Sustainability is Not a Buzzword:

Lessons from the (Real) Field

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The number of families that can afford an expensive education is dwindling.

Students are staggering under the weight of college loans, and are increasingly less willing to assume the cost.

The inability of institutions to support students' financial needs means that higher education is losing its role as the great equalizer of our society.

Instead of reducing or stabilizing costs, we struggle to figure out which strategies will help us recruit and retain students, competing against one another in a constant arms race of amenities and services.

For many institutions, growth is the strategy they have chosen to stave off financial ruin.

These are the conversations we constantly have, the topics we read and write about in our professional media, the challenges we wrestle with here and at other conferences.

And one word often used in these discussions: "sustainable."

How many times have you said or heard someone say, "this is not a sustainable model"? How often have you questioned the "sustainability" of a new initiative?

Earlier in my career I was part of a department of interdisciplinary studies that included an academic program known as "Sustainable Development."

I worked every day with scholars in that field, and through meetings, lunch conversations, shared curricula and common students, I learned a little about the field of "SD," enough to recognize its status as just that: a field, distinct in the academy, rich with its own research and scholarship. I grew sensitized to the casual use of the word "sustainable," recognizing that sometimes it has a capital S, sometimes not.

Sustainable Development

is:

"…development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."
                                    --Brundtland Report, United Nations

The too-common use of the word these days to describe what we are not, but need to be, in higher education has led me back to the literature of my former colleagues. "Sustainable Development" is a broad field that bridges multiple disciplines, as diverse as tourism, agriculture, resource management, landscape design, architecture and animal husbandry. At the heart of all of these is a basic premise: that sustainability doesn't just happen. It results from a series of intentional choices and necessary sacrifices. I have found myself asking, when listening to the many conversations in higher education that have resulted from our current state of affairs, what does the field of SD have to teach us as we grapple with our own challenges? After all, SD has been around a long time, easily pre-dating the current disaster conditions we find ourselves responding to.

Carrying Capacity

In fact, the term first surfaced in the 1970s and was most officially defined in a 1987 report as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." It was also when the concept of "carrying capacity" was first applied to the environment, as in "the earth has a limited carrying capacity," and exceeding that capacity leads to eventual ruin. The formula is not terribly complicated: there are a finite amount of resources on the planet, and unless we figure out how to replenish those resources at least at the same rate we use them, we will run out. So if we are not working every day within that model, we are causing the ultimate downfall of whatever community we happen to be focusing on, whether it is a salmon population, or a Brazilian rainforest, or a struggling town in the Appalachian Mountains.

Principles of Sustainability

Those who work in the field of SD meet, just like we do, and over the past three decades have produced multiple sets of "principles" that provide the foundation for efforts of Sustainability.

An examination of these principles shows, not surprisingly, a great deal of common thought. I believe that if we in higher education are going to continue to pursue models that are sustainable, we must understand what scholars who have studied this notion in a rigorous and objective way have come to believe is important. And then I think we have to ask ourselves if what they say must be done is truly what we want to do, because it is no small undertaking to embrace the most commonly accepted principles of sustainability.

I looked at more than a dozen such sets of "principles" from fields as diverse as fisheries management, disaster mitigation and architecture. Several themes emerged. I'd like to share with you five prominent ideas from the field of Sustainable Development.

Development and growth are not the same thing. In fact, development without growth is a principle of sustainability. Resources have limits and must be as "non-declining" as possible. In other words, a balanced equation is key: either resources must be able to be replenished or they must not be used.

How important is growth-- student population, staff, physical footprint—to your campus?

2 Inter-generational Equity

Intergenerational equity is also foundational. Quite simply, sustainability precludes the privileging of one generation, say, this one, over those who come after us.

Imagine how different some lives might be if someone had considered intergenerational equity a priority while discussing the removal of the top of a mountain to get at its coal, or contemplated this when public pension managers were considering an investment that would have a quick payoff but a long-term devastating cost.

3 Transparency and Openness

Transparency and openness are critical to a community's well-being, as is a democratic approach to education.

Sustainable development is built on a notion that we are all stakeholders in our communities and thus have both the privilege and responsibility of knowing about every decision that impacts it. Every decision. Before it's made.

4 Social Justice

Social justice: It is not a heady aspiration in the field of SD, but a necessary condition. Sustainable development is a field that requires attention be paid to the least among us.

SD has a deep vein of commitment to the poor, the powerless, the marginalized, because their existence indicates an imbalance of resource use.

5 Diversity of life and difference of ideas

Diversity—of both species and ideas—must be present. It should be pursued and preserved with intense focus and energy, because limited resources last longer when all of us recognize and respect our interdependence.

Competition is anathema to sustainable development. If our institutions are spending valuable resources competing for the same students, the same funding, the same territory (both programmatic and physical), we are eroding, not enhancing, our likelihood of survival.

Why should this matter?

So why should this matter to us in higher education? Because most of us know our current model is not sustainable. Our limited resources are running out. But we talk about "sustainability" in much too limited a way. Sustainability is about more than a balanced ledger sheet. It is about more than growing or retaining our way to financial stability, or signing up thousands of students online.

It is about adhering to a set of common commitments, one of which is that students who have not even been born yet are just as important as the ones we enroll right now, that faculty and staff of the next century should inherit an institution that is even healthier than it is today.

Because our colleagues in the field of Sustainable Development tell us that this is the framework we should use every day: development without growth, intergenerational, gender, racial and economic equity, and transparency about everything we do.

Ask yourself this: if my current personal finances, health and happiness depended on the financial state of my institution and its community members twenty or forty years from now, would my day-to-day work-related decisions be any different? If maintaining a diverse community, fair and open to the least wealthy among us far outweighed our prestige, would our recruitment and

financial aid strategies look different? And above all, if we viewed higher education itself as a strategy to protect and replenish limited resources instead of three thousand individual institutions competing for those resources, how different might the annual meeting of this association look?

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I encourage you to take some time to familiarize yourself with some of these ideas.   It is my hope that from this point on, when you hear the words "sustainable" or "sustainability" in reference to a question about the work of higher education, you'll pause and consider just what that answer might be.

Commonly-accepted Principles of Sustainability

CERES is an acronym for Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies. Its principles, developed shortly after the Exxon Valdez disaster, are a 10-point code of corporate environmental ideals.

Cradle-to-Cradle Design (also known as C2C) is an approach to the design of products and systems suggesting that industry must protect and enrich ecosystems, seeking not just to be efficient, but waste-free.

Deep Ecology is a contemporary ecological philosophy distinguished by its advocacy of the inherent worth of living beings regardless of their instrumental utility to human needs. The phrase "deep ecology" was first used in 1973 by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess.

Earth Charter: an international declaration of fundamental values and principles first established in the 1980s at the request of the United Nations, which was seeking a way to guide a global transition to sustainable development

The Equator Principles are a voluntary set of standards for determining, assessing and managing social and environmental risk in project financing. These principles were developed by private sector banks in 2003, and are modeled on the environmental standards of the World Bank and the social policies of the International Finance Corporation.

The Hannover Principles is a set of nine statements about designing buildings and objects with forethought about their environmental impact, their effect on the sustainability of growth, and their overall impact on society.. They were first developed in 1992 but became well-known as part of Expo 2000.

Melbourne Principles for Sustainable Cities are ten short statements that, when used, can guide cities to make wise, sustainable decisions about urban development. These were adopted at the 2002 Eart Summit in Johannesburg.

The Natural Step: A non-profit organization founded in Sweden in 1989, which sets out "system conditions" for the sustainability of human activities on Earth.

Permaculture is a branch of ecological design that has three tenets: take care of the earth, take care of the people, share the surplus. It draws from several disciplines including agriculture and forestry, and sets forth 12 design principles

Principles of Sustainability: Outlined in an excellent article called "Building Back Better: Creating a Sustainable Community After Disaster" by Jacquelyn L. Monday in a 2002 article in the journal Natural Hazards Informer.

Principles of Sustainability for Minnesota are based on The Natural Step (see above) and were outlined in an article entitled "Sustainable Development: The Very Idea" published by the Minnesota Planning Environmental Quality Board in 1998.

Principles of Sustainability were developed by the Marine Stewardship Council and adopted in 2005 by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

Triple Bottom Line (TBL), also known as "people, planet, profit." It can be used in both the corporate (private) and public sector. It implies a commitment to particular standard for urban and community accounting in a way that expands the traditional reporting framework to also take social and environmental performance into consideration.