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[Home](#) > [Opinion & Ideas](#) > [Commentary](#)

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True Sustainability Means Going Beyond Campus Boundaries

By James Proctor

We learn a lot about ourselves by taking a closer look at our utopias. A few years ago, *The Chronicle's* Web site featured an interactive image titled "Elements of a Sustainable University." In the foreground was an institution's entrance sign, with three overlapping circles representing sustainability's ecological, economic, and social dimensions. Behind this sign was Sustainable University itself—a place of wind-powered generators, green roofs, and organic gardens. In the background was ... well, just rolling hills.

This innocuous image may capture the zeitgeist of early-21st-century college sustainability. It by no means stands alone: Take a look at the common features among colleges atop the Sierra Club's "Cool Schools" list, or the Sustainable Endowments Institute's "Green Report Card": solar panels, locally produced food, and lots of new LEED buildings. As director of an environmental-studies program at a West Coast college, I find nothing inherently wrong in any of these practices. But what I fear is that, if that's all there is to college sustainability, we are seriously limiting our students' horizons.

The approach is limited in two important ways. The first is perhaps obvious: While sustainability is promoted as encompassing a broad range of overlapping ecological, economic, and social concerns, in practice it largely boils down to good green technologies. The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, for instance, approaches sustainability "in an inclusive way, encompassing human and ecological health, social justice, secure livelihoods, and a better world for all generations." But its logo is a leaf. And I dare you to find a member profile on its site that isn't about good green practices.

Sustainability is about more than being green, surely. But less obvious is another way in which our approach to sustainability quite literally limits our horizons: We have effectively defined

sustainability in higher education as campus sustainability. It focuses on, and often stops at the boundaries of, our college campuses. It is instructive that many utopias over the ages have been similarly limited: Sir Thomas More's Utopia, in the early 16th century, was an island. More recently, Nicolai Ouroussoff has commented critically on a similarly utopian isolation in an article on Masdar, a city rising in the United Arab Emirates, arguing that what has been called the world's first zero-carbon city may be "grounded in the belief ... that the only way to create a truly harmonious community ... is to cut it off from the world at large." Is this the lesson of campus sustainability?

Almost every definition of sustainability harks back to the 1987 U.N.-sponsored Brundtland Commission report, "Our Common Future." It repeatedly emphasizes that sustainable development must meet "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Presumably, then, energy efficiency and local food and green roofs are sustainable practices because they promote intergenerational equity: They minimize the squandering of resources now so those resources will be available for future generations. This may in some cases be true, but it utterly fails to appreciate the global scope of the commission's larger argument. Somehow, as the nation's colleges and universities embraced the notion of sustainable development, what was once an international-scale political discourse narrowed itself to campus buildings and grounds.

Contemporary sustainability, given its green leanings, is powerfully influenced by environmental ideas. Perhaps the elusive beating heart of today's sustainability movement, its utopian vision, is that of self-sufficiency. The phrase "think globally, act locally" has served as a green mantra, but it is "act locally" that has engaged the popular imagination. Look at the locavore movement, or designs of gleaming city (sometimes rustic country) buildings that capture and store all needed energy. What suffuses these high- and low-tech varieties is the virtue of self-sufficiency.

A contrasting vision of sustainability is grounded in the reality of interdependence among the seeming islands that define our local communities. Interdependence is not a new idea: Economic and ecological interdependence were at the core of the Brundtland report, with its emphasis on necessary connections between the haves and the have-nots of the world. But the picture of interdependence in "Our Common Future" was achieved largely by

looking at the world through the rose-colored glasses of global cooperation, and it may be as unreal as the utopia of self-sufficiency.

How, then, do we more rigorously ground sustainability in an ideal of interdependence? The most thorough recent scholarly exploration of interdependence, along ecological, economic, political, cultural, and other lines, is subsumed under the rubric of cosmopolitanism. As the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has suggested, it is the paradox of cosmos and hearth, of our embeddedness in the larger world set against an understandable urge to turn our backs on it all, that in large part defines the cosmopolitan moment.

So what would a more cosmopolitan college-sustainability movement, one mindful of interdependence, look like? It would certainly include many of the (mostly good green) practices it currently champions, but other elements would reach beyond campus boundaries, simply because the people, objects, and ideas that go into a college community cross those boundaries all the time. It would, in other words, comprise elements as varied as campus buildings-and-grounds policies and students' participation in international programs. Although common sustainability ratings and assessment rubrics have not yet embraced this larger circle, efforts such as the Global Reporting Initiative provide a model for institutions of higher education to express their commitment to sustainability in more-cosmopolitan ways.

As Lewis Mumford said, there are utopias of escape and there are utopias of reconstruction. Self-sufficiency and interdependence are both thoroughly utopian: The former imagines a sustainable campus, the latter a sustainable world. Let's choose our utopias wisely.

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