

The Role of International Alliances to Advance Sustainability Objectives on University Campuses – Plenary and Roundtable Discussion

Summary by David Gottesman and Sara Smiley Smith

SUSTAINABILITY, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, AND CAMPUS SUSTAINABILITY: FINDING A COMMON LANGUAGE

In the plenary discussion, participants were asked to define and differentiate between sustainable development, sustainability, and campus sustainability, drawing on their experiences at their respective institutions. Sustainability practitioners need a way to define and express these concepts. This will enable them to better communicate their ideas to a broad audience as well as find common ground between institutions.

Many discussants felt that campuses are not contributing to sustainability to their fullest extent, regardless of how innovative their green campus initiatives may be, if they fail to educate and engage students. It was argued that campus life affords many opportunities to educate students about sustainability. How sustainability is integrated into curriculum, facilities operations, residential life and other aspects of the university campus will vary from institution to institution.

There was general agreement that campuses will have to change the way they think and conduct business if they are to become models of sustainability. One participant argued that universities must continue to “think globally, act locally.” Another participant stressed that the opportunity to integrate sustainability requirements was ever-present during decision-making processes. Too often, another discussant observed, universities focus on one area of decision-making but ignore others when shaping campus sustainability programs, i.e. energy or waste. Therefore it is important to determine how to incorporate sustainability principles along all dimensions of university decision-making processes.

It was argued that the drivers we use to shape society – the politicians we elect, the way we structure our economy, and so on – are mechanisms by which we can affect change on the global, national, local and institutional levels. These drivers apply to sustainability, sustainable development and campus sustainability.

The discussion concluded by noting the importance of taking a step back from all of the advances being made so quickly in order to return to the overall goals of sustainable development. With these concepts solidified, participants could expand the ways in which they frame sustainability, sustainable development and campus sustainability at their respective institutions.

BEST PRACTICES FOR ADVANCING SUSTAINABILITY ON CAMPUSES WORLDWIDE

The second half of the day focused on optimizing opportunities for sustainability in five key areas of university activity: research; cross-border dialogue between the U.S. and Canadian universities; international dissemination of success stories; case study development; and international exchanges. Below, the dialogue accorded each area is synthesized.

Research Opportunities

Facilitator: Almut Beringer, Professor, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada

This group determined that universities need to track their performance in ways that go beyond metrics. Specifically, they need to consider the qualitative dimensions of their work: human systems and the development of “methodologies and research instruments for documenting and monitoring that aspect of sustainability in higher education.”

The group also commented that while there is a growing wealth of presentations and articles in the field of campus sustainability, few of these employ empirical data from universities. A deeper understanding of current efforts, trends, and claims could be attained if more studies did in fact use such data.

Canada-U.S. Collaboration

Facilitator: Melissa Garcia-LaMarca, Sustainability Coordinator, Concordia University, Canada

A deeper understanding and definition of the background context for the development of a partner institution was called for before collaboration or exchange could be considered. For example, Canadian institutions of higher learning are for the most part publicly funded and governmentally controlled to a far greater degree than in the United States. Knowing the “broader cultural and social context,” including how administration and funding operate, as well as “areas of academic excellence and expertise,” affords a better perspective when preparing for a working partnership.

The group also discussed the most effective ways to collaborate, including tools, exchanges on certain projects, physical exchanges, and sharing resources and knowledge. Existing programs should be examined to glean lessons for best practices.

International Dissemination of Campus Sustainability Strategies

Facilitator: Leith Sharp, Director, Harvard Green Campus Initiative

Leith Sharp opened by acknowledging that the members of her group are at different points – some have information to share while others are interested in that information.

Three reasons were identified for engaging with other universities internationally:

- 1) If a university, regardless of location, has worked on a particular project, information drawn from that experience can be helpful in assisting other institutions working towards the same goal.
- 2) International universities and figures can be leveraged to influence another university's leadership in favor of campus sustainability. University administrators tend to exhibit "a different quality of listening" when a respected international figure speaks to them.

A system by which campus leaders can "shop" for the most strategic individuals in the world related to their particular campus sustainability issues was called upon. Because these leaders are time- and resource-constrained, it is important to connect regional and national networks to other regional and national networks to increase exposure. She pointed out that video conferencing is an underused resource and also suggested international blogs and face books. For example, Yale can leverage the commitments made by President Levin and his willingness to communicate his goals with other presidents. One approach would be to determine which university presidents are interested in this effort but have not yet committed and to utilize President Levin to encourage them to move forward.

- 3) International engagement on sustainability is diplomatic. Because America is often isolated from what is happening with respect to sustainability globally, American higher education institutions have an opportunity to play a role in patching up ill-will and conflicts with the rest of the world. The fact that our institutions are moving forward in a green direction speaks volumes to other societies that we do have some ecologically-minded institutions.

Case Studies

Facilitator: Bernd Kasemir, Novatlantis – Sustainability at the ETH domain, Zurich, Switzerland, and sustainserv, inc.

Collaboration across universities can drastically cut learning time and save years of effort. The value of sharing case studies internationally keeps a university from reinventing the wheel on a particular campus sustainability issue. Case studies should be as specific as possible: beyond stating the final outcome (e.g. – amount of GHG reduction), they should identify the agents of change and explain how they interacted with their institutions to achieve their goals. Of particular importance is the

involvement of students on boards and committees – the incorporation of this type of social capital should be included in reports. The discussion emphasized the fact that case studies must go beyond recounting successes and also include failures. Even though this might be difficult as far as administration and donors are concerned, it is necessary if case studies are to be as useful as possible.

Private sector collaboration can be helpful because it allows campus leaders to frame issues in positive economic terms; cost-neutral initiatives, for example, are appealing to administrations. The danger, however, lies in reducing everything to corporate terms, as that limits the scope of potential efforts.

International Curriculum/Campus-Campus Exchanges

Facilitators: Tom Kelly, Director, Office of Sustainability, University of New Hampshire; Fredrik Grondahl, Professor, Industrial Ecology, Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden

The Swedish experience has been a valuable one. One initiative at the Swedish Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) has been to reach out to former Eastern bloc countries via innovative collaboration projects. One program comprises a short course for international students at a given university, after which they split up and conduct independent research on the topics discussed. Two months later, the students reconvene in another country to discuss their findings. KTH also offers a Master's program in sustainable technology. Ninety-five percent of the students hail from other countries and the courses are taught in English. Other mechanisms include "Universitas 21," a program for international exchanges and the International Association of University Research Associations, which is geared for faculty and students.

On the domestic front, the value of *intercultural* exchange was also addressed. Tribal colleges in the U.S. have a unique outlook on sustainability that is of great value to other American universities. Additionally, urban and rural communities and colleges within the U.S. have a great deal to share with each other. Campus sustainability professionals can advance the goals of their work by encouraging such collaboration.