

National Trend Toward Sustainability Education Grows

The U.S. Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development and key initiatives, resources
by Alessandra Cairo and Debra Rowe

Education for sustainability is a quickly growing national trend in higher education. It is therefore important to understand how sustainability is defined and applied to the societal challenges that face the United States and the global community today. According to the most commonly used definition of the U.N. Brundtland Commission, sustainable development is “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

In 2003, Rolf Jucker further illuminated the idea: “Sustainability is achieved when all people on earth can live well without compromising the quality of life for future generations.” The vision of sustainable human society resides in the common ground of economic growth and equity, conservation of natural resources and the natural environment, and worldwide social development. Businesses often refer to these three components of sustainable development as the “triple bottom line.”

Sustainability and education

Education for sustainable development is a phrase that supports the integration of sustainability within core curricula and all academic disciplines, while continuing to meet professional standards. Education for a sustainable future “enables people to develop the knowledge, values and skills to participate in decisions that will improve the quality of life now without damaging the planet for the future” (World summit brochure on education for sustainable development, 2002).

Higher education institutions across the nation are infusing sustainability into their missions and planning, curricula, research, student life, operations, and purchasing and community partnerships. At hundreds of campuses, sustainability has gone beyond classroom walls as students and staff involve themselves in sustainability committees and actions on and off campus.

For example, students and staff have engaged in community greenhouse gas emissions studies or community energy audits, contributing to society while acquiring sustainability knowledge. Students and staff throughout the nation have organized sustainability-oriented film festivals, living campaigns, speakers and other campus events to share sustainability related knowledge and engage as many people as possible.

Institutional sustainability committees are often made up of staff and students from across the campus who work together to integrate sustainability into the general education core

requirements, courses, disciplines, whole colleges and specialized degrees, facilities and strategic plans. They also ensure purchasing and investments meet socially and environmentally responsible criteria. The students and staff work in conjunction with businesses, governments, nongovernmental organizations and kindergarten through high school education organizations and associations on both regional and global approaches to sustainability.

From a quality perspective, many colleges and universities include something in their missions about creating better educated graduates who can contribute to a better society. Yet this is often not measured or even rigorously implemented. Sustainability education helps this part of the higher education mission come alive.

Decade of sustainable development

In December 2002, the United Nations declared a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) to begin on January 1, 2005. The decade was designated in response to a series of international conferences, declarations and initiatives which began in 1992 with the Rio Earth Summit and concluded with the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the lead agency for the Decade of Education, described the framework for the program, stating, "The focus of DESD activities will be advocacy, communication and networking directed at facilitating all educators to include sustainable development concerns and goals in their own programs" (UNESCO, July 2003).

In 2003, U.S. Partnership emerged from a gathering that included nearly 100 participants from a diverse range of sectors, including K-12 and higher education, science and research organizations, conservation and environmental nongovernmental organizations, faith communities, youth advocacy organizations and government agencies.

The National Council on Science and the Environment and University Leaders for a Sustainable Future summoned the group to respond to the call by the U.N. General Assembly for DESD. Since then, the U.S. Partnership has been working to convene leaders in mainstream organizations, catalyze their initiatives in sustainability education and communicate their efforts and successes to other organizations, societal sectors and the public. The U.S. Partnership has more than 300 partner organizations in multiple societal sectors, including business, communities, faith, youth, higher education and K-12.

Nationwide initiatives

The U.S. Partnership helped catalyze the following national initiatives in its higher education sector: the Disciplinary Associations Networks for Sustainability (DANS), the Higher Education Associations Sustainability Consortium (HEASC), the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), the American College and University President's Climate Commitment (ACUPCC) and the growth of the training for the green economy via the Consortium for Education in Renewable Energy Technology.

When more than 20 academic disciplinary associations were convened by the U.S. Partnership to discuss each of their potential contributions to a more sustainable future over two years ago, DANS was created. DANS (www.aashe.org/dans) includes the national or international academic associations for psychology, sociology, philosophy, religion, biology, chemistry, engineering, anthropology, political science, math, broadcasting, architecture and women's studies. The objectives of the DANS working groups are to integrate sustainability into curricula, professional development, standards and cross-disciplinary projects. DANS also uses its expertise to inform legislative actions about sustainability and educate the public about how to create a sustainable future.

HEASC (www.heasc.net), co-coordinated by Second Nature President Anthony Cortese and U.S. Partnership President Debra Rowe, is designed to move sustainability forward in mainstream higher education associations and in the system of higher education itself. HEASC members consist of the professional associations representing U.S. college and university presidents, approximately half of all of the boards of trustees, and a large majority of facilities directors, business officers, college and university planners, purchasers, and residential housing, student affairs and campus activities staffs. HEASC has multiple sustainability initiatives, resources and professional development offerings.

AASHE (www.aashe.org), serves colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada, and offers extensive resources for sustainability initiatives and policies in higher education, as well as discussion lists and a biennial conference and professional development opportunities. In addition, AASHE publishes an electronic mail bulletin and an annual digest with campus sustainability news, resources, events and job openings.

To promote quality sustainability work, AASHE has developed an assessment tool called sustainability tracking, assessment and rating system (STARS). This tool is a major contribution to the field of sustainability. STARS is a collaborative effort to develop a formal rating system for campus sustainability, with standards by which institutions may measure themselves and qualify for different levels of recognition.

DANS, HEASC and AASHE include members of professional associations and staffs from universities and colleges who work together to advance professional development and move sustainability forward on campuses via changes in practices, policies, standards and curricula. The American College and University President's Climate Commitment (ACUPCC) reaches out to college and university presidents, who sign the ACUPCC pledge to work toward clean energy, carbon-neutral campuses and professional development initiatives. The ACUPCC (www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org) is a major statement from higher education to the rest of society that calls on everyone to create solutions to the climate change challenge, ensuring higher education not only teaches sustainability principles, but also models them. The commitment has now been signed by more than 550 higher education presidents from all 50 states.

Green careers

Recently, an emphasis has been placed on the potential growth for green jobs in the economy. With this interest on green jobs has come an increased interest in curricula for green-job training on campuses. In response, the National Science Foundation funded a Consortium for Education in Renewable Energy Technology (CERET).

CERET (www.ceret.us) is designed to help college and university instructors, as well as remote students and existing workers, gain access to courses and online curricular materials in renewable energies, energy management and sustainability. The U.S. Partnership staff has helped with curricular development, and has taught some of these courses and supported the CERET network.

For more information on the U.S. Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development, visit www.uspartnership.org or contact Alessandra Cairo at Allessandra.Cairo@antiochne.edu.

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