

CONCLUSION

The sustainability movement continues to develop. We have presented in these chapters an account of what it looks like as of the fall of 2014 and where it appears to be going. In this brief final chapter we venture some thoughts about its longer-term trajectory and offer our counsel on how higher education should respond.

The National Association of Scholars in recent years has published studies on a range of issues in higher education, including freshman courses in U.S. history at public universities in Texas (*Recasting History*, 2013), the disappearance of Western civilization survey courses (*The Vanishing West*, 2011), an annual study of common reading programs (*Beach Books*, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014), and an in-depth study of one private liberal arts college (*What Does Bowdoin Teach?* 2013). One thing we have learned from the public reception of these studies is that many readers glance at the beginning and the ending of a report, and skip over the substantive middle. Readers are, understandably, in a hurry to know what the recommendations are. And some readers are all too willing simply to infer the content of a study from those recommendations.

We urge readers to forgo that approach. The value of this study resides in the detailed depiction of a social movement in the midst of self-creation. Our recommendations are of less consequence than our observations. But we do have some recommendations, in the form of advice to colleges and universities to uphold with greater vigor their traditional standards.

Respect Intellectual Freedom

Recommendation 1: Create neutral ground. Uphold the principle that higher education is neutral ground in important scientific debates. Colleges and universities betray something fundamental when they take sides in a dispute where there are serious differences on the key facts and pertinent theories. Some matters are indeed settled in history, science, or other fields—settled at least until an important new challenge arises.

But manmade global warming is not one of these. No college or university should have pre-empted this debate by signing the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment. Global warming caused by human agency may exist and may be important, but it is not the role of colleges and universities to declare the matter to be settled when it is plainly not. And it is all the more important that colleges and universities resist this rush to judgment when it appears that there is a majority on one side. Truth is not determined by majorities. It is determined by evidence and demonstration. The theory of man-made global warming has not achieved that standard.

Supporting the principle of neutral ground at this point requires that colleges and universities do more than say they are open for debate on these matters. They must act to ensure those debates actually occur on campus.

Recommendation 2: Cut the apocalyptic rhetoric. Presenting students with a steady diet of doomsday scenarios and insisting that the time for inquiry is over, and that it is instead the time for action, undercuts the basis for liberal education. Panicking students, demoralizing them, or imbuing them with a sense that the only morally acceptable course is blind obedience to a cause robs them of the opportunity to develop a mature understanding of the world.

Recommendation 3: Maintain civility. Some student sustainability protests have aimed at preventing opponents from speaking. The sustainability movement and its deep attraction to apocalyptic scenarios prompts a sizable fraction of students and even some faculty members to adopt a radicalized perspective. They come to believe that steps such as interfering with the free speech of others, taking over meetings, and attempting to prevail by force are legitimate tactics. No college or university can indulge these infringements against civility without sacrificing its basic claims to being a place set apart for the life of the mind and the disciplined pursuit of truth.

Recommendation 4: Stop “nudging.” Leave students the space to make their own decisions. We have documented the efforts by many colleges and universities to manipulate students into adopting views and habits that are aligned with the sustainability movement. Psychological manipulation of students to get them to conform to an ideology is unworthy of higher education, which ought to aim at freeing students to examine matters with intellectual clarity. Stop the arm-twisting to make every course a sustainability course. Part of the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment is the idea that “sustainability” should be suffused throughout the curriculum. At many colleges this mandate is followed up with a requirement that faculty members, regardless of discipline, report yearly on their efforts to advance sustainability in their classes. The infringement on academic freedom is patent, but this approach also does a serious disservice to students who are robbed of a fair-minded approach to the subjects they choose to study.

Uphold Institutional Integrity

Recommendation 5: Withdraw from the ACUPCC. Colleges that have signed the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment should withdraw in favor of open-minded debate on the subject. The Climate Commitment is a dogmatic statement that compromises the institutions that sign it. At its worst, it becomes an invitation to suppress academic and intellectual freedom on campus for both students and faculty members. It is also an on-ramp to squandering large amounts of money in an effort to reduce institutional “carbon footprints.” We have nothing



against colleges and universities investing in efforts to curb their utility bills. But the pursuit of drastic reductions in institutional carbon footprints appears to impose net costs greatly in excess to any savings on carbon-based heating and electric generation.

Recommendation 6: Open the books and pull back the sustainability hires. Bring financial transparency to the campus pursuit of sustainability. We were unable to find a single college or university in the United States that offers a forthright and reasonably comprehensive account of what it currently spends on sustainability. Many costs are hidden inside other categories and not broken out. Institutions of higher education routinely boast that their sustainability “investments” save money in the long-term. But they make these claims behind an opaque wall when it comes to accounting for actual costs. It is time to change that practice by presenting a de-mystified account of what sustainability really costs. We have documented in this study the rapid growth of administrative and staff positions in sustainability in colleges and universities. These are cost-drivers in the immediate sense but they also represent the institutionalization of advocacy. The more such positions are added the more difficult it becomes for a college or university to uphold free inquiry on disputed matters.

Recommendation 7: Uphold environmental stewardship. Campuses need to recover the distinction between real environmental stewardship and a movement that uses the term as a springboard for a broader agenda. The blurring of this line has served the interests of those who like to appropriate the good will of students and the general public towards environmental goals, such as clean air and water, with political goals far removed from environmental concerns. Sustainability advances a hard-core anti-capitalist agenda and a commitment to the goals of a myriad of identity-based grievance groups. Sustainability advocates are up front about these goals on campus, but colleges and universities typically abet them by presenting sustainability to alumni and the broader public as simply an invigorated form of environmentalism.

Recommendation 8: Credential wisely. Curtail the aggrandizement of sustainability as a subject. There should be no such thing as a sustainability department or major. Sustainability is not a discipline or even a subject area. It is an ideology.

Be Even-Handed

Recommendation 9: Equalize treatment for advocates. Treat sustainability groups on campus under the same rubric as other advocacy groups. They should not enjoy privileged immunity from ordinary rules and special access to institutional resources. They should not receive favoritism or privilege, and they should be held to the same standards of openness and inclusion as every other group.

Recommendation 10: Examine motives. Boards of trustees should examine demands for divestment from fossil fuels skeptically and with full awareness of the ideological context. Their examination ought to be informed as well by an understanding of the debates over energy policy, including the once widely credited idea of “peak oil”; the advancement of new, relatively inexpensive ways to extract oil from deep layers of shale; the renewed debate about bringing nuclear energy back as a viable option; the recent world-wide plunge in the price of oil, and the financial difficulties faced by producers of “alternative” energy. There is no reason why boards of trustees should not give earnest consideration to the arguments of those who call for divestment. But if they decide to open themselves to this debate, trustees should pay attention to the full range of responsible views. It is the responsibility of higher education to create the space and conditions for both sides to make their best arguments and advance their best evidence.

We of course hope that colleges and universities will act favorably on all ten of our recommendations. But we realize that isn't likely. The leadership of much of American higher education is in the hands of people who are fully committed to sustainability. Even among college presidents who have reserved judgment, the prevailing sense is not to risk the wrath of the sustainability advocates. So the question remains, what is the longer-term trajectory of this movement? Will it succeed in embedding itself in higher education for generations to come, as perhaps the latest iteration of the Romantic Movement that commenced in the early days of the Industrial Revolution? Or will it flame out, like Occupy Wall Street?

Our view is that the sustainability advocates are working hard to institutionalize their movement. This may seem to contradict their apocalyptic narrative. If the world is coming to an end, why set in place long-term institutional structures? Why build energy plants meant to last half a century? Pretty clearly, the apocalyptic narrative is needed to create a sense of urgency but just as clearly it is indefinitely deferrable and not taken all that literally by many of the sustainatopians.

The longer term trajectory of the movement is to settle in as part of the permanent politicization of American higher education. Sustainability is a doctrine that justifies closing off the campus to inquiry and opinion that does not suit the views of those who favor a post-capitalist, post-national future. In due time, it will settle out as an “old” idea that must be replaced by something fresher. But left to its own course, sustainability by the time it is retired as an ideology will achieve a vast deforestation of our rich intellectual and academic environment.

Worse still, the sustainability movement is cultivating a susceptibility in today's students for the allures of command economies and undemocratic forms of political control. At its heart, sustainability is opposed to freedom. It offers students an imaginary world where important decisions about how to use resources will

be made by properly credentialed experts, not by citizens making their own choices. The anti-consumerist impulse in this vision marches side-by-side with a wish for authoritarian control. Sustainability advocates are never too clear on exactly what regime they would like to install to bring about sustainatopia, but they are united in the belief that leaving people free to govern themselves can only create a tragedy of the commons. Sustainability means, "Do not trust your neighbor. He will despoil the Earth. Trust us. We will save it."

Striking the balance between trust and distrust is always the deep problem in politics. Higher education is one of the best places for people to wrestle with it. Whom should we trust more: Our neighbors who may make some short-sighted decisions? Or visionaries to whom it has been revealed how exactly we should live to ensure the future of the planet? The debate belongs in the classroom. The folly we face is not that the sustainatopians are arguing their views, but that they have increasingly monopolized the space. They come not to debate, but to rule. By that standard we can gauge what they will bring should they attain even greater power beyond the campus.