses can be models for implementing sustainable solutions. Below are some specific suggestions for how.

Campuses can switch to cleaner and renewable fuels and fuel cells to meet energy needs; and when building new construction, aim for the most energy efficient green

designs. In terms of sprawl, making campuses more walkable and supporting public transit connections to campus will help reduce the need for parking, which is a visual and security blight on towns. Diesel buses can be retrofitted for more efficient fuels and greater efficiency. On the waste front, beyond the three “Rs” (reduce, reuse, recycle), engaging with the waste trail and understanding where it goes can help raise awareness and motivate faculty, staff and students to waste less. Instituting and enforcing safe disposal practices (e.g., incinerating autoclaved medical wastes) can also reduce the toxicity of trash that is incinerated.

Echoing Miller-Travis, Mitchell called for universities to exploit their *raison d’être* in teaching and research to advance environmental justice. Engage students with service learning programs and community internships with neighborhood groups. Promote research and teaching of safer alternatives to toxic products and processes. Finally, Mitchell called on universities to support research and to document and publish on environmental justice issues.

RESPONSIVE PROGRAMS AT THE COMMUNITY SCALE: EXAMPLES FROM YALE

Colleen Murphy-Dunning asked: Do we embrace town-gown relations as part of a strategy to institutionalize university sustainability efforts, or just a public relations strategy? Finding common ground between campus and city can result in mutually-beneficial outcomes. How can rethinking relationships between university students, staff and faculty and local populations of the cities we all call home create opportunities? Through a university/public-private partnership, a Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies (F&ES) program creates a clinical learning opportunity for students, which supports the natural resources goals/interests of the New Haven community.

In the City of New Haven, environmental burdens are often the direct result of poverty. Vacant lots and abandoned, boarded-up homes create their own disproportionate burden on neighborhoods at a very local scale. Vacant houses often have peeling lead paint that falls into the soil. Children may play there because that is the only place to do so on their block. A fundamental question is, where do environmental factors fit within the hierarchy of needs in a poor community?

The Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies has established a service learning program that meets the needs of students driven by degree requirements, and simultaneously addresses environmental justice issues. In a mutual learning pathway, students train community residents with skills to replant and maintain urban forests, while local residents provide students with models for meeting social as well as ecological community needs.

The goals of the Community Greenspace program are to help environmentally rehabilitate an area, to promote local stewardship and to build community. To accomplish these goals, the program partners with community groups, neighborhood institutions and public agencies. Site selection is driven by neighborhood residents’ interests and concerns. The chosen site may be a streetscape,

a park, a vacant lot, or public housing. Often, the significant sites are places of environmental burdens.

The program focuses its efforts in “empowerment zones,” a federal designation of poverty pinpointing neighborhoods that have a majority of residents by census tract whose incomes fall below the poverty line. It is no surprise that these neighborhoods also contain the greatest share of vacant buildings and lots. Since these are a major eyesore for people in the community, they tend to be their priority focus of rehabilitation efforts. Yale’s Greenspace program has helped local groups rehabilitate several such areas in various parts of the city. These community-managed open spaces are resident-initiated and responsive to community concerns. They continue to be beautiful spots many years after initial rehabilitation. Their sustainability is testament to the importance of the partnership model and instilling stewardship responsibilities in both town and gown.

