Plenary Session I: Arizona State University’s Journey to Sustainability

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Salon ABC
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Sustainability has become the new buzz word in American higher education. At least three national efforts have evolved to rate institutions on their efforts to achieve sustainability. But what does this mean? Why do the various national efforts differ so much in what they consider success in advancing sustainability? And is there anything WICHE could do to progress this progressive agenda?

We all know what it means for something to be sustainable: it means the capacity for a process or state of being to be maintained indefinitely. In current parlance this concept has been exclusively captured by the green movement, so that sustainability is the effort to maintain the planet, and the human condition on the planet, in a fashion that will allow future generations to benefit as much as we do, if not more. This requires that nature’s resources only be used at a rate at which they are replaced.

This is not a new area of interest in higher education. For more than a quarter century, environmental science has been a significant field of interest within higher education, for students and faculty alike. Indeed, the knowledge garnered from the field has driven much of the current focus on sustainability because it has become clear from environmental science that we are living today in an unsustainable way: we are consuming more of the earth’s resources than nature can replace.

The sustainability effort is affecting higher education in three ways. First, it is infiltrating the research agenda in a variety of ways, building not only on research in the natural sciences but also affecting engineering, architecture, urban planning, and many other disciplines. Second, it is impacting the curriculum, leading to courses within many disciplines addressing environmental concerns, and it has even begun to lead to distinct programs of study. Arizona State University’s School of Sustainability, the first such school in the country, offers degrees from the bachelor’s to the doctoral level. Third, sustainability is affecting the way colleges and universities are managed as business enterprises, with a number of institutions having signed a pledge to become “carbon neutral” within the next decade.

Arizona State University (ASU) has become highly regarded in the sustainability arena for a variety of reasons – in part because of the leadership role that Michael Crow, ASU’s president, has taken on in addressing this issue. ASU, through its Global Institute of Sustainability, sponsored a national summit on sustainability in Washington, D.C., in September 2008, which brought together representatives of government, business, academia, and advocacy to discuss major sustainability issues. This combination of research, outreach, and curricular redesign has no doubt contributed to the recognition of
ASU’s efforts. *Princeton Review* included ASU in its 2009 Green Rating Honor Roll. And Valley Forward, a Phoenix-based environmental organization, awarded its Environmental Excellence Award to ASU’s School of Sustainability this year.

But as *Inside Higher Ed*, an online higher education news source recently said in a headline, “It’s Not Easy Being Green” (see article in this agenda book). So many evaluative schemes have arisen that it is difficult to discern between them. *Princeton Review*, in addition to placing ASU on the honor role, also placed 10 other institutions in this category, including two other WICHE region institutions – the University of Oregon and the University of Washington. ASU’s sister institution, the University of Arizona, has also been recognized for excellence in this area. It was ranked by the National Wildlife Federation’s highly esteemed *Campus Environment 2008: A National Report Card on Sustainability in Higher Education* as having “more exemplary programs than most of the schools surveyed” and was the only PAC 10 program so rated. Yet the Massachusetts-based Sustainable Endowments Institute rated neither Arizona institution on its list of 15 “overall college sustainability leaders.”

These different efforts to assess the commitment of campuses to sustainability, though potentially confusing to many, are actually both justified and good news. They are justified because this new area of endeavor is still finding its way; thus, it should be expected that different interest groups will value different efforts toward sustainability in different ways. This is good news because it demonstrates an extremely high level of interest in efforts to make life for future generations as enriched as our lives have been.

**Biographical Information on the Speaker**

James L. Buizer is special policy advisor to Arizona State University President Michael M. Crow and executive director for strategic institutional advancement in the Office of the President, providing strategic advice and guidance on a broad range of topics to the president and other university leadership. Buizer oversees transformative design efforts and development of new interdisciplinary academic units across the university. Previously, he served as executive director of the Office of Sustainability Initiatives in the Office of the President, where he led the conceptualization, design, and initiation of the universitywide Global Institute of Sustainability and its School of Sustainability, launched fall 2006 as the first of its kind in the world. Prior to this he served as director of the Climate and Societal Interactions Office at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in Washington, D.C., where he was responsible for providing programmatic vision, design, and leadership of NOAA’s integrated, multidisciplinary research and applications program, positioned at the climate and societal interface. Over the years he has also been active in the efforts of the Intergovernmental Panel on
Climate Change, which was awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. Buizer represents President Crow and ASU on numerous boards and councils throughout the university, nationally, and internationally. In his personal capacity, he serves as vice chairman of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education Board of Directors and on a number of other boards. He received his degrees in oceanography, marine resource economics, and science policy from the University of Washington in Seattle.
It’s Not Easy Being Green

How environmentally friendly is your college or university? Well, it all depends on whom you ask.

As higher education has become more conscious of issues such as sustainability, a number of independent assessments have arisen from both nonprofit and for-profit sources. For better or for worse, they all have different methods of evaluation and serve disparate audiences — and many of these assessments rely on self-reporting. As these green ratings have proliferated, many college officials have said they would prefer a national standard. And some experts think a new environmental rating being created may become one.

The myriad of assessments evaluating college environmental performance and sustainability can be separated into two broad categories. There are those ratings, generally compiled by nonprofit organizations, that strive to be substantial assessments of an institution’s commitment to environmental thought and practice. Data are typically self-reported by colleges and rely upon their participation for their inclusion in the study. Some critics argue this self-selection strategy allows under-performing institutions to fly under the radar. Still, there are some studies that attempt to do their own independent research in an effort to ensure greater participation and accuracy by including institutions that do not voluntarily provide data.

In contrast, there are those rankings and listings, usually published by for-profit college guides and magazines, aimed at informing prospective students and their parents of institutions that put environmental concerns at the forefront of their mission. These rankings are often less scientific and more anecdotal than their non-profit counterparts, attempting to provide their readers with an easily digestible critique of select institutions. Some critics argue this method has the potential to mislead readers and arbitrarily publicize the efforts of some institutions over others. Nevertheless, even some of these critics contend that these listings generate valuable awareness of environmental issues on college campuses and may drive some readers to seek out more detailed analyses of their institutions of choice.

Striving for Completeness

The Campus Ecology program of the National Wildlife Federation published what it and most others in the field of assessment consider the first study of environmental performance and sustainability in higher education in 2001. Julian Keniry, the NWF’s director of campus and community leadership, said the initial report was difficult to compile as there were no existing standards.

The NWF’s 2008 report card surveyed 1,068 institutions; Keniry said that all institutions in the country were asked to provide data. This rate of participation constitutes a modest 5 percent growth from that of the initial study, making it what the organization claims is the largest study of its kind. The report card does not grade or rank individual institutions. Rather, it grades all participating colleges collectively on a number of criteria from A to D. Those conservation issues assessed include energy, water, transportation, landscaping, waste reduction and environmental literacy. The survey, Keniry said, was meant to take institutions a relatively short amount of time to complete: between 20 and 30 minutes per component of the survey, which judged management, academics and operations. She added that as the survey is self-reported, it is meant to show
activity and not to judge performance.

“There is no reason to believe the respondents would be over or under reporting,” Keniry said. “So many campuses were willing to admit to having no program in place for certain areas. You would think, if you were going to exaggerate your program, you would say that you have a lot going on in all areas.”

In addition to collectively judging higher education on its commitment to sustainability, the report card also specifically identified more than 240 institutions as having “exemplary programs.” These are defined by a rigorous set of criteria, and an institution must meet the minimum criteria in at least one area in order to be named. For example, an “exemplary program” in operations must receive more than 80 percent of off-campus energy from a renewable resource. This type of information is also self-reported by the institutions.

“In the listing of exemplary schools, if a school is not on the list it doesn’t mean that they don’t have a particular program, it just might not have been the criteria,” Keniry said, noting that she had received some complaints from institutions who were upset about not being on the list. “It was meant to be more celebrative than punitive. This was just our attempt, based on self-reporting, to recognize these programs as models. Campuses are proud of programs in certain areas. Why not highlight those?”

Another report card is that of the Sustainable Endowments Institute. Following the success of the initial NWF report in 2001, SEI published its first report card in 2007 after publishing an aggregate study similar to that of the NWF in 2006. Mark Orloski, SEI founder and director, said the first report card was created in response to the numerous requests he received for information on how specific institutions fared in the study. This year, the report card surveyed the institutions with the largest 200 endowments in the United States and Canada. The project included independent research to assess institutions that did not complete surveys. Orloski argued that, by using institutions with larger endowments, the study is not skewed toward wealthy colleges and universities.

“It is not accurate to say an institution is wealthy by looking at their overall endowment,” Orloski said. “You have to look at wealthy institutions by looking at the per-student endowment. We’re using overall endowments to create a filter. It’s a way to look at schools that are geographically spread throughout the country. There are public and private schools, although it is skewed a bit to the privates. There is also a nice mix of large and small and in rural and urban areas.”

The report card assess administration, climate change and energy, food and recycling, green building, transportation, endowment transparency, investment priorities and shareholder engagement. Regarding its scoring for institutional investments, the report card states that “points were given to schools that investigated, or currently invest in, renewable energy funds or similar investment vehicles.” Institutions are graded in these different sections individually and then given an overall grade. While the scoring criteria and calculation of the overall grade are transparent and explained by the report card, the methodology behind the individual section grades are kept a secret. Its rating standard is based on “current best practice,” according to its methodology. The average grade for all institutions in 2008 was a C+, up from a C last year. Orloski says the report’s direct approach to grading and independent assessment of institutions makes it unique.

“We don’t have a profit motive,” Orloski said. “We’re not trying to sell more of our report cards. This is becoming a top-tier issue right up there with the academic quality of an institution. This has started thousands of conversation on sustainability at these schools. It’s opening eyes as to where a school is and where other schools are. Before this, there wasn’t an approach to compare with peer schools.”

He added that a number of faculty and students at schools earning poor grades from the SEI report card have contacted him to thank the organization for bringing awareness to environmental issues at their institutions. Orloski said he has seen a number of institutions make constructive changes after receiving poor grades on the report card.

The University of Southern California, for example, earned a D on the 2007 report card. The university, according to the 2008 report card, established a sustainability task force and began two building projects using Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification. As a result, the college earned a C+. SEI also added another category, in which the university was already excelling, to the report card, said James Grant, USC spokesman. He pointed out that although the addition of a “transportation” category clearly helped the institution’s overall score, “eco-friendly approaches to transportation as ridesharing, incentives for metro passes for students, faculty, and staff; and alternative fuel vehicle use have been in place for several years already.” USC is one of five colleges on this year’s report card that saw an improvement of at least a grade and half.

Orloski said that about two-thirds of the institutions in the 2008 report card improved their grades from last year. A number of these grade shifts are the result of institutions providing their investors with more explicit opportunities to invest in funds that consider environmental or sustainable factors.
Jumping On The Bandwagon

Given the impact of the report cards by both the NFA and SEI, a number of other less substantial or duplicative rankings of campus environmental sustainability debuted this year. The Princeton Review and Kaplan dedicated sections of their 2009 college guide books to recognize “green” institutions. Also, magazines from Forbes to Sierra Club, the official publication of the Sierra Club, published environmental rankings of colleges and universities. The lists by Forbes and Kaplan, however, made use of SEI data, said Orlowski. Still, others did come up with their own methodology.

In its recent editions of The Best 368 Colleges, The Best Northeast Colleges and The Complete Book of Colleges, the Princeton Review included new “green ratings” for institutions on its review pages so that readers could “find out if they’re environmentally friendly.” The 534 institutions rated are judged on a scale from 60 to 99 based on institutional responses on a self-reported survey. The methodology behind this rating, however, was not made available to the institutions before the survey was conducted, said David Soto, the Princeton Review’s college ratings director. He added that the survey consisted of 30 questions from which the Princeton Review selected the 10 it found to be most important to determine the rating after having given the survey. This information was self-reported by the institutions. ecoAmerica, a non-profit environmental marketing agency, helped the Princeton Review determine the criteria for this rating.

“Especially with a rating of this nature, it will play a role in a student’s college selection,” Soto said, though there is no data to suggest that prospective students’ college decisions hinge on the issue of sustainability. “We were considering students. They are reacting to, want and need this information. Students are savvy shoppers these days.”

Instead of seeking hard data like the NWF and SEI surveys, the Princeton Review asked colleges questions about their efforts to provide what it calls “an environmentally beneficial student experience.” For example, one of the questions among those that counted asks, “Does the school offer programs including free bus passes, universal access transit passes, bike sharing/renting, car sharing, carpool parking, vanpooling or guaranteed rides home to encourage alternatives to single-passenger automobile use for students?” As a result, the exact methodology in calculating the ratings is not transparent to the public. Only the 10 questions used by the Princeton Review to calculate the grades have been released, and its scale for judging institutional responses has not been released. The institutions’ responses to these questions are not made public either. Only a rating between 60 and 99 is provided in each college’s profile. Those institutions that did not provide answers to a “sufficient number” of questions were awarded the lowest score of 60 with an asterisk. Though Soto said the Princeton Review did its best to ensure full reporting from the institutions it surveyed, he noted that colleges and universities can improve their “green rating” each year when a new guide is published.

Joining its competitors on bookstore shelves this fall is Kaplan’s College Guide 2009, which also includes a list of 25 “environmentally responsible colleges.” Instead of ranking the institutions or assessing them in some quantifiable way, Kaplan presents a two-page spread detailing the green aspects of 25 institutions listed in alphabetical order. The list was not compiled in a scientific manner, said Jason Palmer, Kaplan contributing editor, adding that it instead focuses on institutions with a well-documented and long-term commitment to environmental sustainability. The guide entries detail green attitudes and activities “inside the classroom,” “around campus” and in “student life.”

“Our book is geared towards students,” Palmer said. “We shy away from rankings. We were not trying to find the greenest college. Still, we wouldn’t consider it definitive. Realistically, college number 26 could have just as easily been included as college 25.”

U.S. News and World Report, known for making waves with its annual list of America’s Best Colleges, does not currently publish “green” ratings of colleges and universities. It is, however, already making plans to join that crowded playing field.

“We think measuring and assessing the differences in campus environmental sustainability is very important and is something that U.S. News wants to begin doing as soon as possible,” Robert Morse, the magazine’s director of data research, stated in an e-mail. “U.S. News is looking for an environmental organization with expertise who would like to work with U.S. News in order to produce such rankings. We think teaming up with such a known environmental organization would be the best way to produce the most credible green rankings rather than trying to create such rankings on our own.”

The Gold Standard?

Even before this recent influx in the number of campus environmental rankings and assessments, some college leaders have been calling for an objective standard by which all colleges and universities could be judged. In 2006, the Higher Education Associations Sustainability Consortium, a network of associations including groups like the Society for College and University Planning, commissioned the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) to create just such a system. Now, the organization has 90 colleges and universities testing a pilot version of its new Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (STARS). Julian Dautremont-Smith, associate director of AASHE,
said the goal is to have STARS reach the same accepted standard that LEED certification has achieved in evaluating buildings.

“There was a perception that there was no good way to show how sustainable a campus was and its progress over time,” said Dautremont-Smith of the time period before STARS was introduced. “There needed to be a system like that of LEED but for entire campuses. There have been all these attempts to assess a system, but there is a need for a standardized method because many haven’t been satisfied with the rigor of the others.”

Dautremont-Smith identified a number of key distinctions that set STARS apart from the other assessments on the market. He noted the system’s complete transparency from start to finish. Unlike some of the other assessments, colleges and universities know from the beginning what they must do to garner certain ratings. Additionally, data and documentation are also publicly available. Dautremont-Smith said this adds to the credibility of the system, as institutions can understand what is expected of them in the survey process. For example, each point awarded by the system has a number of qualifications. In one of the initial questions, one point is given if “between 0.0 and 0.1 percent of the institution’s courses are sustainability focused” and six points are given if “4 percent or more of the institution’s courses are sustainability focused.” Specific percentages between these two qualifications warrant different point amounts.

The process of STARS evaluation, however, is meant to be lengthy, he said. Though all data is reported by the institution, the system maintains an objective scoring rubric with solid requirements for gaining points. Though the final rating levels have yet to be determined by AASHE, Dautremont-Smith said it will be a tiered grading system similar to that of LEED certification, in which buildings can earn bronze, silver or gold recognition. After being certified, the STARS rating for a college or university will be valid for three years.

The STARS pilot program ends at the end of the year, at which point AASHE will synthesize the feedback in order to develop the first full-fledged version of the assessment system. Dautremont-Smith said STARS 1.0 will launch in the fall of 2009 and will be the first version of the assessment to offer official certification to institutions.

Some, however, worry that STARS may be too detailed and complicated for all colleges that want to participate to be able to do so. Additional, there will also be a fee for the certification process. Dautremont-Smith dismissed these concerns by stating that only institutions who wish to be assessed by the program need apply.

“We’ve been working to make the process as easy as possible without watering down its comprehensiveness,” Dautremont-Smith said of the certification. “These things do take some amount of time. We hope other systems will start to use the data from STARS, as more folks are starting to use it as the standard. We think it’ll have a pretty big impact over the long term.”

— David Moltz

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Comments

College Stores Often Sustainability Leaders on Campus

A good portion of higher ed’s stellar showing in the NWF report card could be attributed to the practices of college stores, which are often at the forefront of the ‘green movement’ on campuses. This is because the college-aged crowd that makes up their primary customer base has always had a heightened interest in environmentally friendly products and practices.

A NACS Student Watch™ Survey found that 64 percent of college-bound high school females and 57 percent of college-bound males listed “caring about the environment” as being important to them.
Highlights of how stores make operational choices that support the environment include:

• The University of New Mexico Bookstore’s dedication to offering eco-friendly pens and clothing made from recycled bottles and organic cotton.
• Numerous plastic bag reduction initiatives, including New York University’s creative Save-A-Bag program, which has reduced plastic bag use while raising more than $5,000 for charity.
• Increased use of biodegradable bags at the University of Western Ontario (Canada) and the University of Waterloo (Canada).
• UCLA’s comprehensive sustainability policy that has helped the store reduce waste, conserve energy and water, and reduce chemical use.
• The University of Alaska Anchorage Bookstore’s decision to sell biodegradable plates and utensils made from sugarcane fiber and potato starch.

This is in addition to efforts by many stores to reduce their carbon footprints through cutting use of print advertising and Styrofoam packaging, selling rechargeable batteries, use of reusable mugs and utensils in the office, cutting down on printed reports and other documents, and selling used textbooks.

Charles Schmidt, Dir. of Pub. Relations at Natl. Assn. of College Stores, at 9:10 am EDT on September 5, 2008

Green Colleges

I am glad to see your discussion of the various rankings of green colleges. Unhappily for me, you have missed the oldest of all, Making A Difference College Guide — which I have been publishing since 1992, and whose 11th edition will be out before long. So, clearly, there is no jumping on the bandwagon here, this is our purpose and our passion. Clearly, in 1992, or even 2000, many of the criteria being used today didn’t exist (green buildings, carbon neutral...) — but my focus has always been and remains primarily on the educational aspects — the campus ethos and culture. After all, you don’t choose a college because of where it invests its money. I’m not saying these criteria are irrelevant, not at all, I’m saying they are secondary. If you attend a university that is top ranked because of many external “green” criteria — such as Harvard, you are still attending a college which according to yesterdays NY Times, has 37% of it’s graduates going into investment banking. Hello? That is not the result of a green education. I invite readers to check us out — we don’t rank the colleges, but we do scrutinize them. And what is #1 on the list may be totally unsuitable for the reader. As always, it’s the fit that counts.

Miriam Weinstein, at 1:00 pm EDT on September 22, 2008

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