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Sustainability of What? Sustainability for Whom?

Any inquiry into sustainability must first be situated within social and ecological context. Regarding the latter, Working Group I of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently summarized the scientific consensus in their contribution to the forthcoming Sixth Assessment Report (AR6), “Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis” (IPCC, 2021). Its conclusions are harrowing: “Global surface temperature will continue to increase until at least the mid-century under all emissions scenarios considered,” the authors warn, adding that “every region is projected to increasingly experience concurrent and multiple changes in climatic impact-drivers.”

As we continue careening toward planetary ecological catastrophe, climate change poses fundamental existential questions for all human institutions, and postsecondary institutions are no exception. For higher education, such existential questions compel us to consider the ends and obligations of academia: What are the purposes of intellectual inquiry? To whom do we owe what? What is the nature of learning in a world that is burning?

Professor Thomas Princen, a scholar of environmental policy and planning at the University of Michigan, suggests two foundational questions every sustainability professional should ask: Sustainability of what? Sustainability for whom? The fundamental premise of these two questions is that challenges of sustainability demand an interrogation of system boundaries, of social-ecological systems, and of distributional effects. These questions, moreover, must be considered within the context of sustainability in higher education in the United States.
Due to the ravages wrought by consumer society, the enormous ecological footprint of Americans far exceeds our country’s biocapacity, per decades of data collected by the Global Footprint Network (2021). The US is, by far, the largest contributor to cumulative global carbon emissions (Irfan, 2019), and per capita American carbon emissions today remain triple the global average (Ritchie, 2019). Higher education in the US is geared to generate private wealth in a world where the “richest one percent of the world’s population are responsible for more than twice as much carbon pollution as the 3.1 billion people who made up the poorest half of humanity,” from 1990 to 2015 (Oxfam, 2020).

The most extreme impacts of environmental hazards, however, are experienced most intensely by the vulnerable people of the poorer half, in what UN researchers have described as “a vicious cycle, whereby initial inequality causes the disadvantaged groups to suffer disproportionately from the adverse effects of climate change, resulting in greater subsequent inequality” (Islam & Winkel, 2017). The same dynamics play out domestically as well, which is why environmental justice issues comprise a central plank of contemporary civil rights work (for activists from establishment organizations like the NAACP to those engaged in newer grassroots initiatives such as the Movement for Black Lives), reflecting a recognition of the disproportionate impacts of environmental injustice on communities of color (Thompson, 2020). From climate to food, energy, materials and the built environment, it is impossible to imagine any aspect of sustainability that would not be better understood through equity and justice lenses (Center for Sustainable Systems, 2020).

Who, then, are the beneficiaries of dominant campus sustainability initiatives on traditional college campuses? And, what ends do current campus sustainability efforts serve? Just what is it that sustainability officers seek to sustain? Such questions are particularly pressing and vexing for institutional leaders in a diverse and unequal society poised on the precipice of multiple social and environmental crises.

Higher Education Confers Privilege Upon the Privileged

Those working in academia often overlook the fact that undergraduate education remains a relative rarity for most Americans. In fact, as of 2019, Census Bureau data indicates that, across varying regions of the United States, 70-80 percent of Americans over the age of 25 do not possess four-year college degrees (McElrath & Martin, 2021). Degree attainment fluctuates by region, with 30% of the Northeast population over 25 earning a Bachelor’s degree, as compared to 20% in the South (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).
While higher education may offer a potential pathway to social mobility for a select few, the post-secondary education sector in the US is predominantly premised upon – and perpetuates – vast social inequalities. The affluent purchase educational access for their children through “opportunity markets,” which is a reflection and culmination of the transformation of education into a commodity (Grusky, Hall & Markus, 2019). It should come as no surprise, then, that many of our most esteemed institutions function most effectively as “engines of inequality,” with students from working class and lower income families being few and far between (The Education Trust, 2015).

Despite US higher education institutions being advantageous to only a select few, many continue to subscribe to what might best be described as a trickle-down theory of higher education. Neither rates of labor force participation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020) nor indicators of social progress (The Social Progress Imperative, 2020) suggest that those outside the formal reach of our institutions experience substantial benefits from the educational products and credentials that colleges and universities are selling. Vis-à-vis labor force participation, college grads are nearly thirty percent more likely to be employed than high school grads. Meanwhile, on the Social Progress Index, the US excels in only one major category, “Access to Advanced Education,” a ranking driven by the presence of an abundance of world-class “quality weighted universities,” while achieving middling scores in delivering on “Basic Human Needs,” “Foundations of Wellbeing,” and “Inclusiveness.”

Although we may very much like to believe that the rewards of higher education are broadly societally beneficial, the spillover effects of academic excellence are limited. Higher education in the contemporary United States is a private good with limited positive externalities.
Conventional Approaches to Campus Sustainability

The American academy aspires to corporate models and platitudes, and current campus sustainability efforts are essentially adopted and adapted from the business world. Consequently, equity and justice are typically relegated to afterthoughts when envisioning flashy environmental initiatives. Sustainability itself is likewise seen as secondary to university business, as reflected in three dominant approaches to “greening” campuses.

The most common approach to campus sustainability appears to be via various efficiency improvements and operational savings. These are typically marginal cost-minimization strategies that fail to make much of a dent in the scale and scope of an institution’s overall environmental impact. The primary motivation of such tactics is reducing costs, without challenging the modus operandi of an institution, much as consumerism continues to ravage the planet despite incidental reductions in packaging waste by some businesses. The fact that AASHE’s roots reach back two decades while fossil fuel divestment has gathered only modest momentum over the past few years reveals such fundamental hypocrisies and the lack of meaningful sustainability commitments at the core of the U.S. higher education sector. Furthermore, while student-led divestment movements continue to achieve some notable successes (Wirz, 2020; Whitford, 2021), university commitments to divest have been notoriously disingenuous (Thakker, 2021).

A second, related approach concerns the planning of new capital investments in buildings and grounds, employing architecture, landscaping and aesthetic strategies to communicate environmental concern. Chief among these is LEED certification, a process so robust and holistic as to allow organizations such as the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company to achieve plaudits for the construction of its new corporate headquarters. Notwithstanding upfront expenditures, such investments are made with an expectation of savings in long-term operational costs, while accruing near-term reputational benefits.
The third approach to campus sustainability strategy, and a thread that runs through the first two, is greenwashing (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). For example, one prevalent public promise is the claim of carbon neutrality, typically calculated through some combination of tightly constraining the operational dimensions considered and “offsetting” the carbon production therein through the purchase of carbon credits (Irfan, 2020). Not only are many dimensions of carbon use excluded or excused when staking the net zero claim, an overemphasis on carbon neutrality often serves to obscure an institution’s broader impacts on many other critical planetary boundaries (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2015). Moreover, as recently published research regarding California’s state carbon offset program reveals, purported carbon credits frequently fail to accomplish genuine carbon savings while acquitting continued pollution (Song & Temple, 2021). In a society plagued by disinformation and distrust, educational institutions must aspire to model humility, integrity, specificity, and transparency, by clearly and honestly communicating motivations, achievements, limits, and failures.

None of the above outlined approaches could seriously be said to accomplish very much from any holistic systems perspective, and all are absent any meaningful equity or justice component. Dominant approaches to campus sustainability are narrowly defined to benefit dominant segments of society. And as the fight for fossil fuel divestment demonstrates, sustained pressure from multiple constituencies inside and outside the academy may be necessary to effect a paradigm shift.

The Campus in Historical and Geopolitical Context

Even when sustainability initiatives are moderately successful with respect to relatively narrow measures, any efforts that do not extend beyond campus grounds to engage and benefit surrounding communities at best constitute limited local efforts to reduce environmental bads and hoard environmental goods, while ignoring and possibly exacerbating environmental injustice and relative environmental vulnerabilities. Genuine sustainability on campus would entail looking backwards as well as forwards – and certainly looking well beyond the nicely manicured groves of academe.

To begin thoughtfully incorporating racial equity into an understanding of something such as a sustainable campus landscape, one must begin by interrogating the very origins of our buildings and grounds. The foundation of our land-grant institutions are expropriated Indigenous lands: the Morrill Act enabled funds from the sale of 80,000 land parcels taken from 250 tribal communities, together totaling more than the combined area of Connecticut and Massachusetts, to endow 52 universities (Lee & Ahtone, 2020). Nearly a third of these institutions have held on to a portion of the stolen lands and are still profiting today from land use revenue streams (Goodluck, Ahtone & Lee, 2020). Meanwhile, many of our most prestigious private institutions were built by the labor or sale of enslaved peoples (Smith & Ellis, 2017).

Just, equitable and inclusive sustainability initiatives would seek to acknowledge and engage responsibly and collaboratively with present-day descendants of the dispossessed and enslaved, as well as with other contemporary marginalized members of neighboring and nearby communities. How many of those descendants and unaffiliated neighbors could articulate concrete advantages that they have gained from any sustainability projects in the postsecondary sector? How do they experience the benefits of campus beautification efforts?
These issues are especially relevant for institutions located in communities facing structural disadvantages. As Davarian Baldwin has noted, “because most wealthy schools sit in largely Black and Brown communities, their unjust and inequitable relationships with their neighbors are precisely ‘DEI’ issues” (Greene, 2021). If racial equity and social justice are ever to come to the fore of sustainability efforts on campus, then conceptions of community and appreciations of system boundaries must extend far beyond the groves of academe.

**Toward Sustainability Informed and Inflected by Justice**

Without consistent, deliberate effort, there is little reason to believe that institutions designed for the benefit of a limited segment of society will ever pursue campus sustainability initiatives that meaningfully address any dimension of racial equity or social justice. Sustainability that fails to consider injustice is a sustainability that will only sustain injustice. A just sustainability could transform post-secondary education from a private good to a public one.

The mission and purpose of higher education demand that we always ask ourselves: Sustainability of what? Sustainability for whom? Higher education institutions exist within the context of time and space, and our conceptions of sustainability must expand accordingly to acknowledge historical and geographical circumstances. A morally informed and expansive notion of sustainability would afford institutions the opportunity to reimagine social responsibility and our obligations to the past, present and future.

Successful sustainability professionals cannot be mere technocratic managers but must endeavor to be compassionate, humanistic partners – partners who recognize that they inhabit a particular place with a specific history. As humans, we are embodied creatures acting in the context of complex social-ecological systems, creatures embedded and emplaced in both social and physical geographies. Sustainability that aspires toward justice is a sustainability that acknowledges, appreciates, and holds itself accountable to these realities, and to the peoples and trajectories of suffering born of them.

We must move beyond current accounting methodologies for sustainability to broader accountability orientations. What do we owe society? Reimagining campus sustainability offers us an opportunity to grapple with that central question, one that too often we seek to elude or elide.
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