



From Community Engagement to Sustainability Policy at the Evergreen State College

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OBJECTIVE

Imagine that you are a member of a team that has seven months to assemble a five-year sustainability plan for your college or university. To add a wrinkle, your plan must have the weight of the campus behind it—no Ivory Tower plans allowed. For this vision to be transformed to practice, rather than be relegated to a musty bookshelf, you must engage every constituency of your campus community.

CHALLENGES

Although the Evergreen State College is exceptional, we are no exception to the difficulties faced when any institution plans to create new policies for sustainability based on community engagement and support.

What would the challenges be? Take a moment and try to list a few. Especially, list the ones that seem insurmountable. Start with the fact that no one holds the same definition of “sustainability.” Nearly every person or group that we talked with had a different vision of what sustainability was or could be. From the teaching of sustainability, to the operational sustainability of the campus, each person and group had a lens and layer of experience.

Add that, at the university level, solutions can move forward at the pace of Northwest glaciers. As members of higher education communities, we know that it is tough to move from talk to action. Matters are complicated when the first thing members of an academic community tell you is that they are tired and talked out, and unconvinced that “sustainability” can become more than the buzz word du jour.

Public institutions are further challenged by scarcity of public dollars. As our legislature has stepped back from supporting higher education, as is the case nationwide, our students have borne steep tuition increases. When not evaluated in a life cycle manner, sustainability initiatives may appear expensive.

Another prevailing challenge for all institutions of higher education is that sustainability can have no borders. In the physical sense, the Evergreen campus is becoming an ecological island surrounded by massive development of suburban housing and roadways. We are challenged to work with local officials and neighbors to consider things such as wildlife corridors; we know ecological islands cannot flourish. We all have neighbors.

Sustainability reaches beyond borders in both physical and non-physical ways. We are a community that values human diversity and this is integral to sustainability—yet we have a structure to look at our diversity policy. How do we cooperate, encourage, and re-enforce this value without making a policy grab and becoming a sustainability octopus?

In considering sustainability policy, many early challenges seem daunting. How do we think beyond the needs of the human? How do we bridge the academic and operational divide of our institution when we are truly all here to serve the value of education? Most importantly, how do we clearly engage with all constituencies that have a stake in sustainability policy?

BACKGROUND ON THE FORMATION OF THE TASK FORCE

Following three summers of faculty-initiated institutes with the theme of campus sustainability, we succeeded in having a task force appointed. In Evergreen parlance, our governance task forces have short missions and fade away. Thus, we became the “Disappearing Task Force on Sustainability.”

With a little crafty maneuvering on our part, we were charged by all of our vice presidents, and thus had portfolio from each decision-maker with purview over academics, admissions, student affairs, communications, and operations. “We” merged with “they.” Our charge was to write a brand new section for the college’s five-year strategic plan, which is a fairly good spot for a sustainability policy. Budget allocations are closely linked to this guiding document. The task force membership came from high-level staff, faculty, and students.

Academic governance task forces often operate with the assumption that they are, in and of themselves, representative of the community.

We began with the ethical premise that, for sustainability to be both meaningful and enduring at Evergreen, the vision for sustainability and its accompanying action plan had to be organic—double entendre intended. We few people in the room could not create an enduring definition and plan. Our Sustainability Task Force saw ourselves as facilitators of a community-wide conversation that would result in a high degree of consensus around what sustainability *is* at Evergreen, and how we would labor toward it. Without that consensus or common definition, we also knew that we would never galvanize the needed institutional support for our initiatives to go forward.

PROCESS – COMMUNITY-BASED PLANNING

Ultimately, our goal was to develop a common vision. Our premise was that to succeed, we needed a meaningful community-based engagement process. We set out to engage a broad cross-section of our community members, including staff, faculty, administrators, and students. These community members may occupy the same space, but live in different day-to-day worlds. Like any academic community, we don’t automatically connect our educational mission to campus and community practices. Some wanted to stick firmly to the “bricks and mortar” notion of sustainability, others were insistent that we embrace social justice, as well as value biodiversity at a level beyond the needs of the human community.

We realized that it would be difficult to engage a diverse and busy population in our deliberations. So, we chose several different methods that would bring in a large number of people into the conversation. These included one-on-one interviews with faculty members, one-on-one interviews with students, well designed student workshops that were facilitated within academic programs, initial visits to sector staff meetings culminated in a cross-campus staff institute, interviews with key administrators and decision-makers at the college, and an online web survey.

Thinking about all of these different forms of engagement with our many diverse community members we needed to have some measure of consistency. This would be especially critical when it came time to analyze the feedback from our engagements. Therefore, we chose three central themes for our questioning that provided consistency. These were,

- What is your current perception of Evergreen’s sustainability?
- What should a sustainable Evergreen look like in the future?
- How do we get there?

These questions, conversations, forums and other engagements helped us to both define sustainability at Evergreen and to determine the initial major steps for getting closer to our goal.

BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY-BASED PLANNING

One of the greatest benefits emerging from our community conversations was the tremendous insight we gained from our many diverse constituents. As a result, the Task Force's understanding of sustainability issues on campus grew exponentially as we pooled together many perspectives and ideas from our community members.

Task Force members also learned through our conversations that we had very little record of Evergreen's deeply held values and practices in sustainability. These are deeply rooted both in our curriculum and operations. As such, we had little to share internally or externally. Often, staff was engaged in amazing sustainability work with no link to academic programs; academic programs were engaged in theoretical work without taking advantage of the living laboratory that is our 1,000-acre campus. Our students engaged in meaningful sustainability work, but as they graduated, we lost its momentum and history. We are renowned for our interdisciplinary teaching in learning communities, and much of this work is based in sustainability. Yet, we have not called it that, and neither current nor prospective students can identify it as such.

Staff members also taught us that, as a public institution, we are hampered and often hamstrung by laws and rules that require unsustainable practices to continue. Some initiatives will require far broader coalitions to change local and state policies and practices.

We heard varying ideas of where to put the responsibility for sustainability, from beginning a "Center For Sustainability," to other models. Yet what we heard most is that in our decentralized system, we had to develop sustainability as legacy work that would be embraced by, and continued by, all members of our community.

The single most important thing we learned is that every member of our community is exhausted. To be sustainable, and to engage in the work of sustainability, requires campus health and well-being.

Like the freshman student with his or her first research paper, we felt, at first, buried in research and input with no clear direction. Yet out of these many engagements came patterns and threads that helped us to identify both a vision and initial steps for reaching it.

OUTCOME

Once we completed our outreach, the Task Force members assumed a leadership role. Members of the task force were responsible for assimilating the information from these engagements, and distilling the common vision and tasks to produce our sustainability strategy. We began this process by locking up task force members in a room on a sunny Sunday and keeping ourselves there until we had put together a coherent vision that incorporated many of our community's diverse voices and suggestions.

As a result of these engagements, here is our vision statement:

"The Evergreen State College will be a laboratory for sustainability as demonstrated in its operations, curriculum, and quality of life for employees and students. We will nurture values and practical skills that motivate a lifetime commitment to a sustainable, intergenerationally just, way of living on a healthy planet."

This larger vision is what ultimately propelled us to reach agreement on internally controversial steps toward sustainability, some of which would require meaningful financial resources.

These are our initial strategies for a sustainable future:

- Establish a curricular pathway in sustainability
- Increase opportunities for a practical education in sustainability
- Initiate a robust plan for the reduced and efficient use of resources
- Examine and implement best sustainable practices/purchases policies
- Increase communication and assemble the history behind Evergreen's sustainability goals, achievements, and indicators
- Manage Evergreen's land endowment for increased biodiversity and maximum educational opportunities related to sustainable practices
- Become a carbon neutral college
- Strengthen bonds and relationships among all Evergreen's programs
- Strengthen bonds & relationships with Evergreen's neighbors & greater community region
- Improve campus spirit and internal wellness and foster healthy relationships

The good news is that, on deadline, we completed our work. We have not “disappeared,” and are now a standing body. Our plan has been approved by all vice presidents, the college president, and will be put before our board of trustees in November for final approval.

Now that we have outlined key steps, we have exciting questions to pursue as a community. For example, facilities staff was initially skeptical of targeting such things as carbon neutrality and zero waste, concerned about time trajectories and expenses. Now that we have reached this common vision as a community with our administrators on board, we are working together to address the quantitative and qualitative information we need to then develop methods to reach these critical goals. We are excited and pursuing our goals in community.

The most important success of this organic process is the strengthened sense of community. From the standpoint of biodiversity and sustainability practices, we will have a better campus. This will come from having stronger relationships with one another—staff that think of how academic programs can be involved in operations; faculty who think of how academic programs can support a sustainable campus. For example, our faculty and students are beginning the work to assess our carbon footprint so that we can outline steps to become carbon neutral. Our facilities staff has just completed an outside audit of our energy use that they will share with those faculty members that teach in this area. We now have a student serving as an academic intern in the purchasing office outlining sustainable vendors. Our administrator in charge of Housing, John Lauer, has made sustainability a top priority in all renovations.

We don't expect that this definition of “sustainability,” our current vision of it, or the tasks required of us, to remain static. For this reason our ongoing challenge will be to handle our tasks in a way that models “legacy work.” We will keep our community engagement model, and continue to bring diverse voices into defining and supporting the tasks. In this next year, we will be working to move from policy formation to implementation.

SUMMARY

In summary, we captured critical aspects of sustainability by engaging the entire community, rather than by using a limited number of people to make decisions that might not be supported by the community as a whole. Our report is a product of our community. As we move forward with increasingly difficult tasks and decisions, we have now created pathways and relationships that we can use effectively to continue with this community engagement model. We have created momentum.

Finally, this work has increased the overall understanding and awareness of sustainability issues on our campus. This, in turn, has put our college leadership in a position where they must continue support sustainability initiatives, and have begun to take a leadership role in so doing.

Due to our short amount of time with you today, we were only able to offer you some brief insights into our own process. Please accept our heartfelt invitation to contact members of the Evergreen Sustainability Task Force as you engage in similar efforts to build a community-based outreach program at your college or university.

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Main link to Evergreen Sustainability Task Force:

<http://www.evergreen.edu/committee/sustainability/>

Link to Task Force Interim Report:

<http://www.evergreen.edu/committee/sustainability/interimreport.htm>