

Community Partnerships: A Key Component of Sustainability

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Partnerships between higher education institutions and their surrounding communities are a powerful tool for advancing sustainability and educating for sustainability. Colleges and universities, longtime leaders in sustainability, are increasingly realizing the full potential of community partnerships as a means for further advancing their sustainability goals. Community partnerships for sustainability create a win-win structure, building student skills while helping implement solutions to our urgent societal challenges.

The Importance of Communities

Urban planners, community developers, and leading thinkers within the sustainability field argue the community is the appropriate scale for discussing sustainability and ultimately persuading behavioral change. Individuals are too often disconnected from global problems to assume responsibility, while a myopic focus on families and households overlooks the shared dependency on regional markets and ecosystems. The concept of the triple bottom-line of environment, equity, and economic prosperity with a focus on improving quality of life for present and future generations, is most tangible at the community scale.

Community scale sustainability has at least two important implications for colleges and universities seeking to achieve their sustainability goals. First, communities and higher education institutions are intimately linked across transportation, energy, waste, economic, and social dimensions. For example, the expectation that a college's off-campus student population use public transportation or bicycles to commute to campus is only realistic insofar as the surrounding community supports and invests in the necessary infrastructure. Out of this institution-community interdependency come both challenges and opportunities for advancing sustainability goals.

Second, communities offer real world, project-based learning opportunities that help both students and communities realize their ability to affect change. Local governments frequently lack the staff capacity to focus on sustainability issues while students often crave the type of hands-on educational experience to confirm they can make a difference in society. Through community-learning projects centered on sustainability, higher education meets its objective of education and outreach, and communities gain valuable labor capacity and knowledge. The practical course of action for colleges and universities is to leverage existing and create new community partnerships to robustly support both student skill building and solutions to our shared sustainability challenges.

Partnerships as a Proven Tool

Partnerships are pervasive within higher education. From intercollegiate grant proposals to group coursework, and on to administrative activities such as fundraising and shared procurement, collaboration has been a key factor in higher education success. For examples, alliances between communities and higher education institutions can be found throughout the United States. For example, popular alternative spring break programs connect student volunteers with communities to provide both an educational experience and labor capacity for a needy community.

Despite the rich history of community partnership-building in higher education, there remains much to learn and do – specifically in the sustainability arena where partnerships are taking on a new form and function. Like many newly developed tools, the full range of function may not be known initially, but is instead learned through time and application (e.g., the Internet). Similarly, sustainability-based partnerships between communities and higher education is a key component and an effective tool we're just beginning to wield. Colleges and universities will be more effective if they are willing and eager to discover new sustainability related applications for existing community partnerships and foster new partnerships where they ought to exist.

A Versatile Tool

For colleges and universities seeking new approaches to advancing sustainability, the many applications of partnerships hold vast potential. Exploring the Sustainability Tracking and Assessment Rating System (STARS) database, and the stories of community collaboration told within, the full range and functionality of partnerships begins to emerge.

Higher education institutions and communities form partnerships across educational, financial, professional, and service dimensions (see Table). For example, undergraduates can earn experience tutoring K-12 students in ecology, or university administrators and town officials can create incentives for faculty and staff to purchase homes in the community, which supports both the local economy and campus transportation goals. Perhaps most promising are opportunities for students to build upon their classroom skills with essential citizenship, systemic change and communication skills.

Moreover, the risk tolerance of communities and higher education institutions make them ideal for groundbreaking sustainability partnerships. While businesses are eager to protect profits, and federal and state officials have a lower tolerance for perceived political risk, local governments, communities, and higher education institutions are generally more willing to learn through trial-by-error and become

testing sites, or labs, for advancing sustainability through partnerships. The Higher Education Associations Sustainability Consortium, a network of national higher education associations with a commitment to advancing sustainability in higher education, has named as a core strategic direction this concept of “using the campus and the community as a living lab for sustainability.”

Table. Partnerships across community and higher education dimensions

Community				
College/ Univ.	Residents/ Businesses	Municipal Government City/County	Local non-profits and community advocates	Schools K-12
Students	Service-learning (e.g., Community gardens in Pomona, engagement in Transition Town projects)	Service-learning through energy audit walk-throughs or GHG analyses/plans , help with government policy development	Donations from unused dining plans to food shelters (e.g., Depaul University), catalyzing organic food co-ops, advocating for environmental justice and sustainability related policies	Assessing how green a school is and helping to organize K-12 energy ambassadors, bringing sustainability curricula to K-12 districts
Faculty/ Staff	Cooperative extension agriculture and stormwater planning	Participation in city planning discussions or on decision-making bodies	Connecting community based green training programs to stackable certificates and degrees	Teaching at summer camps and regular lectures in high school courses
Admin.	Live-where-you work programs (e.g., U of MD)	Shared procurement (e.g., PPA or composting facility)	Town Hall convenes around issues advocated in community	Host summer camps and provide educational resources for local students

Conclusion

Individually, colleges and universities are only scratching the surface in terms of making the most of partnerships to advance both higher education and the broader society’s sustainability agendas. Nationally, across the higher education field, this is an emerging and encouraging trend.

To be sure, relationships of any form require time and effort as trust is built, responsibilities are identified, and hierarchies (or lack thereof) are established. In creating new partnerships with communities, colleges and universities should be

prepared to make a commitment of time, and potentially, funds and staff power if possible. Communities and higher education institutions alike should be prepared to experiment and to actively communicate with peers to stay attuned to best practices and successful models. Service learning and teaching centers should help faculty and students become more involved and then help institutionalize these partnerships and processes.

The possibilities for sustainability-based partnerships that benefit both communities and higher education are boundless. Partnerships are also necessary as students, professionals, and citizens look to build a critical mass capable of driving meaningful sustainability progress in their community.