

What It Takes: How to Green the Ivory Towers of Higher Education



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In this collection of articles, we've offered a variety of views on the role of higher education in global sustainability efforts.

The series was launched with a piece from Michael Young, President of the UW.

Young believes that, when it comes to sustainability, universities must turn themselves inside out – taking more of the discoveries and innovations from their scholars, researchers and students and bringing them to the broader global community.

We also featured articles on “The New Sustainability Curriculum for the 21st Century,” “The Millennials’ New Planetary

Passion,” and “Sustainability As a Business / Financial / Economic Decision.”

Now, to conclude our series, I've asked four of the most thoughtful and important players in sustainability at the University of Washington to discuss what it takes to truly green the ivory towers of higher education.

Sandra Archibald, Dean of the Evans School for Public Affairs and Chair of the UW's Environmental Stewardship Committee, has seen the growth in support for these efforts rise dramatically since she assumed the Chair position in 2004.

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Archibald initially worked with students, faculty and staff who cared so deeply about the environment and sustainability that this committee was formed. As successes were realized and the Climate Action Plan was submitted in 2009, the UW as a whole took notice and the President and Provost elevated the decision-making ability of the committee. In the last four years, this work has engaged all campuses, medical centers, and intercollegiate sports. Overall, we've seen increased participation from the entire community.

“When I think about public institutions of higher education, and how they contribute to sustainability, I realize that they're curiosity places that uncover problems and discover solutions,” says Archibald. “And, even though sustainability is a very complex topic, I believe that universities approach this subject with wonderful multi-generational learning and lots of civil and constructive conversation.

Lisa Graumlich, Dean of the College of the Environment at the UW, believes that without collaboration across campus, there's no way to effectively harness sustainability talent, or generate sustainability progress, at any university.

That means engaging and linking the academy via programs; individual faculty across the disciplines; students in the classroom; the staff through the buildings/labs they work in; and academic and administrative leadership as they help form policy.

“Part of what makes the University of Washington unique, and what keeps us at the forefront of this work,” says Graumlich, “is the rich interface between the educational opportunities we provide in the classroom, our leadership in sustainability science and research, and our forward-thinking campus operations.”

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A critical offshoot of this, adds Graumlich, is an institution-wide commitment to sharing open and clear communication about sustainability issues.

“I think each of us plays an important role in communicating sustainability, from classrooms and academic journals to the Web and social media,” she says. “Our communicators – whether they’re scientists or staff – make incredible contributions, all the way from central units to individual schools and colleges.”

Active leadership is a must, though.

And, as V’Ella Warren – Senior Vice President of Facilities and Finance at the UW, and Treasurer of its Board of Regents – points out, this invaluable support must come from the President, Provost, Board of Regents and the community. If they’re not totally behind sustainability efforts, higher education simply can’t help drive a robust environmental agenda on campus or off campus.

“The key, explains Warren, “is that sustainability must be integrated with the core values of the institution. This will make it part of the university’s DNA, not just another unfunded mandate. And, once sustainability is part of the DNA, it becomes a matter of ‘how,’ and not ‘why.’ That’s how you become a major factor in higher education’s sustainability conversation.”

None of this happens overnight.

Ana Mari Cauce, Provost and Executive Vice President at the UW, understands the need and desire on the part of universities to show immediate results in the sustainability area, especially given the imperatives of addressing and arresting climate change.

But, she cautions, “it’s important to stress taking the long view of things. When you look at a short-term framework – a year or a biennium – some of these efforts may seem less than cost-effective, or maybe even self-indulgent to some people. When you view a time-frame of a decade or more, however, many of these efforts not only help save the environment, but can also save money.”

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As I look both backward and forward, it’s important to recognize the pivotal role of the UW’s Environmental Stewardship & Sustainability office. The foresight of V’Ella Warren to create a central hub for communication and coordination across the academy helps faculty, staff and students truly engage with sustainability efforts and activities. And this melding of talent, passion and expertise is transforming how we work together across the UW.

Looking out over the horizon, it’s clear that higher education’s depth and breadth in the field of sustainability can change the world by making it cleaner and greener for the many generations to come. It’s up to all of us at colleges and universities to take advantage of this opportunity.