CHAPTER 4: HABITUATED: THE NUDGE-CULTURE OF SUSTAINABILITY

Yale president Peter Salovey recently gave his students some advice: “Fake it till you make it.”

The occasion for his fireside chat was the launch of Yale’s new 2013-2016 Sustainability Strategic Plan. On Wednesday, October 30, 2013, in the midst of the academic semester, Salovey gathered a group of students in the President’s Room in Woolsey Hall and confronted them frankly with his goals for sustainability initiatives.

The previous three-year plan had set ambitious goals for energy and emissions reductions and increases in recycling. Some of these Yale had met or slightly exceeded; others, it had failed by a long shot. The goal of 25 percent reduction in paper use, for example, flopped; Yale reduced its paper consumption by only 7 percent.

Yale had evidently detected among its members a certain irresolution or perhaps a lack of heartfelt commitment to these policies. President Salovey’s “faking it” solution was to make the students act as if they are enthusiastically eco-conscious, even if they are not. The idea is partly to prompt conformity to campus environmental policies. But the longer-term goal is that after a while, students won’t be able to tell the difference between bluffing and believing. At some point, the mask begins to form the face.

In contrast to Yale’s previous three-year sustainability plan, which had focused on institutional practices and policies, the new 2013-2016 plan deflects focus away from institutional environmental goals and towards personal behavioral changes. The plan isn’t devoid of statistics and new policy targets: “Increase the renewable energy portfolio to represent 1 percent of the total electricity generated on campus by June 2016,” “Establish sustainable procurement standards by June 2014,” “Reduce sodium content in on-campus food offerings to 2,200 milligrams daily by June 2016.” But it does focus in a powerful way on personal behavior and private, everyday decisions. A section of the plan called “Leadership &

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292 Ibid, pg 7.

293 Ibid, pg 11.

Capacity Building” sets out Yale’s underlying goals:

The success of this plan relies on system modification and behavior change. As a university with a robust culture of sustainability, Yale is able to call upon its professionals to effect change in their workplaces and in their lives while simultaneously offering students the experience of living, studying, and playing in a setting that is imbued with sustainability values.295

The day after Salovey’s meeting with students in the President’s Room, the Yale Daily News reported this shift in tactics:

Salovey noted that while the 2010–2013 plan had focused on environmental policy changes in the Yale community, the new plan centers upon encouraging behavioral change in areas ranging from food consumption to paper use.296

And in a letter prefacing the new Sustainability Strategic Plan, Salovey himself noted that while Yale had taken many steps to align its institutional policies with its green ideals, it had much work to do in getting its staff and students fully on board:

Sustainability calls for new ways of supplying energy, serving food, circulating vehicular and pedestrian traffic, distributing documents, and maintaining landscapes. We have much of the necessary technology; our challenge is to change our behaviors so that what we do with our resources provides the best stewardship for the future.297

How, then, to get Yale’s constituents to comply? Prod them—nudge them—towards green behavior, ideally without the students’ awareness. Exactly how this might be done will depend, Salovey said, on what research in social psychology indicates will best push students’ psychological buttons:

As a social psychologist, I am pleased that our strategies include engaging the Yale community in bringing about this change so that sustainability is embedded in the policies, practices, and day-to-day operations of our campus.298

In others words, the way to green the campus is to “embed” sustainability in all aspects of day-to-day life, socially conditioning students so that they will adopt—of their own accord, or so they think—a particular habit of behavior. Sustainability becomes an active way of living to absorb, not a list of goals to examine and consider.

295  Ibid, pg 15.
296  Schwarz, “Sustainability Plan Launched.”
297  Sustainability Strategic Plan 2013-2016, pg. 3.
298  Ibid.
The *Yale Daily News* reported an enthusiastic response to Salovey’s plans from the Yale staff. Martha Highsmith, Salovey’s senior adviser, hopes to use social media to make sustainability hip, and to rely on residential colleges to make sustainability part of the social norms of the school. She’s targeting prominent members of the student body to model and to influence their peers towards lifestyle shifts.

Dining director Rafi Taherian plans to “seduce our students with plant-based foods” rather than “mandate change.”

“This is about empowering the community to make mindful decisions and integrating these principles into everyday behavior,” says Amber Garrard, the education and outreach program manager for Yale’s Office of Sustainability. “Mindfulness,” in this sense, refers to the actions students make, rather than the decision-making process behind those actions. Garrard wants Yalies to be mindful about recycling their paper and plastic, but unaware of the psychological manipulation going on in the background to get them to recycle.

When a campus ideology is equipped with an “education and outreach” campaign, it’s clear which decision counts as “empowered” and “mindful,” and which one is uninformed and inappropriate. Yale plans to immerse its students in a culture of sustainability, instructing them to play their parts until they learn them, second nature. They may have to fake it for a while, but eventually, Salovey hopes, they’ll make it to full agreement with the university’s principles.

**Green Police**

Yale’s first sustainability plan, with its institutional commitments and mandates, typifies much of the first-wave environmental-sustainability movement. If the earth is burning up, its trees clear-cut, rivers drained, grounds torn, and continents overpopulated, then we must collectively halt our eco-cide or face a barren world. The kinds of actions required to avert a wholesale collapse of the ecosystem are drastic and require strict rules and enforcement.

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299 Schwarz, “Sustainability Plan Launched.”
Audi satirized these ramrod regulations in a 2010 Super Bowl advertisement about the “Green Police,” who handcuff a hapless shopper in a grocery store who falls afoul of the law by asking for a plastic bag at the checkout. A squad of police barge into a quiet home and bust the unfortunate owner of an incandescent light bulb. Audi’s “Green Police” advertisement during the 2010 Super Bowl satirized overzealous environmental regulations.

Two scraggy teens get caught with their illicit drinks: “What do you think of plastic bottles now?” the officer asks as he empties their disposable water bottles. But the smug owner of an Audi A3 TDI—named the 2010 “green car of the year” according to Green Car Journal—circumvents the long line of cars at a highway “eco-check” point. The Green Police can have no quarrel with him.

Audi’s ad exaggerated but accurately identified the regulatory tactics favored by many of the environmentalist stripe. The establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 unleashed a torrent of regulations on pollution, emissions, waste disposal, and pesticides. Some of these proved worthwhile, others overshot, but all compelled compliance.

The ban on DDT, for instance, prevented farmers from spraying their crops with the pesticide, following public outcry provoked by Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring. Carson had argued that agricultural chemicals were destroying the environment, causing cancer in humans, and might eventually kill all the songbirds that sing each spring. The scientific evidence for Carson’s claims was sparse, though. The citation for the claim that pesticides obstructed human reproduction (one of Carson’s major themes) was a letter to the editor of a medical journal, and the claim that DDT exposure led to neurological pain in joints and limbs was based on a single complainant. Carson cited Sir Macfarlane Burnet who commented in a speech at Harvard School of Public Health that increase in childhood leukemia is linked to “mutagenic

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302  Ibid, pg. 40.
303  Ibid, pg. 41.
stimulus,” but Burnet himself dismissed pesticides and other “all-pervading elements” that suffuse the air as possible causes, because the increase was concentrated only in a subset of the populace, and was not widespread.\textsuperscript{304} DDT had actually helped prevent rapid increase in insect populations and also limited the spread of vector-borne diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. Since the ban on DDT went into effect, an average of 2,700 daily deaths can be attributed to the lack of pesticides.\textsuperscript{305}

**Figure 7. Map of Key UN Sustainability Summits**

Since 1972, UN summits around the world have taken up issues of sustainability and environmental protection.

At UN summits in Rio de Janeiro (1992), Kyoto (1997), Johannesburg (2002), Copenhagen (2009), and numerous other cities, sustainability-motivated diplomats proposed mountains of new regulations demanding compliance from nations, individuals, corporations, and seemingly nature itself.

After its 2010 ad, Audi, warding off criticism from activists upset at its caricature of the green movement, was quick to note that there really are Green Police units—though perhaps not quite as zealous as their

\textsuperscript{304} Ibid, pg. 42.

Audi advertisement counterparts—in Israel, the U.K., Vietnam, and New York state.306

But Green Police are rare on campus. Their work is done instead by behavioral economists and social psychologists. Administrators drive students towards green behavior not by the stick, but by gentle pushes and plenty of carrots—by soft manipulation, rather than by coercion. Yale’s recent shift from administrative policy to so-called “choice architecture” is a good example. The emphasis has shifted from reducing emissions and mandating student compliance to molding student sensibilities. It’s a campaign that targets the subconscious.

Rhodes to Sustainability

Yale President Salovey’s talk about “embedding” sustainability into the “day-to-day operations” of Yale’s community is not an anomaly. Sustainability is increasingly seen as something more than a set of propositional commitments, and something closer to personal values that suffuse all areas of individual and communal life.

Frank Rhodes, former president of Cornell University, writing in the Chronicle of Higher Education, famously called sustainability “a new foundation for the liberal arts and sciences.”307 He characterized sustainability as a morality system “best understood within the larger framework of values, meaning, and purpose.” He regretted students who “graduate untouched by the hard-won collective historical experience, social perspectives, moral considerations, and humane reflections.” Sustainability, in his mind, helps to shore up students’ day-to-day community as well as their understanding of human legacy and history.

John Kerry and Teresa Heinz’s advocacy group, Second Nature, has similarly sought to make sustainability an inescapable part of the fabric of campus life. Second Nature aims to make sustainability “a foundation of all of an organization’s activities so it becomes embedded ‘in the walls.’”308 That means, among other things, being willing to “re-imagine and reorganize the structure of the academy” so that all facets of the institution contribute to the development of a sustainable society. Teaching, research, administrative hierarchies, institutional policies, campus culture, residence life, and all areas of collegiate influence must be rebuilt and integrated together with this goal in mind.

The University of Washington presents a case study for how to embed sustainability “in the walls.” In June 2014, the university was announced as one of four universities (the only one from the United


States) to earn a “Sustainable Campus Excellence Award” from the International Sustainable Campus Network (ISCN), a cohort of colleges and universities that share ideas and best practices for implementing sustainability on their campuses.\textsuperscript{309} The four annual awards recognized excellent sustainable practices in building, in campus, in student leadership, and in “integration.” It was this last category of “excellence” for which the University of Washington was specifically cited.

A glance at the University of Washington’s most recent Climate Action Plan provides insight as to why it excels at the “integration” of sustainability into the campus culture. Sustainability is everywhere, from increasing the cost of parking passes in order to encourage use of public transit, to recycling cooking oil as biofuel, to founding a new College of the Environment and fitting sustainability into other departments and classes that are not strictly environmental, to honoring students and staff who embody these goals with “Husky Green Awards.”\textsuperscript{310}

Indeed, the introductory note to the Climate Action Plan acknowledges that though “substantive carbon reduction” is the “primary goal” of the strategy, these carbon-reducing strategies are simply “part of a larger, more holistic set of strategies” that are aimed at

1. Moving forward toward climate neutrality
2. Engaging faculty and students in conservation and related behavior change
3. Integrating formal and informal learning on sustainability
4. Replacing the campus power plant
5. Moving students, faculty and staff to live near the UW
6. More walking/cycling, less reliance on motorized transportation
7. Becoming energy efficient\textsuperscript{311}

Three of the seven involve changes in operations, efficiency, and energy production. But four—more than half of the primary goals of the Climate Action Plan—involves changing some aspects of students’ and staff members’ lives. These plans go even so far as “moving students, faculty and staff to live near the UW,” presumably to cut down on emissions from commuting.

\textsuperscript{310} Husky Green Awards 2014, University of Washington, 2014. https://green.uw.edu/hga
“Integrating” sustainability makes the university’s environmental activities the personal responsibility of all faculty, staff, and students, across the board and in all aspects of campus life. Achieving this goal entails working to “Promote sustainable behavior as a cultural norm in Human Resource practices; new student orientation; faculty and staff; and in office and other work environments”—in others words, everywhere. Sustainability moves beyond providing an institutional foundation; it becomes the very air its students breathe.

Commitments by Yale, the University of Washington, and others to present sustainability as a “cultural norm” indicate a new stage in the sustainability movement’s progress. Early environmentalism waged war by public information campaigns and statistics, and by force: sit-ins, teach-ins, marches, and demonstrations. Think of the first Earth Day in 1970, when 20 million Americans marched down their hometown streets, occupied public buildings and held teach-ins at university lectures to grab public attention.

Early sustainability, transitioning out of environmentalism and coming out of the Brundtland Commission, progressed by edict: the international agreements and emissions caps, and other regulatory instances of the “green police.” But today’s sustainability is more subtle and emotional. As Yale, the University of Washington, and other colleges and universities are beginning to depict sustainability, it is a habit, a culture with its own way of living and thinking.

**Bottling Sustainability**

Cultural sustainability, like all cultures, has its own adages. One of them is “Think globally, act locally,” a pithy imperative coined by Rene Dubos (1901-1982), the microbiologist-turned-social activist. Dubos, a French-born research doctor at Rockefeller University in New York, predates much of the sustainability movement, though sustainability mines the ore from its environmentalist predecessors as well as from its contemporary champions. Dubos meant his proverb as a criticism of globalism and a celebration of the quirks and anomalies of local life. He thought the wellbeing of the global environment came as a byproduct of local responsibility, each locale with its own customs and forms of responsible behavior.

Colleges and universities intent on sustainability have taken up Dubos’s dictum. As they interpret it, the motto focuses less on local cultures and more on individual choices, regardless of their local

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312 Ibid, pg. 8.
flavor. The idea is that saving the world consists in changing small, everyday habits. On one level, this teaches that the accumulated efforts of hundreds of thousands of people jointly pledging to shut off the water as they brush their teeth will, eventually, save enough water to irrigate a dry farm. On another level, it means that tinkering with seemingly innocuous, small habits will serve as the catalyst for larger lifestyle changes in the future. If the earth is to be saved, that salvation will come one fewer incandescent bulb or plastic bottle at a time.

Plastic bottles, as it happens, have been a prime target at colleges and a key force in the campaign to covertly condition students’ habits and assumptions. On dozens of campuses, green-minded students and administrators denounce bottled water and shame their Dasani-toting peers into drinking from the tap. The main crime, apparently, is the bottles’ wasted plastic, along with suspicions that phthalates in the plastic disrupt human hormones.\(^\text{313}\) According to Corporate Accountability International, which operates a national “Think Outside the Bottle Campaign,” 70 colleges and universities have banned outright the sale of bottled water on campus.\(^\text{314}\) “Ban the Bottle,” another anti-bottle ally, counts nearly 40 American colleges and universities as affiliates.\(^\text{315}\) And “Take Back the Tap,” a project of Food and Water Watch, counts 60 colleges and universities among its partners.\(^\text{316}\) The tap water rebellion is vibrant on campus.

The goals of the campaign are well articulated in the short animated documentary “The Story of Bottled Water,” one of several sequels to the well-known “Story of Stuff,” narrated by sustainability activist filmmaker Annie Leonard.\(^\text{317}\) In “The Story of Stuff,” Leonard describes the polluted process of manufacturing the various needless products that consumer-driven Western society demands, a process created by profit-greedy corporations, she believes, and that ultimately results in needless waste, pollution, and trash. Leonard takes a similar tack in “The Story of Bottled Water.” In the 1970s, she recounts, oversized capitalistic soda companies began worrying about sales declines and hit upon the idea of bottling water

\(^{315}\) Ban the Bottle, Map of Campaigns. http://www.banthebottle.net/map-of-campaigns/
\(^{316}\) “Take Back the Tap on Your Campus,” Food and Water Watch. http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/take-back-the-tap/students/
in addition to soda. They began demonizing the tap as dirty and unsafe, and branded disposable water bottles as the safe, clean, natural way to go. The result was “manufactured demand” for bottled water as the corporations mounted a seductive, misleading advertisement campaign that persuaded people to distrust the tap and shell out their hard-earned cash for bottled versions of their own tap water.

In the eight-minute video, Leonard hits her viewers with the data (80 percent of plastic bottles end up in landfills) and attempts to chart how the bottles contribute to the degradation of the environment. But for most of the film, she avoids statistics. Facts go only so far. Leonard persuasively draws in the viewer’s heart as well as his mind: “This is a story about a system in crisis,” she narrates as offending disposable products zip across the screen from a dirty manufacturing center to an oversized department store, then to a suburban home crammed with stuff, and eventually to a trash heap. “We’re trashng the planet” (animated trees snap off mid-trunk as a mountain peak falls off the top of the globe), “we’re trashng each other” (a skull and crossbones-marked factory dumps waste into a lake where an unsuspecting gentleman stands fishing with his son) “and we’re not even having fun.”

Adopting Yale President Salovey’s prodding tactic, Leonard attempts to make bottled water repulsive: “Carrying bottled water is on its way to being as cool as smoking while pregnant,” Leonard says. “We know better now.”

The Trayless Cafeteria

In addition to bottled water, another favorite sustainability target is the cafeteria tray, an expendable accoutrement that requires washing and enables students, who find their trays bigger than their stomachs, to take and then toss uneaten food. That waste puts the sustainability-conscious in a dither. American University Professor Kiho Kim and AU environmental science alumnus Stevia Morawski set about testing a tray vs. no-tray cafeteria at the American University dining hall over the course of several days. Kim and Morawski measured students’ leftover food and the number of dishes they used, and found that trayless
dining led to a 32 percent reduction in food waste and 27 percent reduction in dish use. In an article for the *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, they concluded that “removing trays is a simple way for universities and other dining facilities to reduce their environmental impact and save money.”

There’s a third reason, though, besides saving money and preventing waste, that motivates institutions to sideline their cafeteria trays. The trays provide for students a strong psychological connection point between sustainability and their everyday lives. Aramark, the foodservice giant that supplies many college cafeterias, acknowledges in the opening paragraph of a 2008 report, “The Business and Cultural Acceptance Case for Trayless Dining,” that

*The increase in social consciousness and environmental stewardship on college campuses has spurred an array of new and innovative sustainability programs. One particularly creative initiative that has gained attention over the past few years is trayless dining.*

Aramark identifies a number of environmental and economic reasons that might interest their clients in de-traying their cafeterias. But it also lists four reasons it categorizes under “social awareness.” Trayless dining, they aver,

- Supports education and awareness of environmental issues.
- Reinforces institutions’ sustainability initiatives.
- Encourages students to participate in a “green” initiative that has both a personal and community impact.
- Reinforces sustainability awareness on a daily basis.

That makes the decision to serve meals on trays not just a quantitative one (how much money will we save? How much food will we save?) but a qualitative one. Using a tray or not becomes a question of values and morals, not just dollars and calories. Theo J. Kalikow, president of the University of Maine at Farmington, understood these implications when in 2007 he led his university to become one of the first to jettison its trays. “It’s the right thing to do,” Kalikow remarked. “Our students see sustainable practices in action on a daily basis.”

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319 Ibid.


321 Ibid, pg. 3.

Since then, trayless dining has become only more popular. In 2009, the New York Times ran a front-page story on the phenomenon, commenting that “the once-ubiquitous cafeteria tray, with so many glasses of soda, juice and milk lined up across the top, could soon join the typewriter as a campus relic.” In 2011, the Green Report Card (a project of the Sustainable Endowment Institute that, until 2011, graded institutions on the vigor of their sustainability commitments) released its annual sustainability ranking of the 300 American colleges and universities with the largest endowments, finding that three-quarters of them had instituted some kind of trayless dining. More are joining. The University of Michigan, for instance, at the start of the Fall 2013 semester scotched its trays across all cafeterias at its Ann Arbor campus, after several years of temporary trial trayless runs.

The increase in trayless dining is partly due to educational campaigns, such as those conducted by American University’s Kim and Morawski, that aim to demonstrate quantifiable practical benefits of detraying a cafeteria. Four years before Kim and Morawski’s study of the American University dining hall, administrators there had tried to impose a tray-ban, but the students rebelled. After Kim and Morawski showed that trayless dining did have some effect on food and water waste, students were more willing to give up their plastic trays: “This time,” the university reported after Kim and Morawski’s study, “without the onus of a top-down solution being imposed on them, students embraced the sustainability implications of eliminating so much waste.”

But more often, persuading a student to repent from his tray requires something more than cold calculations of pounds of trash averted from the landfill. It takes either a wholesale conversion of his values, or a campaign to convince him that this self-abnegation actually fits with the values he already espouses.

Yale, armed with President Salovey’s social psychology research, is trying an approach that tackles both. Having been “nudged”—unaware—towards behavior changes, the student begins to reconcile his new behavior with his already-held values and, eventually, begins to assume and adopt the values behind his new behavior pattern.

326 Spencer, “Going Trayless Study Shows Student Impact.”
Yale first tried to go trayless in 2009, but within a week student outcry brought the trays back. Two hundred students filed comment cards at the Commons Dining Hall opposing the trayless cafeteria; only six wrote in favor. Students found it difficult to carry multiple dishes in their arms. The floor grew dirty with spilled food. A group of football players piled their dishes in a tower atop a table in protest. The Yale Daily News reported that the Director of Residential Dining Regenia Phillips thought Yale might be able to talk the students out of their trays eventually, but only after the campus culture changed: “It won’t work until it’s cool not to use a tray,” she said.

Now, under Salovey’s guidance, Yale is trying hard to make tray-ditching and other sustainability-inspired “lifestyle” changes cool. The sustainability office’s assistant director Melissa Goodall even uses the word “sexy” to describe Yale’s efforts to coordinate sustainability measures across the campus. When Yale succeeds in making tray-ditching “cool,” or “sexy,” it will have fundamentally reshaped its students’ values, social norms, and lifestyle habits—without lectures, data, or bothersome appeals to reason.

**Mind Games**

Bottled water and plastic trays are two of many minor targets that sustainability advocates are taking aim at. There are more: plastic straws, paper cups, Styrofoam to-go boxes, envelopes, plastic grocery bags, to name a few.

These seemingly trifling measures would not halt man-made global warming. American University estimates that it might save 25,000 pounds of food scraps per year by purging trays, and U.S. water bottle consumption might add up to millions of bottles a year. Those are big numbers. But these token contributions are minuscule relative to the vast gulf sustainability advocates see between where society is and where a green, no-footprint society ought to be. An “impact-neutral,” “no-footprint” society would require giving up cars, refrigerators, airplanes, and many digital devices—not just the lower-threat bottled water or plastic trays.

Consider the trays. The amount of effort required to give up a tray might have been more efficiently invested in, say, biking to work once a week, or simply replacing an outdated, inefficient heating unit.

The cafeteria trays’ contribution towards the greening of the country is infinitesimally small relative to the inconvenience of abiding by this new eco-morality. That imbalance leads one to wonder whether it’s not

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328 Ibid.

329 Schwarz, “Sustainability Plan Launched.”

330 Spencer, “Going Trayless Study Shows Student Impact.”

the environment but the inconvenience itself that is the primary goal of these campus exercises in self-deprivation.

The student who navigates the cafeteria with his arms full of plates, cups, and cutlery, dripping soup and spilling soda, is not saving much dishwashing water, or even all that much food, compared to the absolute quantities of dining hall food purchases. His trayless juggle is not necessarily making him any healthier, nor is it doing much to help him combat the freshman-fifteen, as some sustainability activists have suggested. (In fact, a study from two Cornell economists found that students without trays tend to run out of hands and to skip extra dishes—usually healthy dishes such as salads—in order to better carry their entrée and dessert. This leads to students consuming relatively fewer greens and more sweets.\(^{332}\))

But the student in the midst of that juggling act is accomplishing one crucially important objective. He is aware three times every day that he is making a sacrifice on behalf of the environment. He is taking small measures with upfront inconveniences that jar him alert to the need for other, larger measures he may take in the future. He is being habituated into a larger lifestyle replete with sustainability-minded activity. Today he’ll eschew the tray and sip a glass of water from the tap; tomorrow he’ll bike to campus; and in thirty years, he’ll commit his hedge fund to invest in alternative energy.

Long-term behavior modification is exactly what Yale and its compatriot schools have in mind. The text of Yale’s Strategic Plan is itself quite clear in its language. Some of the intermediate goals include:

Establish a culture of green information technology at Yale through a portfolio of training and certification programs, as well as consistent online messaging to all computer-using members of the Yale community by June 2016.\(^ {333}\)

Or

Promote sustainability as a core business value at Yale by June 2016.\(^ {334}\)

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333  Sustainability Strategic Plan 2013-2016, pg. 16.

334  Ibid, pg. 15.
Presumably a “culture of green information technology,” “consistent online messaging,” and the sacralizing of “sustainability as a core business value” will cultivate in students a form of thought and of life that remain with them long after they leave Yale’s campus.

The University of Texas at Arlington has something similar in mind. UT Sustainability Director Meghna Tare puts the objective more directly on the sustainable business blog “Triple Pundit”:

Students attending a university that places high value on sustainable operations are more likely to take this mindset to their future places of employment where they can help shape the future of environmentally-friendly companies.335

Tare’s office at UT Arlington happily “embraces” its role of teaching students “the knowledge, skills, and habits to help society shift to a more sustainable world, both in their professional and personal lives” (emphasis added). To help engrain those habits in students’ lives, the Office of Sustainability holds energy saving competitions to entice students with green living, sponsors student clubs, holds attention-grabbing campus events, and co-opts the curriculum to surround students with an environment rich in the rhetoric of sustainability.

The Competitive Drive

Demanding sacrifices of simple conveniences such as cafeteria trays and water bottles can wear a student down. Fortunately, sustainability offers incentives as well.

In January 2001, two college campus recycling coordinators found themselves at a loss for how to get their students to care—let alone get excited about—recycling their trash. Working memory can only hold so many thoughts at once, and the act of recycling—having to consciously consider their trash, separate it from recyclables, recall which items could be recycled, and seek out a recycling bin—add up to a series of steps that, if not routine by force of habit, requires just enough effort to become a pesky inconvenience.

The recycling coordinators, one from Ohio University, the other from Miami University, hit upon the idea of making recycling a competition between the two schools. Ohio and Miami have a longstanding sports rivalry; beating the other school was a source of pride and school spirit. The recycling competition tapped that school spirit, turning sustainability into a source of institutional honor and inclusion with the campus community. And because the terms of the competition awarded the win to whichever university scored the highest rate of recycling per person, rather than in absolute numbers, recycling became a personal duty to preserve the school’s reputation.

Over the course of ten weeks, university staff monitored recycling bins and heavily promoted recycling to the student body. Ohio recycled an average of 32.6 pounds per person; Miami, 41.2 pounds—and with it gained the recycling victory.336

RecycleMania has since grown to a nationwide annual tournament sponsored in part by the EPA WasteWise program and operated by the national nonprofit Keep America Beautiful. In 2014, a total of 461 American and Canadian colleges and universities clashed in trash warfare. The tournament operates on a rulebook for measuring and reporting recycling rates. It offers 11 categories of competition from specific targets (paper, cardboard, cans, etc.), to the Gorilla prize awarded for highest gross tons of recycled material, to the Grand Champion, which denotes the university with the highest ratio of recycled waste to trash. For broader reach, RecycleMania offers two divisions: “competitive” for those seeking to win and willing to carry out the detailed measuring rules, and “benchmark” for those who will report less precise data, forgo the competition, and simply want to encourage their students to recycle.

The event proves successful. The 2014 Grand Champion, Antioch University in Seattle, managed to recycle 93.133 percent of all waste. The University of Missouri-Kansas City took second with 81.052 percent of all trash recycled during the competition period.

Antioch broke the 90 percent mark with the help of a few heavy-handed tactics: “we made it harder to throw things out by actually removing nearly all of our trash cans,” Antioch President Brian Baird commented in an announcement of the win.337 But its goal superseded a RecycleMania win: “Even though we are a socially conscious institution that lives by our mission, we made people think even harder than they normally do, and make decisions item by item.” Jennifer Jehn, president and CEO of Keep America Beautiful, echoes Baird’s sentiment: “Recylermania is a powerful tool to communicate the recycling message to college students in a way that resonates with their values and experience.”338

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336  History of RecycleMania. http://recyclemaniacs.org/about/history-recyclemania
338  Ibid
RecycleMania is one of hundreds of competitions held on campuses every year. There are dorm competitions to reduce electricity (such as the Kill-a-Watt at the University of Michigan), campus events to promote recycling awareness (trash fashion shows, where students model outfits constructed from newspapers, lamp shades, and other items destined for landfills), and scavenger hunts that advertise campus solar panels and bike repair shops. If cafeteria trays and water bottles are the gentle sticks that prod students toward sustainability, competitions provide the prizes that draw them forward.

“Eco-Reps”

The social architect cannot quite create social norms at the snap of his fingers, though tinkering with authority structure—or cafeteria equipment—can do quite a lot. Creating a fully immersive sustainability experience requires stocking a campus with at least a few true believers ready for the task of quiet evangelism.

On many campuses, this position is called an “eco-rep” or an “environmental ambassador.” Sometimes the titles are rather militant, as at Yale, where these students form the “Sustainability Service Corps.” Other times the titles take on a clinical feel. At Indiana University, the Office of Sustainability hires six students for ten hours a week at a rate of $10 per hour as part of its bluntly-put “peer educator program.”

“Eco-reps” are students, generally paid by their university’s Office of Sustainability, who have bought the sustainability dogma wholesale and fully internalized it. They advise their peers about recycling, shorter showers, Meatless Mondays, and other ways to grow greener. The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education counts eighty institutions that have student environmental representatives of some kind.

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339 Sustainability Peer Educator Program, University of Indiana. http://hoosierbiology.wordpress.com/2014/01/06/sustainability-peer-educator-program/

340 “Student Peer-to-Peer Sustainability Education Programs,” Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. http://www.aashe.org/resources/peer-peer-sustainability-outreach-campaigns
Northwestern University has 60 such “Eco-Reps” who focus on “empowering students that aren’t already engaged in the environmental movement, making sure they have the necessary resources to make greener choices.” During the 2013-2014 school year, they promoted recycling, talked up sustainability among their peers, and held competitions and events to spark students’ interest.

Northwestern Eco-Reps also held a “Living Green Fair” to spotlight all the ways to live an eco-friendly life and ask their peers to sign a green pledge in which they select various ways to conserve energy, reduce waste, eat sustainably, save water, and travel sustainably. The preface to the pledge lays out the importance of personal behavior:

Northwestern is committed to being a leader in sustainability – in our operations, research, and curriculum as well as in the community – and we’re asking you to commit to simple choices that together, will help us achieve this goal and make Northwestern a healthier, more sustainable environment and a better global community.

With friends and peers signing pledges, and with the reputation of their university’s status as a “leader in sustainability” on the line, who but the most staunchly opposed could resist?

Harvard’s Eco-Reps (or Eco-REP, for Resource Efficiency Program, as the sustainability ambassadors are called there) have a particular claim to effective cultural change. In an article titled “University Looks to Students in Effort to Drive Down Waste,” the Crimson reported that Harvard’s waste reduction and recycling rates had recently improved. The Crimson reported on the Eco-REPs’ success in this happy trend:

Jaclyn Olsen, assistant director of the Office for Sustainability, attributed improvement in recycling to similar efforts, but said that a change in culture awareness has also played a part. “I really think it’s been a big culture change,” Olsen said of students who have grown more environmentally conscious.

The REPs set about making their peers more aware of recycling, modeling responsible trash habits, campaigning against bottled water, and trying to make recycling more convenient. They reached out to student groups already active on environmental issues, and together worked with the administration to develop new ways to promote recycling. And they realized how cautious they had to be when pressuring their peers towards a new habit. “If you are trying to change someone’s lifestyle...people are furious

about that,” said Kristen J. Wraith, a three-year veteran Eco-REP and former chair of the Environmental Action Committee.  

**Gambling with the Future**

In some ways, it’s a gamble that Harvard, Yale, and their counterparts take. There is no guarantee that the habits cultivated by doffing the tray or winning a recycling competition will stick, or that if they do those habits will swell into larger lifestyle changes. One sustainability director tried a similar social psychological nudge approach to her students and found herself fired after a year and a half when the experiment failed to achieve measurable results.  

Towson State University released sustainability director Clara Fang in October 2013 for what she described as too much emphasis on student involvement and too little on institutional changes. Fang wrote on the “Towson Goes Green” blog that, “according to my supervisors, I was not fulfilling my duties as a facilities management employee due to a focus on student outreach.” Fang had prepared a Climate Action Plan to achieve climate neutrality in 2050, a greenhouse gas inventory in 2010 and 2011, and a Waste Reduction strategic plan, but evidently spent the bulk of her time on initiatives meant to attract students: recycling competitions, student sustainability events and conferences, a residential recycling initiative, an eco-reps program, a sustainability interns program, and other projects meant to draw students’ interest. These hadn’t taken root fast enough to lead to substantial measurable differences.

For that reason, the slow, psychological prodding approach has faced criticism from some sustainability advocates. Adam Corner, a psychology researcher and sustainability supporter, wrote an article on The Guardian’s blog “Sustainable Living Hub,” that declared, “Every Little Helps’ Is a Dangerous Mantra for Climate Change.” Telling people to take small steps towards saving the earth might send the wrong psychological messages, quieting their consciences with the salve of penance rather than spurring them with the weight of ecological guilt. Corner considers the popular sustainability target of plastic grocery bags, though he might as easily have looked at café trays:

> Like recycling, re-using carrier bags has become something of an iconic “sustainable behaviour”. But whatever else its benefits may be, it is not, in itself, an especially good way of cutting carbon. Like all simple and painless behavioural changes, its value hangs on whether it acts as a catalyst for other, more impactful, activities or support for political changes.

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344 Ibid


Whether reusing plastic bags becomes a habit that leads to “other, more impactful, activities” or “political changes,” depends on the person’s psychological makeup and how deeply his current habits and belief structures are rooted. If the habit stops at reusing plastic bags, and doesn’t develop into an aversion for plastic, a willingness to take public transit, votes for the Green Party, and installation of home solar panels, then the drive to reuse plastic bags becomes an inconsequential accident, rather than the source of a central worldview. “Nudging, tweaking, or cajoling people into piecemeal behavioural changes like reusing plastic bags is not a proportionate response to climate change,” Corner writes. Instead,

Engaging the public through their personal carbon footprints is really only a means to an end – and that end is a political and economic system that has sustainability as its central organising principle. And if these sound like radical statements, unbecoming of the stately, reserved sentiments associated with the Royal Society, then consider the prospect of a world that is four or even six degrees hotter and the havoc and suffering that would be inevitable. This is also a radical choice.

Moral Habituation
Cultivating dispositions and instilling moral principles by habit and practice is not foreign to education, of course. It is a very old practice, one rooted from antiquity at the very heart of education itself. Aristotle advocated a kind of personality sculpting and conduct formation in the Nicomachean Ethics: “Virtue of character results from habit….A state of character arises from the repetition of similar activities.” There are religious grounds for cultivating habits, as well. In Judaism, orthodoxy involves a great deal of orthopraxy: revering the Torah and Talmud involves, primarily, obeying them. In Christian teaching, the spiritual regeneration that so confused Nicodemus initiates not only atonement between God and man, but also the conversion of one’s soul and the conduct-shaping principles that animate it.

Between the realms of positive law and license lies the intermediate domain of habit, governed, as Lord Moulton said, by “obedience to the unenforceable.” Here no written or enforced rules apply, yet other unwritten rules guide one’s behavior. Manners, civic duties, and ethics weigh on one’s conscience. The lack of police force is key: “To my mind the real greatness of a nation, its true civilization, is measured by the extent of this land of Obedience to the Unenforceable.”

Lord Moulton, “Law and Manners”
true test is the extent to which the individuals composing the nation can be trusted to obey self-imposed law.”

Yale and its sustainability counterparts see their project as one that encourages the inclusion of certain “unenforceables” in campus norms. Elevating trayless dining to the realm of law backfired at Yale four years ago, so for now, the decision to forgo trays remains in the realm of free choice. But manipulate the social atmosphere and—voilà!—a new social norm appears, fed and supported by peer pressure as students willingly impose on themselves the strictures they once bucked.

The campus sustainability movement’s stratagem effectively abolishes some measure of student freedom: technically Yale undergraduates could undermine their administrators’ systems by carrying trays and stopping their ears during sustainability orientation lectures, but social norms effectively hedge them in. More concerning is the subterfuge eating away not at choice per se, but at conscious, rational choice.

Yale’s strategy signals an expansion of the domain of unenforced law—something Moulton saw as a sign of true civilization in the aggregate and trustworthiness in the individual. But where Moulton characterized these morals as primarily fixed standards of human decency, Yale’s sustainability plan draws on a partisan ideology: sustainability. Sustainability’s vendetta against capitalism and against social rigidity engenders its own lifestyle and habits, to be sure, but these hardly parallel the timeless traits of a virtuous, classical gentleman.

A linguistic clarification helps. “Mores” (from the Latin for manners) refers to conventions familiar and customary to a particular culture. Ethics comprises cross-cultural absolutes. The former indicates commonplaces like shaking hands and tipping your hat—or recycling your plasticware and eating vegan. The latter declares that murder, stealing, and idolatry, to name a few, are wrong. Where mores match ethics, social conventions encourage (quite helpfully) the simultaneous formation of good citizens and good men. Where they do not, men risk obedience to one at the expense of the other. “What ally should I invoke,” Antigone cries, having buried her brother in defiance of Theban King Creon, “when by piety I have earned the name of impious?”

Giving up a lunch tray isn’t an ethical duty—and as of now, it isn’t a moral duty either. Trayless dining hasn’t quite reached the realm of normal, basic assumptions; it’s still new and surprising enough that the New York Times could print a front-page article on the trend. But if Yale and its counterparts succeed, it might at some point become the norm.

Manipulation

Therein lies the fault. Yale—and its counterparts—is artificially creating social norms meant to architect student’s choices, tamper with their lifestyles, bombard them with promotional material, and nudge them towards the desired response. The movement does not initiate—with conscious ceremony or formal statements to affirm—its novices into its ranks. It conditions them, subtly, into a service kept secret from even their own sensibility.

Manipulating a pupil into “good” behavior seems hypocritical at best, nefarious at worst. But where virtue ethicists see ethics as a set of ultimate, often sacred precepts, recent social science forays into the realm of human habituation—such as those Salovey is trying out on the Yale campus—focus on reflexive, subconscious reactions to social stimuli. In this line of thinking, the primary forces that shape our habits and our characters are contingent happenstances erected by social hierarchies. These hierarchies constrain us more often than they liberate us, and because they are artificial and secular, rather than rational and sacred, nothing prevents our tampering with them. If our characters and habits result from social structures, themselves the malleable products of our own actions, then they can and perhaps even ought to be tempered and re-forged according to a more progressive template. Utility-motivated manipulation (the kind that Yale is advocating) becomes acceptable—at least to the manipulators.

So how do colleges and universities construct this atmosphere suffused with sustainability that nudges their students towards green living? Salovey cited social psychology research broadly speaking. He might have cited more specifically Nudge.

A 2008 New York Times bestseller, Nudge could serve as the playbook for the sustainability movement’s recent advances on college campuses. Nudge advises strategies to tweak our habituating structures to push us towards the best choices. In it, Richard Thaler (professor of behavioral sciences and economics at the University of Chicago) and Cass Sunstein (a Harvard law professor who then became administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs under President Obama) distinguish between “Econs” and “Humans.”

“Econs” are the fully rational, computing robots that economists assume humans to be; “Humans” are the emotional, contextual creatures we really are. We Humans act on impulse, use rules of thumb, inertly favor the status quo, and neglect to study all of our
options, and so we often choose poorly. Educating Humans to be Econs isn’t feasible, but teaching them to mimic Econs is. If not all of us can decide in a rational manner, then the rational ones among us may as well nudge the others towards Econ-certified rational behavior.

Thaler and Sunstein advocate for a “libertarian paternalism”: libertarian because of “the straightforward insistence that, in general, people should be free to do what they like” and paternalistic because “it is legitimate for choice architects to try to influence people’s behavior in order to make their lives longer, healthier, and better.” These paternalistic “nudges” leave people free to choose among a preset buffet of options within an intentionally architected environment. The social planner arranges the circumstances of people’s choices—making desserts harder to find in the cafeteria, or publishing a list of the highest polluting domestic manufacturers—in order to encourage the socially optimal choice. “To count as a mere nudge,” Thaler and Sunstein assure their readers, “the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid. Nudges are not mandates.”

“Easy and cheap to avoid”—if you’re an Econ, that is. If, as Thaler and Sunstein establish early in their book, Humans gravitate towards the default on everything from magazine subscriptions to health insurance policies, then evading nudges isn’t so simple. Nudging Human behavior cracks open the door—if not entirely unhinging it—to the danger of authoritarian abuse. And even if the social architect nudges selectively, creating only those mores that match ethics, the nudged respondents may act, but not be, virtuous. Virtue requires virtuous intentionality, not just one-off activities.

The sustainability movement’s engineering of the social environment to protect the natural one treats human choice as a programmable response to outside stimuli. There’s nothing virtuous, except in a utilitarian weighing of outcomes, about automatically reacting to external cues.

The college campus sustainability commitment represents a significant shift in higher education, away from educating students with rational and moral knowledge that prepares them for wise, conscious choices, and towards covert training operations that elicit Pavlovian responses. The mark of good character used to be one’s trustworthiness, as Moulton put it, in choosing the right behavior of one’s own accord, no nudging required. Now, apparently, it’s sufficient to play the part.

If Yale were nudging its students towards politically incorrect mores—say, encouraging female students to join the cheer squad and avoid sports, or shaming international students who eat their preferred ethnic food—there’d be an outcry: Interference with lifestyle! Intolerance! Regressive social norms! But when a

349 Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*. 
politically correct dogma is forced on unsuspecting students, no one calls foul. Perhaps any would-be discontents are too busy faking it.