

Concluding Plenary: Challenges to Institutionalizing Sustainability on Campus

Summary by Katherine Gasner

Facilitator

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The two-day conference provided nearly 200 participants many opportunities to exchange best practices in the field of campus sustainability. Dr. Newman used the occasion of the concluding plenary to reflect on the importance of returning to the fundamental goals of campus sustainable development. The document announcing the United Nations commitment to the “UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development” reminds practitioners of the basic principles of sustainable development. The principles call for moving from vision to action on creating a better world today without sacrificing opportunities for future generations and to sharing solutions that work locally and regionally at the global level. In keeping with the UN’s goals, Newman asked plenary participants to consider and discuss three questions related to the obligations of the NECSC to the many broader sustainability efforts in and beyond the region.

1. What are the responsibilities of the sustainability professionals working in higher education to dovetail their work with that of the international sustainability community?
2. How do we harness the energy of the NECSC to work with other regional fora and commitments?
3. What specific roles can or should the NECSC play in advancing the broad goals of sustainable development as articulated by the United Nations?

Subsequent to Newman’s introduction, the audience broke into small groups to consider each question and report back. Below, the discussion each question generated is summarized.

RESPONSIBILITIES VIS-À-VIS THE INTERNATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNITY

An international perspective is essential to build on the momentum of the emerging commitment to sustainability at college campuses. Much can be gained from engaging with other institutions of higher learning around the world. Global consequences pertain to individual institutions' decisions regarding global warming and greenhouse gas emissions. Participants suggested that in addition to a strong emphasis on climate change, the NECSC ought to focus on issues of purchasing power, as universities have substantial leverage to encourage fair trade.

There are also opportunities to leverage the collaborative nature of many academic endeavors at the international scale. For example, research conducted with the participation of many different countries can be valuable; different regulations and procedures between countries allow for different types of studies, which can be especially conducive to thorough collection of data and information exchange. One way to do this would be to foster student exchanges, which by their nature would help embed the sponsoring universities in the international sustainable development conversation. Also, the consortium could focus on facilitating cooperation between similar departments of different universities throughout the world. In this vein, it would be useful to encourage the creation of a widely shared list where proposed and on-going sustainability research could be identified. This would help foster international cooperation and would also reduce duplication of studies.

THE NECSC'S RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER REGIONAL ENTITIES

One approach would be to join forces with all New England and Eastern Canadian colleges and present a unified and consolidated front on sustainability. The New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers already passed a greenhouse emission reduction strategy; thus, it was suggested that all the participating colleges in the NECSC sign on to the same goals. This way, the commitments, dates, and times involved in these objectives are not confused, and the entire region can be motivated and inspired to cultivate and maintain energy around the same goals. This way, in addition to striving to meet goals measured in percent emissions reductions, achievement could be measured along the way with percentages of participation in signing on to those goals.

Different approaches to building further expertise were also discussed. There are two types of people in the college sustainability field right now: those who are extremely knowledgeable and experienced and those who are new and excited about learning. Considering this dynamic, there is a need for a mentoring program of some sort. The NECSC could facilitate the partnership of members who are experienced in campus sustainability and those new to the field. This way the NECSC could enhance more one-on-one contact throughout the region. The move would also help establish an institutional framework for networking. Lastly, it was suggested that the NECSC establish an online database for sustainable campus projects. With a center of

foundational instructions for different sustainable endeavors, one could manipulate the project to accommodate his or her college system. In these ways, the NECSC could contribute to progress on meeting officially agreed-on sustainability goals for the region.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE NECSC IN ADVANCING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

A distinction was made between campus sustainability and the goals of larger scale sustainability. Colleges often deal with the systems aspects of sustainability, but they do not often have to confront complex issues of economics or the issues surrounding equity that are so central to the greater national and world-wide achievement of sustainability.

Questions that guide the discussion on the role of the future of NECSC are as follows: Is there a need for the consortium to take on a role in meeting international sustainability goals? Should the NECSC maintain a tight focus on the Northeast region? Keeping a tight focus on the Northeast may not exclude acknowledging the broader global mission.

The ultimate goal of the NECSC is to maintain the current high level of motivation and drive in the campus sustainability community. The value of the NECSC lies in providing a forum that allows recognition of continuing challenges and provides resources for problem solving. The NECSC is already effectively supporting the high level of enthusiasm and dedication of the growing group of campus sustainability professionals in the region. It can play a growing role in providing networking opportunities for this group and helping to expand these alliances more broadly.

