

THE SUSTAINABLE LEARNING COMMUNITY:

One University's Journey to the Future

John Aber, Tom Kelly, and Bruce Mallory, eds.
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I love New Hampshire. Because of its geography, historic development patterns and current state funding model, the Granite State often operates as a series of modestly sized, eminently frugal city states. This classic scale can allow for effective levels of ingenuity, accountability and social capital development, and in the city of Keene — my home base — and the town of Durham, these optimal conditions have given birth to cutting-edge sustainability initiatives intricately entwined with the higher education institutions that are rooted there.

Enter *The Sustainable Learning Community: One University's Journey to the Future*. This collection of essays and case studies by fifty-nine University of New Hampshire (UNH) administrators, faculty and staff presents the story of UNH's engagement with becoming a more sustainable institution of higher learning. The book abounds with appreciative references to the enduring and classic components of sustainability: frugality, reliance on local materials, and the understanding that people are an institution's greatest resource. Indeed, the overarching theme is that of an underfunded state institution, with a lean administrative structure, and the niches and opportunities that those conditions present for interdisciplinary research, collegiality and collaboration.

In the rapidly mushrooming field of higher ed sustainability, *The Sustainable Learning Community* breaks new ground in expanding the parameters of what might be considered "sustainability." The UNH community defines it not simply in terms of the pragmatic functions of curriculum, operations, research and public engagement (CORE), but as an intersection of four arenas of inquiry and action in response to the central question: What sustains us? The book offers more than sixty short descriptive summaries of how the university's CORE functions engage with these four arenas: Biodiversity & Ecosystems, Climate & Energy, Food & Society, and Culture & Sustainability.

There is much to appreciate about this self-study. The stories of UNH's variety of sustainability initiatives are told with candor and humility. The editors' ability to coax so many colleagues to write these case studies speaks to a shared commitment to sustainability across many parts of the university, and the depth and breadth of the initiatives described are impressive. Co-editor and Chief Sustainability Officer Tom Kelly's fifty three page introductory chapter offers enough

content to serve as a rich resource for lecture notes for a course on the history and theory of sustainability. The book will be a useful guide to those pursuing sustainability initiatives in higher ed in terms of providing an array of general ideas about curriculum, campus operations, research and public engagement. It is likely to spark critical questions. The language is extremely accessible.

The text also highlights UNH's leadership role in shaping the campus sustainability movement nationwide. For example, the school boasts the first Energy Star label for a residence hall, the first Chief Sustainability Officer position, and the first endowed university-wide office of sustainability programs. Many of the 660 signatories to the American College & University Presidents' Climate Commitment can thank UNH for its key role in developing the Campus Carbon Calculator that we use to conduct our greenhouse gas (GHG) inventories and to inform our climate action planning. Other major achievements include the university's construction of the EcoLine, a 12.7-mile pipeline that transports processed landfill gas from the Rochester landfill to a campus combined heat and power facility. That system reportedly provides 95 percent and up to 85 percent of UNH's heating and electricity loads, respectively, and will reduce the school's GHG emissions 57 percent below 1990 levels.

What the reader hungers for with this book is a greater sense of scale, context and priority. It is clear that UNH has embarked upon myriad laudable efforts in the promotion of sustainability within the campus community and regionally. In this swirl of effort, where is the focus? What are the top priorities? As Kelly notes, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that humanity must collectively reduce carbon emissions by 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. The challenge of achieving sustainability purely from a climate perspective alone is herculean. Understanding UNH's particular challenge – in terms of the relative sizes of the school's scope and GHG emissions – and how UNH is choosing to meet it, would be helpful. Indeed, context and scale are minimized to the point that we do not learn until page 120 what the actual size of UNH's GHG emissions is.

The absence of student voices is also felt throughout the book. There are no student authors or direct quotes from students about how the UNH experiment in sustainability has affected them. Where is the evidence that what UNH is so admirably pursuing is having a demonstrable impact on the community's primary learners: its students?

Kelly's chapter importantly emphasizes the crucial human rights/social justice dimension to sustainability at a theoretical level. Yet it remains unclear how UNH applies this dimension to its practices. What are the social justice implications of current production of energy or of UNH-branded apparel? How is the university's endowment invested? Is the university an engaged and active shareholder with respect to climate, biodiversity and human rights concerns? To what extent is it investing locally? What is the role of diversity in sustainability?

Many of the case studies — particularly those addressing campus food and transport operations — provide inadequate contextual information to assess the effectiveness of those efforts in measurable or qualitative terms. Having that analysis and specificity would make the lessons to be learned from the UNH experience more immediately applicable to similar efforts elsewhere and would allow the reader to appreciate the scale of what UNH has achieved. How much has the school reduced plate waste? What percentage of the food served in the dining

halls is actually grown locally? How much compost is produced? Even information about the book is nonspecific: “The paper used in this book meets [the Green Press Initiative’s] minimum requirement for recycled paper.” Why not simply indicate the percentage of recycled paper and whether or not it is post-consumer material?

This is not a how-to guide. Instead, it is a candid compendium of narratives that will inform and likely inspire.