

Sustainability in higher education teaches balance, critical thinking and transferable skills

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The 1983 Brundtland Commission defines sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. This and most other definitions of sustainability refer to three pillars: social, economic and ecological.

The United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development recently ended (see <http://www.desd.org/>). There is continuing interest in many aspects of sustainability, including a focus on education and leadership.

You may have heard of upcoming conferences on this topic, such as AASHE (Association for the Advancement of Sustainability Education) in Minneapolis, USA (<http://www.cvent.com/events/aashe-2015-conference-and-expo/event-summary-fc440cae5a7d4c2c89480f782d320300.aspx>) and EOSD (Education for Sustainability) in Karlsruhe, Germany (<http://eosd.org/en/igee.html>). Many delegates would need to fly there, and though they could buy carbon offsets to reduce their carbon footprint, how many of us might think to do this, or actually do it? Controversy abounds around this practice. Locals could drive or take public transit – or train – what are the relative impacts on the environment?

It is about balance and also relates to our daily lives: paper or plastic, meat/fish or vegan? If you eat fish, do you choose wild or farmed? We face myriad other decisions. I take my re-usable plastic containers when I order takeout sushi. Then I have to wash them. Is this better than the ubiquitous use of Styrofoam, which, although recyclable in some places, often ends up in our oceans?

How do we know? How do we decide? Informed decisions, not only for things we have control over, but our broader actions. Federal elections are coming up soon in both Canada and US. To what extent are the promises and platforms of our politicians on aspects of sustainability (all three pillars) a factor in who may receive our vote?

Some roles of higher education include giving students a chance to consider multiple views, think critically, make informed decisions, connect to the real world and be part of the solution. This special issue on Post-secondary Sustainability Leadership and Education includes great concrete examples of how we have done just this, not only in specific disciplines but in broader contexts.

Starting with discipline-specific examples, In Going Deep: Reflections on teaching deep ecology in Costa Rica, Heather Burns and Jeffrey Briley describe a graduate field course from Portland State University. Taking place in Costa Rica (I already want to register!), students learn, in concrete ways, how to be sustainability leaders through, amongst other strategies, community based learning and deep learning.

Liz Grauerholz and colleagues' Teaching About Consumption and Sustainability describes three sociology courses and the very aptly named Not Buying It Project. Students' reactions to the assignment may surprise you! They also include a literature review related to consumption and teaching about it.

Turning to broader contexts, of interest to educational developers and others who lead seminars for the teaching community, my colleagues and I explain three activities we used in a campus-wide multi-day workshop to help educators introduce or enhance aspects of sustainability into their courses or programs. We explain how 'sustainability literacy', 'sustainability artifact' and 'give one, get one' could be adapted for use in any course, or other settings.

In *Beyond Sustainability: A Context for Transformative Curriculum Development*, Mary F. Wright and colleagues present a framework for initiating sustainability curricular change. They describe a range of student-driven initiatives, the essential need for administrative leadership and support and how faculty members' own leadership and professional development plays a role. The Kinnickinnic Project, a workshop for faculty from many disciplines, embraces these ideas.

Both our (Cassidy et al.) and Wright et al.'s workshops stem from the successful AASHE Sustainability Curriculum Leadership Conference at Emory University.

Julie Saam provides a unique perspective of social sustainability in *Sustainability Principles used to Sustain the Drive Towards Teaching Excellence in Teaching*. Giving the faculty perspective of achieving tenure and then sustaining that level of excellence, Saam points to the value of Faculty Learning Communities and using anecdotal data generated through conversations with faculty, indicators of sustaining teaching excellence. In doing so, she gives us a very nice overview of some sustainability literature.

Sandra Neill describes a sustainability-across-the-curriculum audit at George Brown College. The first of its kind that I am aware of, the key goal was to document all the courses that deliver (and measure) student acquisition of social, environmental and economic sustainability skills and knowledge.

Finally, Lee Beavington presents a poem describing a journey from second grade to current interprofessional work related to the natural world. At least that's my take on it. It may not be yours, and it seems to me that that is the value of this form of writing.

This special issues shows how colleagues have found ways to ensure our graduates understand how sustainability relates to their disciplines and their communities. It brings us back to Brundtland: "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".