Issues of Sustainability in Higher Education

Jason M. Bentley
Central Michigan University
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Creating a Sustainable Campus

Institutions of higher education face increased operating costs (e.g., personnel, health care, energy, etc.), decreases in state and federal appropriations among public colleges and universities, and increased demands to improve access, affordability and evidence that there is value added because of a college education. Since the inception of higher education in the United States, college and universities set out to educate and train citizens, expand understanding and support a more able and enlightened community. As centers of knowledge, early colleges and universities provided religious training. Today, students select from an array of seemingly limitless intellectual topics.

Beyond the myriad subjects students may explore, the modern university affords opportunities to bridge theory with practice. Increasingly, college and universities partner with the public and private sector, consult on issues of national security, prepare civic and business leaders, develop global educators, and support dialogue and connections between diverse races, cultures, ethnic groups, and socio-economic conditions. More than 200 public and private colleges and universities in the United States foster innovation, and continue to provide the fertile, intellectual soil necessary to grow new ideas. It is this richness - the richness of higher education’s intellectual, social and financial endowment resources – that offers the foundation for growth in understanding sustainability.

Not unlike individuals, local municipalities, and state governments, higher education faces issues of being healthy. For individuals, healthy living requires clean air, water and food. For municipalities and state governments, good health suggests balanced budgets, just and equitable decisions and actions that enhance life. Because college and universities function – in
many ways – as small cities, they experience many of the same issues as individuals, local municipalities and state governments.

College campuses across the United States and Canada are improving sustainability efforts (Carlson, 2006). A majority of institutions, however, continue to fall short of aspirational practices that show a clear use of resources, endowments, campus resources, research agendas and community service focused on sustainability. The Sustainable Endowments Institute (2008) studied the 200 public and private universities with the largest endowments, ranging from $230 million to nearly $35 billion and found “green” practices on many campuses. The study reports that nearly 45 percent of colleges have commitments to fight climate change through cutting carbon emissions. The report also notes high-performance green building standards guiding new construction (59 percent of schools), and fleets of hybrid or electric vehicles (42 percent of schools) shaping facility planning and daily operations. Of all the schools studied, 37 percent purchased renewable energy, 30 percent produced their own wind or solar energy, and another 70 percent purchased food from local farms.

While issues of global health continue to dominate policy discussions and election debates, educational leaders face questions about the place of sustainability research in the academe (Monastersky, 2006). Do institutions hire faculty to research environmental and sociologic intersections to offer ideas to influence human behavior? Can scholars publish and earn tenure through engagement in studies on water consumption by college students or the environmental savings of running vehicles on converted fryer oil?

Questions about how colleges and universities may best serve the common good through research, public service and modeling of best practices internally will undoubtedly continue. With leading scholars, large endowments and an available lab in the form of the campus physical
plant and personnel, college and universities have the resources to advance sustainability. Given growing international concern about the development of industry in China and India, and pollution in the United States, higher education has an important public need to meet. To continue centuries of advancing world civilizations, educators now face the most important challenge of our time. Using the wealth and resources available, they face the daunting challenge of helping the world promote practices that meet our growing needs without adversely impacting the environment or the ability of future generations to thrive.

References


