

The Sustainable University: Green Goals and New Challenges for Higher Education Leaders

reviewed by Alberto Arenas – October 18, 2013



Title: The Sustainable University: Green Goals and New Challenges for Higher Education Leaders

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At a time when there is an increasing interest in transforming higher education institutions into green exemplars, *The Sustainable University* (2012) is an opportune and bold volume that will assist educational stakeholders in making such an interest a reality. Whereas publications on the connections between higher education and sustainability have been growing in number since the publication of *Ecodemia* (1995) by Julian Keniry, perhaps the first comprehensive book on the topic with specific action plans for U.S. college administrators, faculty, and students, *The Sustainable University* picks up on the *how* of sustainability, with particular attention to areas that hitherto have received less attention, such as assessment measures, college presidency and endowments, university athletics, and campus architecture beyond LEED. The volume comprises chapters by key actors in the higher education sustainability movement, including college presidents, university sustainability directors, and leaders of influential national groups, such as the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), U.S. Partnerships for Education for Sustainable Development, and Second Nature. Overall, it is a highly informative book for readers keen on advancing the cause of sustainability writ large.

The book opens up with a general panorama of the advances made since the Talloires Declaration of 1990, one of the most important ones being the approval of the 2007 American College & University Presidents' Climate Commitment (ACUPCC). The ACUPCC, whose ultimate goal is to eliminate campuses' net greenhouse gas emissions, turns higher education into "the first

national sector with a significant number of its members to commit to climate neutrality” (p. 26). Another significant accomplishment was the launching in 2009 of the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System (STARS), possibly the most comprehensive system to date that allows higher education institutions to benchmark their progress and compare themselves to other institutions (p. 49). STARS, led by AASHE, requires from participating institutions (251 as of 2012) a high degree of accountability and transparency in all areas of higher education: curriculum, research, operations, investment, and community engagement (p. 50).

Two key audiences of the book are college presidents and trustees, who, relative to other higher education stakeholders, have lagged behind the sustainability bandwagon. To address this gap, Jo Ann Gora, president of Ball State University, and Robert Koester, architecture professor at the same institution, pen a revealing chapter in which they offer a leadership framework to institutionalize sustainability, which includes adopting a whole-systems approach, using multi-modal leadership strategies, and educating the board of trustees (p. 104). In terms of a whole-systems approach, the university made it a requirement that every administrative unit on campus generate their own sustainability plan (p. 107). In terms of a multi-modal approach, the authors advocate the recognition of “differing scales of timeline for action and differing conventions of administrative practice” (p. 115), allowing for alternative funding mechanisms such as replacing centrally budgeted utility costs with sub-metering to respective administrative units. If a department or college saves on operating expenses, the savings can then be reallocated for other purposes. And in terms of socializing the board of trustees, it is vital to ensure that all trustees are informed about the inter-dependence of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability, and to keep them informed on a regular basis (via faculty presentations, for instance) of advances made and challenges faced by the institution.

A related and important contribution of the book is the management of investment funds (p. 167). Given higher education’s role and charge in promoting the common good, there has been a push to ensure that shareholders respond accordingly to support a progressive political, social, and environmental agenda, but these concerns have often been trumped by economic issues. Nonetheless, as the chapter noted, there has been a growing interest in tying investment decisions to sustainability concerns as the ethically correct choice even when it means some loss in investment returns—which would not be any different than supporting the possible additional costs of green buildings or green research. And certainly the growing interest has been motivated in part by such assessment tools as STARS, which awards credit points for green investments.

Another area that has received scant attention is university athletics. To emphasize this point, the chapter dedicated to this topic states, “The green

movement is changing the hue of campus everywhere—except perhaps in the most high-profile venue on many campuses: athletics” (p. 223). To understand why, one needs to consider that many athletic programs operate with financial independence from the university, and respond to a different set of concerns, mostly winning games, which in turn increase recruitment, ticket sales, sponsorships, and TV airtime. Having a vastly different business model and philosophy from that of the university at large has made many athletic programs relatively immune to recent sustainability trends. Despite this reality, some programs do stand out for their progressive green agenda. The University of Colorado at Boulder (UCB), for instance, “became the first carbon-neutral, zero-waste football program in the nation” in 2008 (p. 233). A key step was to convert the football stadium into a zero-waste venue. To do this, all the concession stands started to offer products that were compostable or recyclable. Then all of the public trashcans were replaced with zero-waste stations that collected the compost and the recyclable materials. Once the bags were removed from the cans, they were inspected by volunteers and staff to ensure that there was no cross-contamination and the solid waste was then placed in the corresponding dumpster. As a result of these efforts, the UCB stadium has been able to divert as much as 80 percent of the original “trash” from the landfill into recycling or compost streams (p. 234).

Another exciting contribution of the volume relates to campus architecture. Building design and construction have been perhaps the most visible topics when considering green issues on campus, but as Scott Carlson from the Chronicle of Higher Education explains in his chapter, most of the current discussion has centered on LEED certification (p. 180). Since LEED started in 1998, it has greatly influenced the way campus planners think about the design, construction, maintenance, and operation of buildings, but there are other ways of thinking about these issues that have received less attention, as Carlson points out. Perhaps the lowest hanging fruit and greenest alternative is no new construction at all. Colleges and universities have become obsessed with more buildings and bigger campuses; since the 1970s the campuses (as measured by square footage per student) have almost tripled in size and most of the growth has been on non-academic campus amenities, such as student unions, recreational facilities and students dorms. A politically risky, but in many cases financially and environmentally sound, solution is a no-net-growth policy, which includes renovating old buildings and being smarter about finding new uses for existing space (p. 192). Once it is decided that new construction is indeed needed, then campus planners need to think hard whether LEED is the right choice (which in many cases it could be, given the power of LEED in helping to grant prestige and rebrand entire colleges and universities) or instead opt for something like the Living Building Challenge (LBC), the most rigorous eco-building program in the world. The LBC is “an all-or-nothing rating system that requires a building to produce its own energy, capture its potable water, and clean or recycle its waste water. A building must use sustainable, local construction materials...[and it] must be beautiful and an

educational example” (p. 196). Regardless of which option campus planners adopt, Carlson correctly advocates for a “less is more” minimalist approach in which changes in behavior by building occupants can bring about the most significant and immediate sustainability impact.

The volume also finds space to chastise the sustainability movement as a whole for generally paying greater attention to environmental issues and their financial cost than to social concerns. This is brought to light in a chapter by Anthony Cortese, president of Second Nature and organizer of the Talloires Declaration, when he writes:

Presidents, provosts, chief finance officers, and trustees still view many of the challenges as environmental, and not societal, and not as fundamental to how they can meet the basic needs of all current and future humans in a fair, equitable, peaceful, and sustainable manner. (p. 24)

This is an extremely important point that needs to be remembered by all sustainability advocates, and herein lays a weakness of the book. Many social injustices and incidents of environmental degradation on the planet are caused by an amoral quest for unfettered economic growth, and yet the book is mostly silent about the excesses of the economic system, particularly of corporate capitalism. For instance, several of the chapters talk about the triple bottom line (TBL) in a positive and uncritical fashion, but ignore the fact that such a construct is ideologically suspect because it gives the economic domain a status equal to and independent from the social and environmental (and all too often the economic becomes the master category) rather than subordinating it to the latter two, which is the most likely way of humanizing the economic system (For a critique of TBL see Norman & MacDonald, 2003.).

Despite this weakness—and to be fair, we in the sustainability community have much work to do in this area—this is a timely volume that offers many provocative insights and practical ideas that will push forward the sustainability agenda in tertiary education.

References

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