

Why Teach Sustainability?

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*“Sustainability implies that the critical activities of a higher education institution are (at a minimum) ecologically sound, socially just, and economically viable, and that they will continue to be so for future generations. **A truly sustainable college or university would emphasize these concepts in its curriculum and research, preparing students to contribute as working citizens to an environmentally sound and socially just society.** The institution would function as a sustainable community, embodying responsible consumption of food and energy, treating its diverse members with respect, and supporting these values in the surrounding community.”*

– Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (www.ulsf.org)

Becoming a sustainable institution is not just about reducing the environmental impact of our operations. One of our primary responsibilities as an institution of higher education is to educate our students, the next generation of leaders and citizens, on the meaning and potential applications of sustainability. We can, and should, give them the background and skills they need to shape a society that can be sustained for themselves and for future generations. As a reflection of this commitment, “knowledge of sustainability and its applications” became an essential learning outcome at UWO in 2008. Furthermore, sustainability is now one of the pillars of our proposed general education program, ensuring that all our students will be exposed to sustainability. This should be a point of pride for those of us who teach at UWO; although it is widely acknowledged that schools should be doing this, very few institutions in the U.S. have made as strong a commitment to educating students for sustainability. We are at the forefront of a widely accepted and quickly growing movement in higher education.

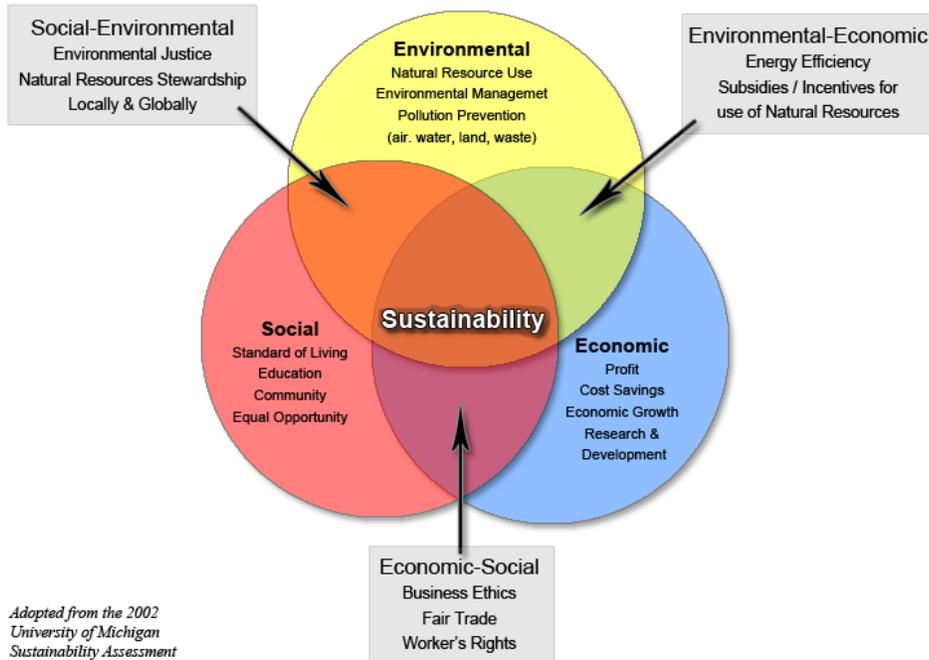
It is easy to see why people might think sustainability represents another liberal agenda in academia. However, contrary to popular perception, sustainability isn’t about telling people what to do—prescriptive practices like recycling, driving a fuel-efficient car, eating tasteless granola, or indoctrinating students into a particular worldview. It’s not even just about the environment, and doom-and-gloom stories of ecological destruction. At its core, sustainability is about helping us live up to our fullest potential, as individuals and as a society. Sustainability is about working towards a future in which all human beings can enjoy decent quality of life— good health, economic security, membership in strong and inclusive communities, the list goes on— while ensuring that we do not endanger the natural resources and environments upon which we depend. Making our way towards sustainability will involve addressing some very big and complicated problems— problems that will not have just single answers, or answers generated by single perspectives. Educating our students about sustainability means presenting them with multiple perspectives and teaching them how to critically evaluate the pros and cons, costs and consequences of the many options that lie before us. Sustainability is not about prescription, or about liberal or conservative points of view; it is about thoughtfully questioning, analyzing, and coming up with creative solutions. And isn’t this exactly what we want our students to be able to do?

However, many faculty and academic staff are (understandably) left wondering how they fit into all this. They ask, “Isn’t this concept only relevant to disciplines like Environmental Studies? How is sustainability relevant to my teaching and my discipline? How do I bring sustainability into my class— and why should I?”

The answer to these questions lies in how we conceive of sustainability. Sustainability is a “big tent” concept that emphasizes the interconnections between three aspects of human communities: social/cultural, economic, and ecological. This is often represented as a sort of Venn diagram, with

sustainability achieved when all three components overlap. The idea here is that all of these components are deeply connected— each depends on or is intertwined to the others, and we cannot impact one without influencing the others as well (by way of example, consider U.S. energy policy). Sustainability requires maintaining the integrity and balance of all three of these components.

The Three Spheres of Sustainability



The beauty of sustainability is that its emphasis on the interconnections between society, economy, and nature makes it relevant to all sorts of disciplines and topics. Furthermore, if we think about sustainability as a lens of inquiry— as a way of analyzing and thinking about issues and problems— its relevance to a liberal arts education becomes clear. Sustainability becomes a pedagogical “big idea” that is widely relevant and even inspiring.

Course examples

There are all sorts of creative ways to integrate sustainability into your classroom. Need some examples? Since 2008 UWO has been working with faculty and academic staff to help them bring sustainability into their classes, mainly through a faculty college called The Winnebago Project. To-date, faculty and academic staff from 24 departments and all four colleges have participated. Below are some examples of courses redesigned as a result of this workshop; courses range from big “gateway” courses taught in the pits to small, upper-level courses in the major. Syllabi and course materials from Winnebago Project participants can be found on UWO’s Sustainability website (<http://www.uwosh.edu/sustainability/> and <http://www.uwosh.edu/stuaff/sustainability/>).

- Art 338: Design II
- History 101: Early Civilizations
- Biology 230: Biology of Animals
- Business 343: Manufacturing Systems
- Chemistry 105: General Chemistry
- English 214: American Literature II
- Philosophy 106: Honors Ethics
- Political Science 366: Politics of Urban Growth
- Religion 104: American Religions
- Spanish 304: Advanced Composition and Conversation II

Disciplinary societies

For further evidence of the relevance of sustainability, and the broad buy-in by many disciplines, look no further than your umbrella disciplinary organization. Many of these organizations (from disciplines as diverse as mathematics, physics, philosophy, psychology, biology, and economics) have been working on issues related to the teaching of sustainability for years, and they have now joined forces. Check out the Disciplinary Associations Network for Sustainability (www.aashe.org/dans), an informal network of professional organizations collaborating on professional development, curricula, and standards for sustainability education in their disciplines.

Support at UWO

And a final, important note- you aren't in this alone. There are plenty of resources and opportunities for faculty development to help you along. A few of these resources are listed below. Please get in touch with me (spehars@uwosh.edu) if you want to know more, have questions, or if you'd like to schedule a department visit or a training session for your unit.

- Winnebago Project: Rework or design a course through this 2-day faculty college, usually offered in May. Call for applications announced soon!
- Small Grants for Sustainability: support innovation in teaching, research, operations, or outreach
- Sustainability Brown Bag series: discussions of pedagogical issues related to teaching sustainability; announced throughout the academic year
- Online resources: Information and resources such as syllabi, assignments, databases, factsheets, field trips, and more: <http://www.uwosh.edu/sustainability/> or <http://www.uwosh.edu/stuaff/sustainability/>