Sustainability and the Common Good:

Higher Education's Opportunity to Impact Multi-Disciplinary Professions

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Abstract

Abstract under track 1: Exploring the Common Good, Its Meaning, and Its Capacity to Inspire and Sustain Ethical Institutions, within the subcategory: The purpose of business and the common good. The title of the paper is Sustainability and the Common Good: Higher Education's Opportunity to Impact Multi-Disciplinary Professions.

A commitment to sustainability ties seamlessly with the values of a Catholic education. The goals of serving the common good and promoting purposeful living, as well as the culture and characteristics of Catholic Higher education, highlight the responsibility we carry to prepare our students for professional, societal, and personal success. Higher education plays a unique and often overlooked role in making healthy, just, and sustainable societies. This paper highlights what sustainability means in the context of higher education and the inherent Catholic values, as well as the educational and operational progress we can gain by making sustainability and corporate social responsibility a part of higher education and strategic planning.

Sustainability and the Common Good:
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Sustainability issues affect the places where we live, work, and play; at the local, national, and global level. There is unequal distribution of environmental and societal resources, and there are specific global risks across race, nationality, and socio-economic classes. Problems of global sustainability and vulnerability have many interconnected components. Catholic education addresses these through the foundation of Serving the Common Good - the common good is at the heart of Catholic social teaching; and Promoting Purposeful Living - A liberal education enables persons to achieve a greater degree of freedom upon which to act purposefully.

An inter-disciplinary educational experience, including environmental, economic, social, human health, and well-being issues, allows students to see and understand the whole through the lens of different disciplines. It also fits with the hallmarks of a Catholic education which include regard for the dignity of the person, academic excellence and lifelong learning, education of the whole person, and promotion of compassion and justice towards those with less. It helps students communicate more effectively across inter-disciplinary boundaries and to become better citizens. Students can learn to apply problem-solving and systems thinking skills through interdisciplinary, experiential learning projects within a business, institution, or community organization; and how these experiences can be scaled up toward future national and global challenges throughout their lives and careers. This paper addresses the multi-disciplinary opportunity we have in higher education (as all of our fields will be interacting and engaging

with and for business) to affect the common good within the market economy to provide for an equitable and sustainable outcome for all.

However, Colleges and Universities have been criticized for making more progress in green initiatives like buildings and grounds than they have in wholistic education related to sustainability (EfS Blueprint Network, 2011). As a whole, we are not increasing the sustainability literacy of our graduates to prepare them for the challenges of our collective future and the growing number of career fields that will be asked to tackle these problems. David Orr (2012) called this "green operations and brown curricula." Maniates (2013) notes that green campus initiatives, buildings, and websites do not on their own translate into effective and meaningful sustainability education programs. When all disciplines and professions explore their connection to sustainability we discover more enlightened solutions to complex problems and will provide students with tools to view and solve these problems as they continue to unfold.

All of our students will at some point be working for a business, be it for profit or non-profit, and will be both touched by and able to touch issues related to sustainability within their careers. Business operates within and affects all of the three P's of people, planet, and profit; with revenues and economic considerations being the central theme of profit. However, even through this lens we can benefit from evaluation of the sustainability of the economy or pressure on businesses to always grow. For example, Meadows (1992) suggested we challenge the goal of perpetual growth and expansion. She suggested growth should be considered but not mandated; that sustainability would be neither for nor against growth, but would consider the purposes for growth. Society could decide if it could be accommodated. Similarly, environmental science students need to understand the social, political, and psychological elements that will lead to sustainable solutions. Environmental science education must include educating students on their

ability to transform the world around them; and that simply offering more scientific facts often fails to transform political, cultural, and social change (Maniates, 2013).

"At its core, sustainability is about improving the human condition - now and into the future - while adapting human activity to fit what nature can provide" (Glasser, 2016, p.56). Sustainability is difficult to describe precisely because of the interconnectedness of the concept and its rich applicability across disciplines. No one person is enough; no one field is enough. In 1972 the United Nations conference on the human environment expressed the role of environmental quality in achieving a good life. It presents that we must collaborate with nature while promoting equity, economic and social development, and quality of life for current and future generations (United Nations, 1972). Hawken (2007) states "It is impossible to do justice to the great, quiescent underground movement of citizens who work daily to speak for the planet, other species, and our collective interdependence." We need everyone across all disciplines and all professions.

The value of sustainability across the curriculum lies in how the diverse topics are viewed through the lens of different disciplines. There will always be different interpretations of the states and impacts of sustainability at any given time. It is through these discussions and interpretations that we will come closest to purposeful judgments that will help us to plan, manage, and change. "Sustainability calls for a deep, public conversation about the conditions for human flourishing" (Glasser, 2016, p.56). President of Cornell University, Frank Rhodes argued for recognition of the strong link between liberal education and education for sustainability, calling it "the ultimate liberal art" (Rhodes, 2006). The 1995 Essex Report tied the tax-free status and academic freedom implicit in higher education to "a profound moral responsibility to increase the awareness, knowledge, skills and values needed to create a just and

sustainable future" (Second Nature, 1995, p.3). We need one another's perspectives in order to see the connections more clearly ourselves and to further integrative learning for stakeholders.

Another challenge to understanding how sustainability fits within all disciplines is the public tendency to focus almost singularly on the scientific dimensions of sustainability related to environment. In higher education we often miss the opportunity to tie the broad and important principles related to sustainability together for our students. The liberal arts and other professional disciplines have much to add given the breadth of sustainability, and we need shared understanding and language to improve our student's literacy in this area. It is both an opportunity and a responsibility if we wish to provide students with the tools to translate their knowledge and skills to the complex challenges of sustainability. When it is only viewed as environmental concerns we have missed the opportunity to help students in a liberal arts education to connect the dots. As an example, the United Nations provided a list of items that should be considered whenever sustainability is discussed. I asked the students in my Corporate Social Responsibility business class to anonymously rank their own definition of sustainability against this list on the first day of class. At that point, most do not identify with a definition of sustainability that goes beyond environmental concerns. I then allow them to anonymously change their answers if they felt differently at the end of the class so I can know if their views have changed overall, without the pressure to please the teacher.

Table 1	Number of students who included in their definition of sustainability at the beginning of the course (n.20).	Number of students who would include in their definition of sustainability at the end of the course (n.20).
Socio-Cultural Perspectives		
Human rights	2	20
Peace and human security	3	19
Gender equality	2	20
Cultural diversity and intercultural understanding	4	20
Health	7	20
Governance	5	20
Environmental Perspectives		
Natural resources (water, energy, agriculture, biodiversity)	12	20
Climate change	7	20
Sustainable urbanization	5	20
Disaster prevention and mitigation	5	20
Economic Perspectives		
Poverty reduction	4	20
Corporate responsibility and accountability	9	20
Market economy	6	19

As many would expect, the highest initial ranking at the start of the class relates to natural resources (water, energy, agriculture, biodiversity). However, there has almost certainly

been learning that has occurred across curriculum in the other categories throughout their liberal arts studies and other professional development courses. Perhaps we haven't provided them with the links or highlighted the connections they need to tie the concepts to sustainability. By the end of the Corporate Social Responsibility course most students see what the United Nations concluded, that all of these areas interconnect to affect sustainability.

It is similarly important to note the general sustainability and environmental concepts presented in "…biology, chemistry, earth science, or physics, quickly spill over into the realm of economic and social impacts and policy formation. Disciplinary study from the standpoint of social science promptly leads to issues of ethics, values, and culture that are core concerns in the humanities…and readily extends to a growing source of employment across many fields, including business and finance" (Weissman, 2012, p.2). It is more than understanding the major environmental problems; those working to address these issues must also understand the larger structures of political power, culture shifts, and social change (Maniates, 2013). Those in sustainability careers must have the knowledge and tools to effectively translate their technical training into strategy that transcends boundaries that divide experts, policy makers, and the public (Weissman, 2012). That requires educating ourselves as faculty across the curriculum regarding how sustainability relates to our fields, and also suggests that we pay attention to the language and strategies we use so students can also see these links.

The language we use matters both within and outside our classrooms. "A Google search reveals hundreds of millions of hits for the term sustainability… The careless usage and potential for manipulation by special interests has led some to argue that sustainability has become a meaningless buzzword…" (Glasser, 2016, p.56). Higher education, with it's rich collection of experts and thoughtful thinkers, has the opportunity to sort this out for our students and for

ourselves. The language we use should be agreed upon and used consistently across the institution. It should be used in our mission statements, strategic plans, admissions materials, and other University documents. Across the institution we can provide a model through how we speak and what we give attention to; what we support, highlight, and reward. For faculty and research, this can include stipends, reassigned time, or course development for early adopters (Weissman, 2012). It can include considerations in University operations, neighborhood and community, and curriculum. As with many initiatives in higher education, support provides the critical mass to launch new ways of thinking. This support will assist students in high impact practices, as the AASHE 2010 call to action emphasizes the need for students to apply learning to real world, place-based experiential learning, and notes an opportunity for sustainability to break down the barriers between higher education and place. Higher education has very real impacts through knowledge, operations, and values that can operate themselves as living laboratories for the students they serve. It is for this reason that we should all be invested from our own areas of expertise in exploring what sustainability is through our unique lens, how to grow from one another's viewpoint, and how to utilize our campuses and resources to provide "place" learning.

In conclusion, Glasser (2016) suggests that when trying to make sense of sustainability we should be asking four questions; and that these questions cannot be effectively answered without collective input from all of our disciplines. What are we trying to sustain, for whom and with what rules of distribution, with what forms of decision making, governance, and metrics for measuring progress, and for how long? Whether we continue with the status quo, nominal sustainability, or with a strong sustainability vision, is largely dependent on our ability to provide current and future generations with the knowledge and tools to address the complex problems of

our future. Sustainability issues affect the places where we live, work, and play; at all levels of society. Catholic higher education provides the "sense of place" to effectively immerse sustainability with the set of values required for thoughtful exploration; serving the common good and promoting purposeful living.

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