

## Sustainable Leadership: Engaging Students to Create Lasting Change on Campus

Kristin Skarie

*College student leaders in the United States engage in programming, governance, social, athletic, and many other co-curricular opportunities during their time on campus. Throughout the leadership process in these activities, students complement their academic learning, gain experience, and connect with communities within and beyond their campus borders. Often without realizing it, student leaders are participating in the creation of programs, processes, and cultures that have the potential to implement lasting change and override the short-term impact of a one-time event. This article proposes the application of sustainability principles to leadership to increase students' capacity for making sustainable change beyond their presence or involvement.*

### **Brief History of Sustainability**

Not since the Industrial Revolution has there been as significant a shift in our living, working, eating, and buying habits. We now have instant access to food, materials, and information with more choices than perhaps we need in all these areas. Purchases can be made twenty-four hours a day, telephones have become computers and world-wide communication is possible with the click of a button. In what many are now calling *The Sustainability Revolution* (Edwards, 2005) this monumental shift is also transforming our social, environmental and economic lives with wind and solar power sourcing, urban gardening, eco-education in schools and universities, "green" housing and workplace construction, restoration of wild habitats, inclusive community development, and grass-roots movements to respect our planet. The Sustainability Revolution is unique in that it presents an "alternative that supports economic viability and healthy ecosystems by modifying consumption patterns and implementing a more equitable social framework" (Edwards, 2005, p. 3).

Although we see sustainability through our own lens in modern times, it is essential to acknowledge the evolution of the revolution and celebrate a few notable mile markers in the United States sustainability history. Most significant and usually overlooked is the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee, Iroquois Nation, which states, "in our every deliberation we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations" (The Constitution of the Iroquois Nations, 1090). Sustainability was at the core of the Iroquois culture and still is today. It is also interesting to consider the contributions of early U.S. nature writers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who made the call to humankind in the mid-1800s to view the Earth as an entity to be treated with care. President Teddy Roosevelt, colleague John Muir, and other friends started the Sierra Club in 1892 to designate land (mostly land cessions of American Indian nations) to be protected as national parks (National Park Service, 2013). Aldo Leopold furthered development of environmental ethics, wildlife management, and biodiversity in the 1940s and Rachel Carson warned us

of degrading habitats leading to a ban on the pesticide DDT in 1962.

It is appropriate to note the civil rights movement in the U.S. as part of *The Sustainability Revolution* back-story as well, in particular with examination of the social justice component of sustainability. The development of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 and the ensuing Clean Air and Clean Water Acts also mark significant points along the road of the sustainability revolution. Of course there are hundreds of other authors, activists, actions, and advances involved around the world in this historical journey, bringing us to the sustainability drive and revival we are experiencing today.

Sustainability as an issue was grounded in a more comprehensive, global manner when the United Nations convened the Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 to explore the relationships between people, the environment, and economics (University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, 2013). Years later in 1987, the United Nations established the Brundtland Commission, eventually releasing the report “Our Common Future” to reinforce a global agenda for change and creating a framework for addressing strategies necessary to achieve sustainable development and greater worldwide cooperation on environmental concerns (Our Common Future, 1987, p. 43). As a result of these and other related efforts, sustainability is now commonly defined as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Commission, 1987). In addition to the strong framework provided by the sustainability definition, the Brundtland Commission articulated The Three E’s of sustainability:

Ecology/environment,  
Economy/employment and  
Equity/equality.

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil laid more foundation for the connection of environmental, economic, and social development and set the stage for other world summits, partnerships, and declarations. As sustainability continued to grow as a field of study, the UN designated The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development for 2005-2014 to improve education on the importance of sustainable development and to advance sustainability efforts already underway at that time (UNESCO, 2005).

Sustainability is often implemented with the Triple Bottom Line (TBL or 3BL), which describes the core of sustainable development as having equally valued financial, social, and environmental priorities. John Elkington, the founder of a British consultancy called SustainAbility first coined this term in 1994 (The Economist, 2009). Not just about money, the TBL suggests the People-Plant-Profit mantra as a context to address how socially responsible an organization is in its operations and to measure its success in financial, social, and environmental terms.

### **Sustainability in Higher Education**

The Secretariat of University Presidents for a Sustainable Future was founded in 1992 as a direct result of the Talloires Declaration, the first official statement made by university administrators on a commitment to sustainability in higher education. Signed to date by 440 university leaders in 53 countries, this commitment supports sustainability as a critical focus of teaching, research, operations, and

outreach at colleges and universities worldwide through publications, research, and assessment (AULSF, 2013). As the work continued to develop and become more inclusive, The Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future emerged from the ongoing work of the Secretariat and is still one of several guiding bodies for sustainability efforts in higher education (AULSF, 1990).

A partner to AULSF, the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, empowers institutions of higher education to lead sustainability transformation, meet their sustainability goals, and ultimately to make sustainability practices the norm (AASHE, 2013). AASHE was established in 2001 with funding from like-minded organizations and offered its first conference in 2006. AASHE provides administrators, faculty, staff, and students, as well as the businesses that serve them with thought leadership, knowledge resources, professional development, and a unique framework for demonstrating the value and competitive edge created by sustainability initiatives.

As a key player in the sustainability revolution, AASHE defines sustainability to encompass human and ecological health, social justice, secure livelihoods, and a better world for all generations. AASHE also embraces the Brundtland Commission definition as a tool for framing programs, projects, processes, and procedures in sustainability terms. *The Sustainability Revolution* has now taken root in higher education with many campuses reworking and reestablishing their efforts to “green” their facilities, teaching, learning, research, processes, and policies.

## The Greening of Campus

Sustainability efforts are being infused in university life now more than ever. It is estimated in the past ten years, 150 sustainability officer positions have been established on college campuses across the U.S. (Powers, 2008). Sustainability themed housing options are becoming commonplace and over 600 United States academic institutions have signed the American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment since 2006 with the pursuit of carbon neutrality as its main strategy (Journal of College and University Housing, 2009). Faculty involvement in sustainability, eco-business, and environmental science study areas and institutes is increasing, as is student interest in sustainability degrees and careers (USA Today, 2009). Noteworthy as well is the abundance of established task forces, commissions, and knowledge communities focused on sustainability in student affairs organizations such as ACPA, ACUI, ACUHO-I, NODA, and NASPA.

In her address to members of the College Personnel Association of New York State at their annual conference in 2006, Dr. Debra Rowe, Senior Fellow in Education for Sustainability with the AULSF, shared her passion for sustainability and her work to engage college students in meeting the needs of today’s generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. She reminded the audience that over 18 million US college students at almost 5000 institutions surely have an opportunity to play a role in *The Sustainability Revolution*. Conversely, she suggested the revolution needs college students to advance the cause and to develop leaders now who will steward

a new way of living, working, learning, and leading.

### **Leading Sustainability versus Sustainable Leadership**

Continuing the progression of this now recognized revolution involves the task of furthering students' development to lead sustainability efforts on their campuses. The skill sets that advance all aspects of sustainability are varied, deep, multi-faceted, and transferrable. Student leaders are moving outside the 1970s model of the seemingly simple Reduce-Reuse-Recycle. They are combining their efforts with faculty and staff to significantly impact campus life and promote sustainability in multiple ways from campus operations to endowment practices. Students on hundreds of campuses are leading programs and projects to explore recycling, composting, food waste, energy use, building construction, purchasing, transportation, and investment practices to green their campuses (College Sustainability Report Card, 2013). It makes sense, as Dr. Rowe suggested, that college students would play a role in changing the way their communities use and preserve their financial, material, and human resources.

Sustainable leadership runs parallel to leading sustainability efforts. It uses sustainability core principles to make decisions in the now with awareness of the impact on the future – on people, planet, and profit. Students use seven generation planning to lead in a way that maximizes one's capacity to make lasting change beyond their presence or involvement (e.g., when the leader is not present, the program, process, or project lives on not in spite of the leader's absence, but because of it.) A highly skilled sustainable leader puts a

foundation in place exactly so their presence is not required to ensure the success of the initiative.

There is very little research on sustainable leadership in higher education. The main body of work in a related area by Hargreaves and Fink (2006) focuses on secondary school administrators and teachers in the U.S. They highlight seven principles required to preserve, protect, and promote learning for all in relationships to care for others. In their model, it is depth, length, breadth, justice, diversity, resourcefulness, and conservation that are the requirements for leadership that lasts. They consider local and global spheres of influence to be relevant to the work of school leaders – the school and the community, the local district, and the state/national levels of government and administration. Ultimately, the authors believe sustainable education and the future success of our children rest on the ability of school leaders who fully engage government, family, and teachers in a collective, progressive philosophy of purposeful planning and development. Although there is much to learn from their research findings on the value of leadership that lasts in the secondary school arena, higher education is distinctly different as is the way college students lead, learn, and contribute.

### **Characteristics of Sustainable Leaders**

Sustainable leaders combine best practices of sustainability in education and business to maximize their capacity for making an impact beyond their presence or involvement. The programs, projects, processes, and policies they influence have a longer lasting effect than traditional one-time events or quick decisions made in a vacuum. Sustainable

leaders maintain themselves in ways that traditional leaders often overlook, finding the right balance of work with rest, planning with dreaming, and action with vision. They weigh deliberate short-term decisions and long-view planning and carefully reflect on the social justice, environmental, and financial implications. Sustainable leaders are able to consider a range of simple to complex aspects of their projects (e.g., which t-shirts to buy, who to invite as planning partners, who will benefit, the event history, campus politics, and respect for established communication channels.)

These considerations stream through a sustainable leader's decision-making filter. They recognize the importance of sustaining their energy, their reputation, and their relationships in all aspects of their student/campus life – personally, professionally, and organizationally. Like a three-legged stool, this triple bottom line of sustainable leadership provides a framework for aligning values and actions. Sustainable leaders understand the connections between the three areas and do not compartmentalize who they are and what they do in personal, professional, and organizational relationships, roles, and responsibilities. In describing their co-curricular work, their influence on campus or their organization(s), sustainable leaders would say, "It's not about me, AND it starts with me."

The following five characteristics of sustainable leaders are presented in a day-long Teamworks program called Lead Green. Program activities and tools offer student leaders an opportunity to explore their real life examples and repeatable qualities of sustainable leadership. In the program, they consider their leadership wants, needs, and hases and practice methods to increase their capacity for

creative collaboration. They use the Triple Bottom Line of sustainable leadership to create an action plan grid and make commitments to short and long term goals on personal, professional, and organizational levels. Students in a Lead Green program walk away with a grounding philosophy and leadership skill set to further explore, fine-tune, personalize, and own. At their best, sustainable leaders are aware, deliberate, grounded, collaborative, and organized to extend their leadership shelf life and cultivate their capacity for positive change.

Sustainable leaders are **aware** of the strengths, talents, and attributes they bring to the table in to their academic classes, club meetings, campus events, or athletic competitions. They are open to feedback, assess and appreciate their capacity for leadership and can reflect on what they have learned from leadership style surveys or profiles. They can uncover affirmations, revelations, implications, and celebrations as they embrace their strengths and areas of challenge or struggle.

Sustainable leaders are **deliberate** in understanding the difference between their leadership wants, needs, and hases with personal, professional, and organizational congruence. They do not defer to randomness, disorder, and chaos but are at the same time aware of the power of creativity and innovation. They are mindful of what is on their leadership/life plate and know how to leave a margin for balance and self-care. Sustainable leaders are purposeful in creating realistic and challenging action items to keep their plate filled with the right activities, commitments, and relationships.

Sustainable leaders are **grounded** in a set of personal values that guide their

decision-making and can articulate these values easily and quickly. They have at least one person as a role model for integrity to use as a standard or to consult in difficult times. Sustainable leaders can match the commitments on their plate to their values and establish their priorities accordingly.

Sustainable leaders are **collaborative** and highly skilled at bringing people to a place of shared vision, shared credit, and shared results. They appreciate the viewpoints of others, especially across philosophical divides, and can identify unlikely partners for large-scale projects or culture change. Sustainable leaders are invitational leaders and know how to engage others in a common cause. The finest trait of a sustainable leader is the willingness to step to the side and let others stand in the limelight.

Finally, sustainable leaders are **organized**. They document everything to pay forward a sense of order and clear the path for the next leader. They have written succession plans and development opportunities in place for others to lead in their absence. They are aware of the habits that propel them and their organizations forward to success and make the most of their areas of excellence while being equally aware of the habits that block them. They set specific goals for daily choices and life-changing decisions for themselves and are open to the prospect of accountability and stewardship.

### **Sustainable Leadership in Action**

It is a privilege to be in the presence of sustainable leaders. Their passion, determination, and belief in a better way is inspiring and motivating as is their minimal need to be in the

spotlight or receive commendation for their work. In recent years, a few examples of sustainable leadership have risen to the surface as best practice learning opportunities and as standards for sustainable leadership excellence. Here are three of those examples to illustrate what is possible through sustainable leadership:

- A student at Arizona State University started a clothing swap with a team of friends, neighbors, and colleagues called CoOp Swap Phoenix to share used clothing and to support a local women's shelter. She launched a second CoOp Swap in Tucson with a third location in the works.
- Hot Dog Day is a dual-campus fundraiser started in 1972 by Alfred State and Alfred University and proceeds benefit eight local charities. The actual student founders of the day are unknown to the public.
- A pre-orientation wilderness experience program called BuckWild is now in its 17<sup>th</sup> year due to initial and ongoing student input and collaboration between student activities, recreational sports, athletics, and outdoor education (Bucknell University, 2013).

### **Summary and Recommendations**

This initial research suggests there is a place for the study of sustainable leadership in higher education. Sustainable student leaders may be more likely to engage in behaviors associated with *Deep Approaches to Learning*, as described by the 2012 National Survey on Student Engagement. Richer, more

lasting connections to material through an emphasis on activities such as integration, synthesis, and reflection could be an outcome of sustainable leadership and the potential for learning and real life application it presents (NSSE, 2012). Reflective learning is a key component of sustainable leadership through self-assessment and real life examples, which promotes the examination of one's own thinking and the perspectives of others (NSSE, 2012). The Learning with Peers Engagement Indicator (NSSE, 2012) may also be a source of data to understand the potential of collaboration skills, values development, and relationship building in student success. There may also be ways to utilize the immediate and accessible real-time learning in students' social, athletic, academic, and governance organizations to conduct further research on sustainable leadership.

Questions to consider in the future include the following:

- What skill sets support the characteristics of sustainable leadership?
- Are sustainable leaders more engaged and therefore more successful?
- Do student leaders and their organizations benefit from purposeful planning?
- In what ways do student leaders, their organizations, and their campuses benefit from a connection to a bigger picture/purpose?
- How long does a program, process, or culture have to "last" to be considered sustainable?

These questions if answered could also have exciting implications for the

ways in which student affairs professionals foster students' ability to influence their campus culture. Advisors and supervisors in student activities, greek life, residence life, orientation, civic engagement and alumni relations could use the characteristics of sustainable leadership to engage their students in conversations, projects and initiatives that connect them to the vision and mission of the institution. The essential role of advisor in advancing sustainable leadership and a focus on the institution as a whole suggests systems-thinking as a sixth essential component of sustainable leadership.

A quantitative piece is recommended to define and measure the parameters and characteristics of sustainable leadership. For example, the ideal timeframe and durability of programs and projects, ideal number of collaborators, and definition of sustainability related outcomes would enhance the measurability of sustainable leadership. It is also important to continue gathering examples of sustainable leadership evidenced in programs, projects, and processes on college campuses that have stood the test of time and change. This could spark a network and idea sharing opportunity from which students could learn through each other's successes and challenges. It may also be valuable to uncover best practices on campuses that reward student leaders for collaboration and programs that last beyond the student leaders' tenure on their campus.

Further research on the repeatable qualities of sustainable leadership may offer student leaders new concrete tools for designing and developing sustainable programs and processes. Implications for career development and personal growth are inevitable. More than a leadership

legacy, the sustainable leader leaves a trail of big picture thinking, collaboration and values-based decision-making leading to doing something that matters. Aware, deliberate, grounded, collaborative, and organized student leaders can make a longer lasting impact on their campuses, participate more fully in creating a culture of sustainability, and

enhance their own learning and development. The application of sustainability principles to student leadership may offer a new approach to engaging students in creating lasting change that improves their lives, their organizations, their campuses, and their communities.

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*Kristin Skarie is a national speaker, educator, writer, and entrepreneur with her company, Teamworks. She has twenty-eight years' experience in crafting distinctive, relevant, grounded, and "green" team and leader development programs for college, corporate, and community organizations. Kristin is the author of "A Year of Nothing New – Tools for Living Lean and Green" – a journey of personal sustainability to reduce her footprint and increase her impact. She received her B. S. in Physical Education from the University of Wisconsin, Madison and her M. S. Ed. in Higher Education & Student Affairs from Indiana University, Bloomington.*