

## Letter to the Editor

I wish to express my thanks to the *Northwestern* for opening the conversation on sustainability at the University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh, with its 'Our Say' piece published Friday, 20 February. The piece raises questions about sustainability; about a university's role in sustainable development, in particular during challenging economic times; and about a full-time senior academic staff position to address sustainability issues on campus. I would like to speak to the issues raised, in particular to the notion that sustainability in higher education is first and foremost an operational agenda (energy and water conservation, building and remodeling efficiency, reducing solid waste, and the like).

Sustainability is the moral imperative of our time. It is widely accepted that our global society is living in ways that the planet we inhabit can not support indefinitely. The economic crisis we are currently experiencing is just one symptom of a much broader and deeper crisis of ecological debt which, unlike economic-financial debt, can not be redeemed, it can only be arrested. American culture, and the dominant American way of life, is specifically implicated in a global consumer culture which is wreaking havoc on the Earth's ecological systems. These, no doubt, are tough statements to hear and difficult truths to accept. Sustainable development is not opposed to economic prosperity; on the contrary, sustainability is about securing economic prosperity for today's and future generations by respecting the health of ecosystems and social justice.

The United Nations has mandated universities and colleges to take the lead in charting the pathway toward more sustainable futures. Where else but in higher education can the intellectual prowess be harnessed, new knowledge be generated, innovative technology be developed, and the next generation of societal leaders be educated to promise constructive and hopeful approaches out of the crisis of unsustainability? The University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh, with its comprehensive Campus Sustainability Plan, has accepted – and more importantly, *acted* – on this mandate. This, to date, has been done by faculty and staff who already hold full-time jobs. By addressing the operational and academic side of sustainability in higher education (i.e. sustainability research and education), the University is one of as yet very few universities worldwide which is looking at sustainability comprehensively, beyond energy efficiency, water conservation, recycling, etc. Sustainability is not just about those issues, it is also and more fundamentally about building capacity for sustainability – through research, teaching and learning – so that students and other campus community members can be effective agents for social change in their communities. With its endorsement of the Earth Charter and its commitment to Fair Trade, UWO is among even fewer universities globally which are explicitly addressing social sustainability. Sustainability in higher education envisioned such requires expertise beyond facilities management, how to “replace[s] less efficient fixtures and structures with ones meeting more stringent standards” (Our Say). By creating a senior position in sustainability which reports to both academic *and* facilities management leadership, the University has recognized

the importance of implementing sustainability across the institution, and has endorsed sustainability as being a goal for all units and academic departments, one which unites all campus community members in a common objective.

The path toward more sustainable futures will neither be easy, nor without controversy or pain. There will be losses to grieve, sacrifices to be made, and deeply-engrained behaviours and habits to be changed. But neither is the current path of unsustainability without losses and pain: how many family farms have been lost in Wisconsin in the past decade? How many people are fearing for their jobs, or have already lost them? How many families are facing the sale of their home at this time? Sustainability, essentially, is a deeply motivating and constructive challenge: how can we, in our respective home region, learn to live more lightly on the Earth? What is required is to work together toward positive and practical solutions for local, regional, national and global challenges, to ask deep questions, to engage in debate – toward the shared aspiration of moving out of unsustainability toward a sustainable future.

I look forward to serving the University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh and the residents of Oshkosh, Winnebago County, and beyond in sustainability projects and sustainable development processes – for the common good of all.

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