

Preparing Citizens of the Future

Stage 1: RU Sleeping?

Remington University has just elected a new president, Harriet Neuweg, who will take office in six months. Prof. Neuweg is excited about her new position. Remington is well regarded as a mid-size public university, one that enjoys good enrollments and a good reputation.

During her long and distinguished career at three different institutions, Prof. Neuweg had risen from an assistant professor of sociology to become chair of her department before going on to being a dean and then a provost. Somehow she managed to write nine acclaimed books on a variety of public policy issues. Her latest was titled, *Students: Citizens of the Future*, which motivated her to seek a presidency.

In her book, Prof. Neuweg emphasizes the concept of sustainability, a topic she feels affects everyone in the university community in virtually every aspect of their lives. She sees the university as an agent of change in the world. The challenge is to incorporate sustainability into the ethos of every graduate. As a university president, she feels she can put her ideas into practice.

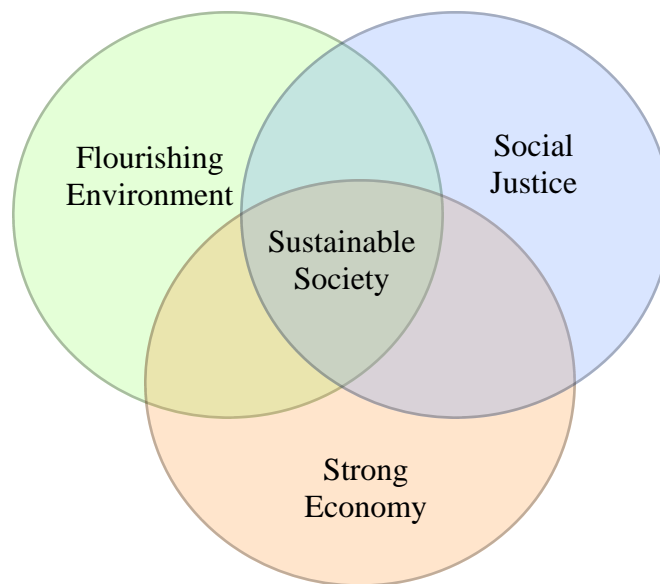
During her interviews, Prof. Neuweg's vision of sustainability generated significant enthusiasm from a broad spectrum of faculty. For once, the science faculty and the humanities faculty agreed on a candidate. This encouraged her because she knew that a university president has little hope of achieving grand goals without faculty support. As she said, "Sustainability touches every discipline and every person in the university from the staff to the Board of Trustees. It is a theme that can guide education and decision making. It should permeate the institution."

What does sustainability mean to you? Spend a few minutes thinking about sustainability and write down your thoughts in a complete sentence or two.

Stage 1 Handout: What is sustainable development?

From the 1987 Brundtland Commission, the most common definition of sustainable development is “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” In 2003, Dr. 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.”¹

The vision of sustainable human society resides in the simultaneous and synergistic creation of economic growth and equity, conservation of natural resources and the life-supporting environment, and sustainable social development and social justice. It is often visually represented as follows:



The three components of sustainable development.

¹ (Rolf Jucker, 2003, UNESCO Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future: A Critical Evaluation, Trumpeter, Vol. 19 No. 2)

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Stage 2: Sustainability Across the University

In the six months between her selection and her inauguration, President Neuweg had spent a lot of time talking to campus and community groups. Although she promoted her own ideas, she also listened to feedback about what might or might not be good strategies at her new institution. She constantly wondered if sustainability could truly mobilize the whole campus. To her thinking, sustainability would have to involve more than issues of the environment and renewable resources, as important as those are. She was convinced that a truly unifying vision of sustainability would also encompass issues of economics and social justice as well. Sustainability could not be limited to environmental issues and should not be restricted to scientific or technical spheres. She knew that sustainability required making the invisible visible: making motivated decisions and acting intentionally, with awareness of the full impact of our actions throughout our life.

Consider your current position and institution from Pres. Neuweg’s perspective. What issues are important? How, if at all, does a sustainability perspective enter into decision making? Spend a few minutes to jot down your thoughts before sharing them with the other members of your group.



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Stage 3: Time for Action

As President Neuweg settled into her office, she could not stop thinking “sustainability.” RU was no longer sleeping. Her inbox was full of difficult problems begging for her attention. Based on her conversations and sense of what issues would set the tone for her presidency, she selected a short list of campus-wide issues to address. She thought that resolution of these issues could sensitize the community to how sustainability might influence decision making. It was time for some shared thinking and fresh ideas. She decided to form “Sustainability Teams,” comprised of various stakeholders, to develop approaches to the issues that faced the University. She has asked your team to explore the possibilities for one of the following issues and present your good sustainability ideas on it at a college forum tomorrow morning.

- Everyone seemed to be complaining about parking. Should the University follow through on a plan to build a new parking garage? It owned the land, adjacent to the University, in a somewhat run-down neighborhood of low income homes. But would more parking just encourage more driving and increasing emissions? What could we do to move toward a “smaller footprint” or “carbon neutral” parking or transportation practices?
- Energy costs were taking up ever-increasing portions of the budget. Heating oil and electricity prices were going through the roof. Spending so much money on utilities was threatening important educational initiatives. A member of the Board of Trustees had suggested that a 5% energy surcharge be added to tuition.
- A student group, Student Action Now for Everyone (SANE), is agitating for a new program in peace studies. It is requesting start up funds, and it has identified individual professors in three departments—sociology, military science, and American studies—who have indicated interest in starting a program. Some students envision study abroad in world hotspots: Palestine, Somalia, or Iran. Others wonder if a new program along these lines is really what the University (and the world) needs.
- Dining services is getting its share of criticism: too much food thrown away, too much consumption of energy, poor quality green goods, too many starchy and fatty foods, uninspired cooking in general. The University’s Purchasing Department is thinking about contracting to a large public company
- University investments were coming off two years of respectable gains, but now a student group was pressuring the University to adopt a “responsible” investment strategy that favored, for example, renewable energy while avoiding tobacco and big oil stocks. Others are talking about finding companies that support fair wages/fair trade or that reject sweatshop clothing. Some have suggested looking at the big picture: all the ways the University influences the economy
- The relationship between the University and the town seemed to be at a low point. Student neighborhoods around campus were increasingly run down, and there had been a rise in violent crime rates (assault, robberies, two recent rape cases, several

gun-related crimes). Empty storefronts on Main Street suggest that the local economy is not doing as well as it might. The campus, with its nicely landscaped grounds and traditional brick buildings, contrasted in glaring ways with the run-down neighborhood to the east. Some people have wondered if some form of service learning might have real effects. Others suggest pairing with the community to support small businesses and local development.

- Faculty and staff benefits had always been quite good, with a nice retirement package that included continuing enrollment in medical coverage, heavily subsidized by the University. But the cost of continuing health care coverage was growing rapidly and the university was going through a period of intensive retiring and hiring. The chief financial officer was increasingly concerned about how to gain control over this escalating cost. Among other things, she had suggested outsourcing custodial services and cutting the retirement benefit for new hires while maintaining it for existing employees

At your first meeting (now), decide on which of Pres. Neuweg's issues you will work on and make your choice known. (No more than two groups can select the same topic.) Within your group, each member should identify with some stakeholder (student, faculty, staff, administration, community member, business, government, non-profit) and assume that role for the course of your research and deliberations. Be sure that in your team there are stakeholders who will represent the major dimensions of sustainability—environment, economics, and social justice—while being fair to other positions.

For the issue that your team selected, what would it mean to take a sustainability perspective? What would be at stake? Who would be involved? Does everyone on the team have a stake in the issue?

Given the way your team has mapped the issue, what do you know and what do you need to know to develop a sustainable solution? Using the form, create a table of "learning issues".

In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our actions on the next seven generations.
American Indian saying

Characteristics of Good Learning Issues

"...once you have learned to ask questions - relevant and appropriate and substantial questions - you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning what ever you want or need to know."

Neil Postman & Charles Weingartner (1969)
in Teaching as a Subversive Activity

Knowledge is power (Bacon). All of us have vast areas of ignorance and we will never come close to knowing more than a very small fraction of what there is to know. Nevertheless, being aware of what we don't know is also a type of power because it enables us to focus our learning where it counts when we have problems to solve. The more adept we become at defining what we need to know in away that it can be pursued, the easier it is to quickly locate needed information and the better problem solvers we become.

Most of us are reluctant to reveal our ignorance. Who wants to look "stupid?" A major tenet of problem-based learning is that learning occurs best in an environment where we can admit our knowledge gaps and do something about them by working together to achieve understanding. In problem-based learning, our knowledge gaps become our learning issues. The way we go about defining learning issues influences the depth of understanding we achieve. What are the characteristics of a good learning issue?

1. Presented in the form of a **question** or **series of questions**.
2. **Focused** so that it seeks specific information.
3. Constructed so that it asks an **answerable** question.
4. Pursues information that is **relevant** to the problem.
5. Goes beyond superficial knowledge to probe **conceptual** issues.
6. Often set in a **context** that provides direction. **Why** is the question important?

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Final Stage: Reflect and Apply

President Neuweg thought things had gone pretty well with her first public event, the Sustainability Forum. Some great ideas had been presented, and she had promised to identify one or more task forces to pursue each issue, hoping to keep the ball rolling.

So she was a little disappointed to find her inbox on Monday morning had a couple of notes of negativity. Here was one:

Subject: Sustainability
From: George Pascal <gpascal@RU.edu>
Date: Fri, 26 Oct 2007 08:27:29
To: Harriett Neuweg <pres@RU.edu>

Dear Pres. Neuweg,

I admire your enthusiasm and concerted effort to get faculty involved in your sustainability initiative. However, there are limits. I teach differential equations. You seem think that your sustainability theme can be integrated into any course without altering the course content. I don't see it in my field. My colleagues in other departments feel the same way. I have enough to worry about just teaching differential equations with out having to worry about how it applies to sustainability or vice versa.

George Pascal

And this one was also in the inbox:

Subject: Sustainability or political correctness?
From: Suzy Miller <smile@RU.edu>
Date: Sat, 27 Oct 2007 2:27:29
To: Harriett Neuweg <pres@RU.edu>

Dear Pres. Neuweg:

I've been trying to get enthusiastic about your sustainability initiative, but I cannot endorse the politics. The teams and the forum all seem like a Trojan horse for liberal or even leftist (socialist???) political thinking and action. I think you probably read the articles in the Chronicle of Higher Ed about how campuses have become totally dominated by leftist politics and how hostile they are to conservative philosophy or politics. Well, I feel in this case that these ideas of sustainability reinforce this troubling trend.

Our School of Education and its teacher training programs have pretty much been taken over by talk of "social justice," which is really just a nice term for radical politics, where prospective teachers learn to resist the economic and power structures of the schools. Whatever happened to preparing teachers to teach their subjects?

I probably will be alone on the issues and I am probably putting myself at risk for speaking out, but I just feel like someone has to speak up for traditional academic values.

Reflect on your learning. Think through your experience with the sustainability problem, how your thinking and understanding have developed through the team tasks. Now, individually, take on the role of President Neuweg and respond to one or another of these emails.