

Turning the University Inside Out

After an election season in which the topic of the environment was all but ignored, President Obama's pledge to action in his inaugural and State of the Union addresses has kindled long-simmering debates on how our nation should move forward in addressing our sustainability challenges. What are the most viable options for clean energy? Should we focus resources on mitigation or adaptation? What are the economic and social equity impacts of taking action on the environment? While there is no clear single direction in which all of the answers to these and other questions will be found, any path to sustainability must run through our colleges and universities.

Increasingly, the sustainability challenges we face today require connected, integrative solutions based on highly collaborative problem-solving research that spans disciplines and reaches across geographic boundaries. Long established as incubators for discovery, universities are particularly well-suited for this kind of research. From developing clean energy sources and technologies, to Smart Grid and other initiatives, America's research universities, often in collaboration with one another as well as partners in both the public and private sectors, are at the forefront of innovation in sustainability research.

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There's no question that the advances we will see in the future – alternative energy sources, new materials that will enable us to harvest energy from those sources, policies that will govern the use of new innovations and adaptations – will emerge from work being done at universities today. Yet while we look forward to those breakthroughs, a great deal of non-research related activity happens on campuses that underscores the unique role colleges and universities play in advancing sustainability and from which we can take both inspiration and valuable lessons right now.



Michael K. Young

President, University of Washington

Michael K. Young is President of the University of Washington. Prior to this, he served as President at the University of Utah. Before assuming the presidency at Utah, he was Dean at the George Washington University Law School. He was also a professor at Columbia University for more than 20 years. President Young has held numerous government positions. He was a law clerk to the late Justice William H. Rehnquist of the United States Supreme Court and he served in the Department of State under President George W. Bush.

Over the last several years, the Ivory Tower has undergone significant greening. Pretty much everything connected to campus life has been put under the sustainability microscope. At the University of Washington (UW), for example, our buildings have gardens on their roofs and carry certifications such as LEED Silver, Gold, and Platinum. We are biking to school and work, and recycling and composting when we get there. Our students are using sensors to measure their energy use in their residence halls, and we are reclaiming water to use

in landscaping. Our custodial teams use green cleaning products, and our gardeners brew special “teas” to use instead of pesticides.

Some of the reasoning behind the decision to go green is purely financial. As a case in point, we have saved \$12.83 million in utility costs over the past year at the UW as a result of the myriad energy efficiency projects we have implemented. But it really goes much deeper than money alone.

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For colleges and universities – especially public ones – engaging with our communities is fundamental to our mission. We all have a responsibility to turn our universities inside out – that is, to take the wealth of ideas percolating on our campuses into our community, whether that community is across the street or across the globe. By making sustainability a priority in our daily operations and practices, we demonstrate in an authentic way our commitment to making a better world for us all. At the same time, it de-mystifies the work being done at universities, connecting discernible, concrete practices with an issue as complex as climate change.

By the way we live on our campus, we also teach our students every day what it takes to live sustainably. And it’s a lesson they really take to heart. Our students voted

themselves on a set of fees that goes into a Campus Sustainability Fund from which they finance their own sustainability projects, including, do-it-yourself bike fix-it stations, green walls, and a bioswale to filter pollutants from storm-water runoff in a parking lot. Every year we send out about 15,000 graduates who have lived and breathed this lifestyle; it is not unrealistic to expect that they will carry this way of living with them into the real world.

In a similar vein, another unique strength of universities is our graduates who understand the innovations of today so well that they will continue developing the innovations of tomorrow. We see this process taking root every day on our UW campus where our students have undertaken such ambitious projects as building a 3D printer that can transform waste plastic into composting toilets and rain-catchment systems and developing an electric vehicle drive train that converts any car from gas to electric power. Speaking personally, I cannot wait to see what they come up with next.

The energy and commitment of our students are powerful testaments to the exceptional efficacy of colleges and universities to lead the way to sustainability. We provide laboratories for future advances, as well as for what works now. By leveraging this experience, we can change the world – ensuring a healthier, greener, more sustainable planet for ourselves and for generations to come.

A Leader in Sustainability

The University of Washington is consistently recognized as a leader in sustainability:

- Named to the Princeton Review’s yearly Green Honor Roll
- Honored by the Sierra Club on their annual “Cool Schools” list
- Received a Gold rating by the national Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS)