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“A Model Sustainable Institution”

Excerpt from “U.S. Progress Toward Sustainability in Higher Education”
<http://www.ulsf.org/dernbach/history.htm>

While the manner in which academic institutions define and approach sustainability is very divergent, reflecting cultural, bioregional, economic and political diversity, we would expect a genuine commitment to creating a sustainable future to be evidenced in most of the following critical dimensions of institutional life:

1. **Disciplinary, professional, liberal arts and general education requirements** at the university would focus on interdisciplinary decisionmaking and reflect a fundamental concern for sustainability. The institution would impart a basic understanding of (a) the complex environmental, social, and ethical issues that must be addressed to create a sustainable future, and (b) the nature of the political, organizational and individual responses needed--particularly emphasizing the interconnected, multisectoral response that Agenda 21 expresses.⁴⁰ Thus courses throughout the curriculum would feature sustainability topics (e.g., Globalization and Sustainable Development; Urban Ecology and Social Justice; Population, Women and Development; Sustainable Production and Consumption; and many others). Students would also learn about how their own campus functions in the ecosystem (e.g., its sources of food, water and energy, and the endpoint of waste).

2. The **research** of the institution would significantly focus on sustainable development (e.g., renewable energy, sustainable building design, ecological economics, population and development, environmental justice, etc.)

3. **Faculty and staff development and rewards** at the institution would cultivate understanding of sustainable development and criteria for hiring, tenure and promotion would recognize faculty contributions to sustainability in scholarship, teaching, or campus and community activities.

4. **Campus operations** at the college or university would be fundamentally oriented toward reducing the institution's "ecological footprint."⁴¹ Thus one would see examples of water and energy conservation, carbon dioxide reduction practices, sustainable building construction and renovation, environmentally responsible purchasing of food, paper and other products, etc. Furthermore, these operational practices would be integrated into the educational and scholarly activities of the school.

5. **Student opportunities** and engagement on campus would reflect a deep commitment to sustainability through such institutional practices as new student orientation, scholarships, internships and job placement counseling related to community service, sustainability and/or justice issues. Students groups and activities focused on environmental or sustainability issues would be visibly present.

6. **The institution's outreach and service** would support local, regional and global partnerships to enhance sustainability (e.g., collaborating with other higher education institutions, with local primary and secondary schools and with businesses to foster sustainable practices, as well as seeking international cooperation in solving global environmental justice and sustainability challenges through conferences and student/faculty exchanges).

7. **The university's mission, structure and planning** would communicate and promote sustainability. The descriptions of learning objectives and the public relations materials of the various schools, departments, programs or offices would express prominent and explicit concern for sustainability. That commitment would be further evidenced through administrative positions and committees (e.g., Director of Environmental Programs, Sustainability Task Force, etc.) and practices (e.g., orientation programs, socially responsible investment policies, annual environmental audits, etc.).⁴²

Notes

(40) An attention to issues of social justice would also be present. In the words of theologian John Cobb Jr., an academic institution committed to sustainability should help students understand the roots of today's injustices and motivate them to seek justice in full integration with understanding the roots of environmental degradation and modeling environmentally sustainable practices. John B. Cobb Jr., unpublished notes from "Sustainability and the Liberal Arts" Conference, Conway, Ark. (Oct. 1998).

(41) The "ecological footprint" measures human impact on nature. It indicates how much productive land and water we use to produce all the resources we consume and to take in all the waste we make. This concept, now a popular measure of sustainability, was developed by Mathis Wackernagel, who has written widely on the question of embracing limits and developing indicators to assess sustainability.

(42) These dimensions are explored in more detail in ULSF's "Sustainability Assessment Questionnaire." See http://www.ulsf.org/programs_saq.html (last visited Mar. 30, 2002).