

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is fast becoming the dominant ideology at colleges and universities in the United States, Britain, and many other parts of the Western world. It is an ideology that harms both the spirit and the substance of liberal education.

To the unwary, “sustainability” is the newer name for environmentalism. But the goals of the sustainability movement are different. They go far beyond ensuring clean air and water and protecting vulnerable plants and animals. As an ideology, sustainability takes aim at economic and political liberty. Sustainability pictures economic liberty as a combination of strip mining, industrial waste, and rampant pollution. It pictures political liberty as people voting to enjoy the present, heedless of what it will cost future generations. Sustainability’s alternative to economic liberty is a regime of far-reaching regulation that controls virtually every aspect of energy, industry, personal consumption, waste, food, and transportation. Sustainability’s alternative to political liberty is control vested in agencies and panels run by experts insulated from elections or other expressions of popular will.

Sustainability’s hostility to economic and political liberty is in no sense a secret. Advocates of the movement declare their views at every opportunity. But that part of their message tends not to register with the larger public as much as do the movement’s claims about carbon dioxide, global warming, and environmental stewardship. Likewise, the campus sustainability movement (CSM) has not yet come into clear focus for parents, alumni, and the public at large. The purpose of this report is to change that.

If the sustainability movement as a whole has largely escaped critical scrutiny, the campus-based component of the movement has been especially immune to fact-checking and skeptical examination. Since 2006, the year in which the campus sustainability movement became formally organized under the rubric, “The American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment,” there have been no major critical studies of it.

There has, however, been an avalanche of 50,000 books and 200,000 articles expanding on the premises of the movement and advocating for its various goals.² Over 100 formal organizations have been created or re-purposed to advance the movement. There are upwards of 50 professional bodies to serve the intellectual and career interests of sustainability experts. There are 1,438 sustainability-focused academic programs at 475 campuses in 65 states and provinces to credential those experts.³ Hundreds

² World Catalog lists 50,607 books and 229,772 articles on the topic, as of December 1, 2014.

³ According to the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, as of February 25, 2014. <http://www.aashe.org/resources/academic-programs/>

of millions of dollars in private philanthropy have been channeled into sustainability research. Government agencies, too, have poured billions into academic research aligned with the sustainability movement's agenda. The EPA alone has spent more than \$333 million in the last 15 years sponsoring sustainability fellowships, predominantly for college and university professors,⁴ in addition to another \$60 million in sustainability research grants. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration records show more than \$3 billion in grants for climate science research since 1998 (more than \$89 million in 2014), while the National Institutes of Health has granted in the last four years alone \$28 million for research on climate change and another \$580 million on "Climate-Related Exposures and Conditions."⁵ The National Science Foundation records show more than \$1.7 billion since 1998 in sustainability research grants.⁶ The National Endowment for the Arts invested \$2 million over the same period.⁷ The disparity in date ranges available in government grant databases makes direct comparisons difficult. But these numbers indicate an average of \$465 million in federal funding for sustainability and climate change research each year—though in recent years government funding for climate research has increased substantially.

In less than a decade, the campus sustainability movement has gone from a minor thread of campus activism to becoming the master narrative of what "liberal education" should seek to accomplish for students and for society as a whole.

In this report, we critique that master narrative.

What Is Sustainability?

The word "sustainability" evokes concerns about conservation, stewardship of the earth's resources, and public policy aimed at ensuring clean air and water for generations to come. Participants in the movement often advise balance, respect for nature's patterns, and protection of natural goods from overuse and from the harms of climate change. They seek to correct market failures by requiring markets to account for externalities such as pollution. And participants say they seek a friendlier economy in which businesses are rewarded on multiple bottom lines—social wellbeing and environmental responsibility in addition to financial rewards.

But the movement is much more than a call for environmental responsibility. It is a summons for fundamental changes in human life—changes that include the imposition of vast new social, political, and economic controls. Sustainability advocates vary among themselves in how far they think these

4 "Sustainability Fellowship," EPA, January 2, 2015. http://www.epa.gov/ncer/quickfinder/sustainability_search.html

5 Climate Grants, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, February 20, 2015.

6 Sustainability Grants, National Science Foundation, January 2, 2015. <http://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/simpleSearchResult?queryText=%22sustainability%22&ExpiredAwards=true>

7 Sustainability Grants, National Endowment for the Arts, February 20, 2015.



fundamental changes need to go, but a great many of them view “capitalism” as the primary enemy. They see as the root problem the economic and social system that brought modern industrial technology into the world and freed much of humanity from the drudgery of subsistence labor.

For people accustomed to images of clear blue skies and fresh mountain springs when they hear the word “sustainability,” the suggestion that sustainability is really a war against the comforts of modern life seems too large a stretch to be true. So let’s start with the words of one of the most prominent advocates of the movement, Naomi Klein, whose recent book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, declares that the environmental crises of today call for no less than the abolition of capitalism. Ms. Klein writes that “the urgency of the climate crisis could form the basis of a powerful mass movement” aimed at protecting “humanity from the ravages of both a savagely unjust economic system and a destabilized climate system.”⁸

Ms. Klein blames what she calls “free market fundamentalism” for “overheating the planet.” She disparages the idea that markets in general solve most of our problems of scarcity and distribution. And she sees “big business” as inimical to environmental health.

Ms. Klein may sound like an extremist—and indeed she is. In an interview with the Sierra Club, she embraces her role as a “radical” within the movement and acknowledges that her forthright anti-capitalism is outside the comfort zone of many environmentalists: “right now, I’m getting so much pushback for just talking about capitalism.”⁹ But she is not alone in espousing the view that a truly sustainable society is one that has rid itself of capitalism and, in the process, eliminated the use of fossil fuels. She is one of many in the leadership of this movement who uphold such views. And anyone who seeks to understand the sustainability movement must be prepared to take this first big step: The sustainability movement presents itself as benign concern for the natural environment, but its deeper aim is radical economic transformation.

The more moderate voices in the movement sometimes speak about curbing the excesses of free markets, but its dominant voices view free markets themselves as the cause of environmental disaster. Some even view the existence of private property as the fundamental problem. Let people decide for themselves what to do with the things they own, and people will do foolish things. On campus, for example, they might consume a bottle of water and contribute to our burgeoning landfills. Therefore, on many college campuses, sustainability advocates have succeeded in banning bottled water.

8 Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, Simon & Schuster, 2014, pg. 8.

9 Steve Hawk, “Capitalism vs. the Planet: Naomi Klein Dares to Discuss the C-word,” *Sierra*, January-February 2015. <http://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/2015-1-january-february/feature/capitalism-vs-planet>

There is a big gap between grand propositions such as “abolish capitalism” and petty actions such as banning bottled water. One of the components of the sustainability movement that we will aim to bring into focus is how it spans global ambitions and micro-administration. Its attempt to do both, however, is an important clue to its character. The environmentalist movement of years gone by focused on getting people to take better care of the natural world. The sustainability movement, by contrast, focuses on convincing people to submit to a regime of nearly total social control.

Even if sustainability has no realistic prospect of attaining the types of totalizing social control its advocates deem desirable, the movement in the meantime fosters a spirit of illiberalism. It does not welcome robust debate on the problems it enunciates. And it has a shameful record of attacking and punishing those it marks out as enemies.

Sustainability thus combines an environmental theme with an economic call to arms and a recipe for harsh and often non-democratic forms of political control. To understand the sustainability movement correctly, however, we need to add one more ingredient: its embrace of identity politics under the rubric of “social sustainability.” The basic idea is that a sustainable society must not only rid itself of the penchant for exploiting nature but also of exploitation of oppressed groups of people.

To this end, sustainability reaches into cultural and social institutions, and it demands strict regulation to keep everything in line. Sustainability thus calls for the overthrow of patriarchal systems, misogynist bias, racist prejudice, and traditional marriage norms. It ties social and economic grievances to environmental degradation: women are disproportionately harmed by wars over resource shortages; minorities are more likely to live near landfills and polluting factories; previously colonized and oppressed nations are more likely to be flooded and scorched by global warming; the poor are least responsible for causing climate change but also least able to protect themselves from its effects; traditional marriage (without abortion and strict birth control) overpopulates the globe and mires communities in poverty. Rising global warming and the threat of runaway consumption augment these dangers.

The goal of the sustainability movement is radical transformation of the relation between humanity and nature.

Sustainability, too, warns of wars and rumors of wars over oil, water, food, clean air, rare minerals, precious metals, and land. It castigates free markets for prioritizing individuals over communities—for facilitating the individualism that characterizes free market economics. And sustainability demands strict regulations on corporate behavior and individual

consumption; education initiatives to train students to conform to sustainable guidelines; government mandates on recycling and carbon caps; and global treaties that consider individuals as citizens primarily of a global, rather than national, commonwealth.

There is in these demands something that borders on totalitarianism. The sustainability movement, of course, doesn't see itself as totalitarian, and it would surely be a mistake to say that it leans towards totalitarian forms of control such as existed in Stalin's Soviet Union or Mao's China, or, in the realm of fiction, Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*. But that is only to say that sustainability presents a new kind of totalizing impulse. It is a desire for total social control conceived as well-intentioned, kind, and even generous. At least up to a point. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. recently called for a law to punish people who express skepticism about manmade global warming. He singled out the "Koch brothers" as "contemptible human beings"; called their actions "treasonous"; and declared "they should be in jail." The CEOs of coal companies, he added, "should be in jail for all of eternity."¹⁰

Intemperate language by an irascible public figure, of course, doesn't necessarily reflect the temper of a large movement which includes many more thoughtful advocates. But to become better acquainted with the sustainability movement is to become familiar with a great deal of such intemperance. Many sustainability advocates, as we will see, do not have much patience for those who

THE NEW WHAT?

"Sustainability" is new. But the new what? The new "venture capital buzzword," says one observer. The "new green," says another. The new American Dream. The new Industrial Revolution. The new space race. The new frontier. In the realm of economics, sustainability is by turns the new currency, the new equity, the new profitability, the new economic bottom line, the new imperative in business, the new path to doing business, the new mantra for success, the new leadership framework, the new "lean," the new quality standard, the new driver of growth and profit. It is the new normal, the new black, the new "reality," the "new vanilla ice cream in the world of work," the new safety. And for the awestruck, it is the new "grand narrative replacing modernism," the new elegance, the new lens, and the new "politics of co-existence in the eco-sphere on which we all depend." We suggest that for many, sustainability is the new fundamentalism, the governing ideology that orders everyday life and gives meaning to public choices.

¹⁰ Marc Morano, "Update: Video: Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Wants To Jail His Political Opponents – Accuses Koch Brothers of 'Treason' – 'They ought to be serving time for it,'" *Climate Depot*, September 21, 2014. <http://www.climatedepot.com/2014/09/21/robert-f-kennedy-jr-wants-to-jail-his-political-opponents-accuses-koch-brothers-of-treason-they-ought-to-be-serving-time-for-it/>

decline to submit to the supposedly superior wisdom of the movement.

So what is sustainability? It is an ideology that attempts to unite environmental activism, anti-capitalism, and a progressive vision of social justice. The three are not equal partners. For some advocates, such as Naomi Klein, the anti-capitalist theme comes first. Environmentalist concerns, for Klein, simply provide a fortunate opportunity to do what she wants to do anyway: get rid of capitalism. For others, such as Bill McKibben, the Middlebury College professor who is at the center of the campus fossil fuel divestment movement, the environment comes first, and economy and society will simply have to adjust to the needs of nature. For still others, such as Mitchell Thomashow, former president of Unity College, social justice is the preeminent aim of sustainability initiatives.

The goal of the sustainability movement is radical transformation of the relation between humanity and nature. To this end, it seeks extreme forms of conservation of natural resources; the virtual elimination of extraction of energy from fossil fuels; a drastic retreat from the forms of mass consumption that are characteristic of the modern world ever since the Industrial Revolution; fundamental redistribution of the world's wealth from richer to poorer countries; the end to industrial development in the underdeveloped parts of the world; and a return wherever possible to subsistence and near-subsistence standards of living. The sustainability movement generally views these goals as impossible to achieve via the forms of governance that prevail among modern nation states. To accomplish their ends, sustainability advocates favor the short-term tactics of international treaties, binding multi-national agreements, and rule-setting by world bodies. In the longer term, they see the need for a form of enlightened despotism in which sustainability-minded rulers would create, impose, and enforce a new set of universal norms.

None of this is to say that the sustainability movement is likely to achieve any of its goals. It is worth taking seriously, however, because as an ideology it is exacting and will continue to exact enormous costs by diverting resources from better ends, co-opting higher education, and instilling in students a profound distaste for political and economic freedom.

Sustainatopians

In explaining what the sustainability movement is and what it hopes to achieve we have, in effect, described a utopian movement. Such movements are endemic to the West, although the name "Utopia" as shorthand for an effort to imagine a human community that has achieved peaceful and benevolent perfection arrived only in 1516, with the publication of Thomas More's book about an imaginary island republic. The utopia of today's sustainability advocates—*sustainatopia*—is also an island of sorts, in the manner suggested by photographs of the Earth from outer space. *This Island Earth*, the title of a 1950s science fiction movie that like many of its kind imagined our world imperiled by an existential threat, captures the balance between the sense of fragility and aspiration.



Sustainatopians on one hand are always reminding us that the dangers are immense, but they are also evoking a future in which all human conflicts and travails will simply evaporate. How will it happen? The answers are as numerous as the participants in the movement. But it will help to give a few examples.

David Shearman is an Australian-based leading advocate of sustainability and an emeritus professor of medicine at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. Writing in the book *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy* with his colleague Joseph Wayne Smith, Shearman comments, *Ecological services have little chance of surviving without tight control by law of human activity affecting the environment. This option would be thought of as totalitarian by today's free societies, but this may be the only solution for us.*¹¹

Self-government inevitably falls short, he claims, as men refuse to recognize and prioritize the common good. In fact, democracy proves the worst of all possible forms of government:

*The institution of liberal democracy fails to adequately address the challenges of the environmental crisis, and by giving an even greater license to greed and individual self-satisfaction, it is potentially a more environmentally destructive social system than most other systems under which humans have lived.*¹²

Plato and Aristotle, along with America's founding fathers, might share Shearman's distaste for a pure democratic regime. Plato preferred a natural, virtuous aristocracy while Aristotle praised a polity for its stability; the American founders aimed at a representative republic meant to "refine and enlarge the public view," as James Madison expressed it in "Federalist No. 10." But the proper regime for a "sustainable" society, Shearman and Smith argue, is a totalitarian dictatorship. A sustainable government is autocratic and clamps down on that dangerous phenomenon, human freedom, and the opportunity for self-government. The model, Shearman suggests in a blog post, is China:

*The People's Republic of China may hold the key to innovative measures that can both arrest the expected surge in emissions from developing countries and provide developed nations with the means to alternative energy. China curbs individual freedom in favour of communal need. The State will implement those measures seen to be in the common good. ... Crises call for fast and sure action and an educated Chinese leadership could deliver.*¹³

Shearman, to be sure, is a fringe figure. We do not know of other sustainability advocates, at least

11 David Shearman and Joseph Wayne Smith, *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy*, Westport, Connecticut: Pentagon Press, 2008, pg. 71.

12 *Ibid.* pg. 55.

13 David Shearman, "Climate Change and the Failure of the Democratic System," *Doctors for the Environment: Australia*, July 29, 2004. http://dea.org.au/news/article/climate_change_and_the_failure_of_the_democratic_system

those who have advanced degrees and reside in academia, who go so far towards explicit advocacy of totalitarian government as the solution to climate change. But Shearman isn't necessarily that far from the mainstream.

Consider *New York Times* columnist and best-selling author Thomas L. Friedman. In a series of columns in 2009 and 2010, Friedman argued that the Communist Party in China really does offer an attractive model for addressing global warming. In one column he complained that skeptics in the U.S. had demonized the issue of climate change and had caused the Senate to "scuttle" an energy-climate bill. "While American Republicans were turning climate change into a wedge issue, the Chinese Communists were turning it into a work issue," Friedman wrote. He quoted the chairwoman of the U.S. China Collaboration on Clean Energy who proudly explained, "There is really no debate about climate change in China."¹⁴

Friedman also appeared on *Meet the Press* on May 23, 2010, saying that he "fantasized" about making America "China for a day," so that we could "authorize the right solutions" on "everything from the economy to the environment." He then backed away, saying that "I don't want to be China for a second." But, "OK, I want my democracy to work with the same authority, focus and stick-to-itiveness."¹⁵

The think tank Reason labeled Friedman's view "authoritarian envy."¹⁶ And that is probably what we should take away from both Shearman's and Friedman's expostulations. They and many other global warming alarmists are frustrated that the broader public and the duly elected legislatures in the U.S., U.K., Australia, and other nations have not embraced their cause. They imagine—with rather different degrees of self-awareness—that bypassing the structures of self-governance in favor of coercive authority would provide the "answers" they seek.

The outright totalitarian temptation is not shared by all sustainatopians. Some get there by the back roads. Many sustainability advocates, for example, see themselves as champions of the democratic power that Shearman despises. In the sustainatopia idealized by these activists, the wealthy corporations that buy political influence are regulated down to size, and the people are empowered with true democracy.

Bill McKibben, whom we have already introduced, was a journalist at the *New Yorker* who launched his environmentalist career with the bestselling *End of Nature* in 1989. Since then he has rocketed to national fame for leading demonstrations against the Keystone XL pipeline and coordinating fossil fuel

14 Thomas L. Friedman, "Aren't We Clever?" *New York Times*, September 18, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/19/opinion/19friedman.html?_r=0

15 Matt Welch, "Thomas L. Friedman Wants Us "to be China for a day," to "authorize the right solutions,"" Hit & Run Blog, *Reason*, May 24, 2010. <http://reason.com/blog/2010/05/24/thomas-l-friedman-wants-us-to>

16 *Ibid.*

divestment campaigns at hundreds of college campuses. He argues against plutocratic rule and in favor of raw “people power.” Writing in *Rolling Stone* in August 2012, he noted that,

*Left to our own devices, citizens might decide to regulate carbon and stop short of the brink; according to a recent poll, nearly two-thirds of Americans would back an international agreement that cut carbon emissions 90 percent by 2050. But we aren't left to our own devices. The Koch brothers, for instance, have a combined wealth of \$50 billion, meaning they trail only Bill Gates on the list of richest Americans. They've made most of their money in hydrocarbons, they know any system to regulate carbon would cut those profits, and they reportedly plan to lavish as much as \$200 million on this year's elections.*¹⁷

McKibben's imagining that American citizens, freed from the influence of the evil Koch brothers, “might decide” to embrace his carbon diet is, however, every bit as much a fantasy as Friedman's “China for a day” dream. There is no evidence that Americans would be willing to relinquish their standard of living built on the carbon economy for what would amount to a pre-industrial subsistence-based economy—a dream McKibben has evoked in some of his writing. Or that Americans would gamble on a renewable energy economy based on huge increases in the price of staples and as-yet-uninvented technologies. McKibben's path leads likewise to autocratic impositions, but by a more circuitous route than Shearman's or Friedman's.

McKibben, calling for democratic determination of environmental policies, has built a career rallying people to invite rule by an environmental czar. His grassroots group, 350.org, exhorts people to picket the EPA for stronger carbon dioxide regulations, sit in at the White House to protest the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline, and mass-call Congress to support regulatory enhancement in the name of environmental protection.

For McKibben, environmental degradation stems from the degeneration of democracy into plutocracy. The true voice of the people would demand environmental protection, but first the people need to be liberated from the false consciousness into which they have been lulled by consumerism and the industrial-capitalist complex. This is what most sustainability student activists on college campuses believe as well. They distrust political leaders (and their campus administrative authorities too), fear the free market for trampling individuals to benefit corporations, and cling to rallies and marches as demonstrations of popular power. But what the people want, McKibben and his allies say, is a new policy shift in government, away from capitalism and towards strict regulations.

¹⁷ Bill McKibben, “Global Warming's Terrifying New Math,” *Rolling Stone*, July 19, 2012. <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-20120719>

"Government regulation," of course, covers a wide spectrum, from laws enacted through due legislative process to impositions from agencies acting outside their legitimate mandates. The sustainatopian message is consistently on the side of maximizing the reach of regulatory agencies that deal with environmental issues.

Consider Bill McKibben, writing in *Rolling Stone*: "To make a real difference—to keep us under a temperature increase of two degrees—you'd need to change carbon pricing in Washington, and then use that victory to leverage similar shifts around the world."¹⁸

Naomi Klein, whom we also introduced above, writes:

*What we know is that the environmental movement had a series of dazzling victories in the late '60s and in the '70s where the whole legal framework for responding to pollution and to protecting wildlife came into law. It was just victory after victory after victory. And these were what came to be called 'command-and-control' pieces of legislation. It was 'don't do that.' That substance is banned or tightly regulated. It was a top-down regulatory approach. And then it came to a screeching halt when Reagan was elected.*¹⁹

Al Gore, commenting on the importance of the IPCC, declared that

*Solving this crisis will require cooperation, and bold action from all sectors—businesses must adopt a more sustainable form of capitalism, governments must regulate emissions and adopt a price on carbon in markets, and people must use their voting power to put a price on climate denial in politics in order to ensure that their nations—and global civilization—move toward a sustainable future.*²⁰

Secretary of State John Kerry, in a speech in Indonesia, remarked that

Thanks to President Obama's Climate Action Plan, the United States is well on our way to meeting the international commitments to seriously cut our greenhouse gas emissions by 2020, and that's because we're going straight to the largest sources of pollution. We're targeting emissions from transportation—cars, trucks, rail, et cetera—and from power sources, which account together for more than 60 percent of the dangerous greenhouse gases that we release. The President has put in place standards to double the fuel-efficiency of cars on American roads. And we've also proposed curbing carbon pollution from new power plants, and similar regulations are in the works to limit the carbon pollution coming from

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Jason Mark, "Naomi Klein: Big Green Is in Denial," *Salon*, September 5, 2013. http://www.salon.com/2013/09/05/naomi_klein_big_green_groups_are_crippling_the_environmental_movement_partner/

²⁰ Al Gore, "Statement on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Working Group III Report," *Al Gore*, April 13, 2014. <http://blog.algore.com/2014/04/>

*power plants that are already up and already running.*²¹

Why College?

This report examines the sustainability movement on campus. Clearly the movement itself is much broader. It serves as the basis of political careers; it has provided the plots of so many movies that a new genre has emerged called “cli-fi” that trades in imaginary global climate catastrophes. It is built into the marketing of tens of thousands of consumer products, from automobiles to facial tissues. And it is the conceptual backbone of whole new industries that aim to produce green energy. Why then focus on the college campus?

Because colleges and universities have become the linchpins in this movement. That’s where the activists focus their efforts to recruit new adherents; that’s where the movement develops its new tactics and ideas; that’s where federal research money for sustainability is concentrated; and that’s where the movement looks for its intellectual and cultural authority.

We are not alone in thinking this. In its early years, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the sustainability movement was mainly an affair of international development experts and government bureaucrats. Its popular support was meager and it had no significant presence on the American college campus. In 1992, Teresa Heinz and John Kerry, after attending the UN Rio Earth Summit, brainstormed together and decided that the best way to bring the movement to life in the United States would be to build its campus presence. To that end they founded Second Nature, an organization specifically devoted to making sustainability a campus issue. We will tell this story in detail later. But, to a large extent, the sustainability movement we have in the United States today is a product of this campus activism far more than it is the result of international summits, political campaigns, government regulation, or green investments. All of those play significant roles, of course, but the cultural basis of the sustainability movement in the United States is higher education.

Those activists may dream of a time when they will be able to impose their will on all of society. But in the shorter term, they focus their efforts on dominating higher education, both intellectually by precluding the expression of dissent, and socially by enforcing their own standards of behavior.

When top-down regulation falls short, education and training programs encourage people voluntarily to police themselves and their neighbors. Adam Corner, writing for the *Guardian* in the UK, comments that

Over the past two decades, a huge amount of time and effort has been expended trying to

²¹ John Kerry, “Remarks on Climate Change,” Jakarta, Indonesia, February 16, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/02/221704.htm>

understand how to nudge, persuade, cajole or regulate people into more sustainable patterns of behaviour. But in our eagerness to understand the drivers of behaviour, and our enthusiasm for measureable behavioural outcomes, we may have overlooked a critical point: that sustained and substantive behavioural transformations come not from gradually 'reprogramming' our behaviour but from internalising the reasons for doing so.²²

On campus, students sign sustainability pledges, learn about sustainability during orientation, absorb sustainability in their courses, take mandatory sustainability training in residence life programs, are barraged by paid student peers ("eco-reps") who ask them to alter their behavior, and come to see sustainability—strict environmentalism, social experimentation, and a managed, anti-free-market economic approach—as the norm for responsible, virtuous human life and political citizenship. In the wake of dwindling core curricula and declining emphasis on religious and transcendent educational purposes, sustainability is the new metanarrative. It shapes the curriculum, molds student life, and trains students to accept—even welcome and agitate for—the introduction of greater social control.

In all these ways, the college campus has become the center of this sustainability authoritarianism.

On campus, sustainability poses five particular problems. First, it displaces open inquiry into important subjects with a blatant appeal to authority, usually in the form of declaring that there is a "consensus" among scientists that forecloses the need for further examination of what is precisely in question. Second, it orients faculty research and teaching into a prescribed orthodoxy. Not only are certain questions shut out, but certain answers are locked in. It turns higher education into a form of indoctrination. Third, it subjects students to a regime of constant manipulation, or "nudging," to keep them psychologically attuned to the special demands of the ideology. Fourth, it undermines the ideals of liberal arts education, which require mindful attention to many matters that sustainability now deems irrelevant. For example, many colleges are embracing something called "the environmental humanities," which pushes aside the traditional humanities curriculum. And fifth, it diverts students into pointless battles at the expense of learning how to participate meaningfully in American civic life.

Hurdles

Critiquing the campus sustainability movement requires that we overcome several hurdles.

1. Who are we to question a movement that has such broad and deep support?

The National Association of Scholars is a membership organization founded in 1987 to "advance

²² Adam Corner, "Morality Is Missing from the Debate About Sustainable Behaviour," *Guardian*, July 19, 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/social-justice-behaviour-climate-change>

reasoned scholarship in a free society.” We uphold standards of excellence in teaching and research, and more broadly, we advocate for the intellectual freedom without which such standards would be a dead letter. This has brought us into confrontation with those who favor using the university as a tool of political activism. Long before the sustainability movement appeared on the scene, the NAS was fighting the rise of illiberal ideologies that were bent on shutting down important debates in favor of giving students their one-sided views of history, philosophy, literature, law, and science.

Our critique of sustainability continues this long effort to call American higher education back to its higher and better principles. Rigorous academic standards require the pursuit of truth. To this end we support vigorous debate on important issues, where all the best arguments and all the pertinent evidence is put forward and every voice that abides by the rules of argument and evidence is welcome.

We first noticed the CSM, the campus sustainability movement, in 2008, and began to document it in a series of articles posted to the NAS website, and in other publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In 2010, we published a special issue of our journal *Academic Questions* devoted to the sustainability movement. All told, before the publication of this report, NAS published some 200 articles on the CSM, which established NAS as the leading critic of the movement.

Our standing as a critic of the CSM has one other important component. NAS has a long history of approaching issues in higher education by way of in-depth studies. Our approach is to gather and analyze a large amount of detailed information. Our best known studies include *The Dissolution of General Education: 1914-1993*; *Losing the Big Picture: The Fragmentation of the English Major Since 1964*; *The Vanishing West: 1964-2010*; *Recasting History: A Study of U.S. History Courses at the University of Texas and Texas A&M University*; *Beach Books: What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?* and most importantly, *What Does Bowdoin Teach? How a Contemporary Liberal Arts College Shapes Students*.

These reports go to great lengths to describe aspects of higher education that others take mostly for granted. The reward for our efforts is that we find important things that others have not noticed. In presenting this study of the campus sustainability movement, we likewise aim to take up a subject that might, at the outset, appear to be thoroughly familiar and ordinary. But by looking at it with care, we intend to bring it to life in a new way.

2. CSM is rooted in the claim that man-made global warming is an established scientific fact, no longer open to serious doubt. Does the critique of the campus sustainability movement require a robust rejection of the “global warming consensus?”



The National Association of Scholars takes no position on the existence of global warming, its magnitude, its causes, or possible remedies. These are, properly, matters of scientific inquiry. NAS's membership includes many scientists who have relevant expertise, but we are not organized as a body to pursue research on scientific questions and we claim no special authority on the answers.

This will pose a difficulty for some readers. The CSM takes massive man-made global warming as scientifically established and beyond the need of further inquiry. We reject that kind of certainty on principle. Science does not advance by declaring certain hypotheses to be beyond question. Clearly some theories are so robust that they are unlikely to be called into serious doubt anytime soon, but that does not apply to "climate science," which is a field of inquiry heavily dependent on computer models, speculative formulations, and reconstructed data. Moreover, thousands of scientists have skepticism about the so-called "scientific consensus" on global warming. As the atmospheric and space physicist S. Fred Singer puts it, "the models cannot reproduce the observations."²³

In this light, we side with those who argue that there is no real scientific consensus and that large and important areas remain open for further inquiry. It could be that the results of that inquiry will vindicate the "consensus" version of global warming hypotheses. Or it could be that the results of the inquiry will discredit the "consensus" version of climate change.

Regardless of how that turns out, we see a need for a careful critique of the campus sustainability movement. That's for three reasons. First, CSM is built on unwarranted certainty about how the earth's atmosphere and oceans will respond to relatively minor increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide. Second, CSM misappropriates climate science as a source of authority for changes in public policy that have scant connection to climate. Third, CSM has become an ideology that undermines liberal education—and would undermine it *even if the global warming hypothesis turns out to be true*.

The CSM, of course, treats the kind of agnosticism we adopt as untenable. It adopts a position of "You are for us or against us." Can NAS act as the Switzerland of climate change? Our position is rooted in NAS's long history of standing for intellectual freedom on contentious issues. The best way to do that is to ensure that the best arguments from all sides are fairly represented.

The advocates of the theory of anthropogenic (man-made) global warming (AGW) have a long history of efforts to suppress the publication and expression of contrary views. By treating both sides of the debate as legitimate, we inevitably break this taboo and appear to range ourselves on the side of the skeptics.

23 S. Fred Singer, "The China Climate Accord: A Bad Deal for the US," *American Thinker*, December 8, 2014. http://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2014/12/the_china_climate_accord_a_bad_deal_for_the_us.html

Appearances notwithstanding, we remain off-shore and uncommitted on the question of the validity of AGW hypotheses. Where we place our stake in the ground is on the indispensable importance for higher education of healthy debate, which requires creating a situation where all parties have both a right and an opportunity to speak.

3. CSM employs a variety of techniques aimed at “nudging” students to adopt the views and practices the movement favors, rather than persuading students of the validity of these views. Is this a form of manipulation that deserves censure or simply an ordinary part of marketing new ideas?

We devote a chapter of this study to the phenomenon of colleges “nudging” students to align their ideas and habits with the dictates of the sustainability movement. In our view these practices are inappropriate. Our chapter on nudging is of particular value because it describes the everyday experience of students on college campuses in which the sustainability movement has achieved authoritative control.

NAS views the domination of college campuses by illiberal ideologies of any sort as harmful to the better purposes of higher education. But some ideologies, in our view, are worse than others. Sustainability has several components that we think mark it as especially detrimental to liberal education. It forecloses open inquiry on matters such as global warming. It fosters hostility to Western civilization, to free markets, and to personal freedoms. (We turn to these in due course.) With “nudging” we come to the importance of treating students as people who are being specifically educated to “think critically” and exercise independent judgment. The decision of a college to “nudge” rather than persuade sounds a note of disdain for the right of students to make up their own minds.

4. CSM supporters range from radical activists who issue apocalyptic warnings to pragmatic moderates who seek conventional reforms such as recycling. Is it fair to treat such a range of perspectives as a single movement?

The CSM spans views ranging from extremists who express a profoundly misanthropic view of humanity to moderates who simply want to take reasonable precautions and perhaps economize on energy expenses. The movement, in effect, extends from prophets of an apocalypse to apothecaries of global healing. Sometimes we see the same people in different moods, arguing apocalypse in the morning and apothecary in the afternoon.

To describe the campus sustainability movement as a whole, we need to present as fairly as possible all of the positions in this spectrum. But describing the full spectrum does not mean devoting equal space to every part of it. This report pays proportionally greater attention to the apocalyptic side, where the campus movement derives much of its force and devotes much of its time. Aggressive activism seems to require

these scare tactics that emphasize runaway global warming that will drown coastal cities and plains, set off enormously destructive storms, drastically reduce the world's food supply, and in other ways let loose a train of catastrophes. Global warming isn't the only apocalyptic scenario evoked by the CSM, only the most common one. Other apocalyptic scenarios include catastrophes ensuing from genetically modified foods, nuclear war or nuclear accidents, overuse of the world's potable water, or the immiseration of humanity brought on by the unchecked growth of capitalism. These apocalyptic narratives are the backbone of the campus sustainability movement.

Our task in this report is to describe the campus sustainability movement, not to weigh these apocalyptic scenarios each on its merits. But because the threat of manmade global warming is conspicuous as the most widely enunciated reason for the movement, we recognize the need to present a basic account of the arguments for and against it. This is presented in Chapter 3.

As for the many supporters of milder and generally non-apocalyptic versions of the CSM, our task is to describe their outlook and concerns to the extent that these are distinct from the movement as a whole. This moderate wing of the movement includes scientists whose research is funded in large part because advocacy of the manmade global warming thesis has prompted public and private support for work on "climate change"; humanists who have reconfigured their own scholarly interests and teaching priorities to match the movement; and university facilities staff who have been rebranded as "sustainability" workers with or without actual changes in their responsibilities.

Colleges and universities as institutions naturally arrange themselves on the side of the movement that favors incremental action for long-term changes, rather than abrupt, utopian schemes such as an "ending capitalism" or eliminating altogether the use of fossil fuels. College and university presidents occasionally indulge in some of the more apocalyptic rhetoric of the CSM, but in the end these are institutions that are planning for a tomorrow in which children will pursue college degrees after high school rather than revert to subsistence horticulture or hunting and gathering.

We mention the return-to-the-primitive options not as caricatures of the sustainability movement but as matters that some of its leaders in all seriousness do advocate, and that have actually gained a small following among contemporary college graduates. Recently one of us spoke to the mother of a young woman who graduated in 2013 from Wesleyan College and who, out of her devotion to the ideals of sustainability, has since been living in a tent in Hawaii attempting to survive on the produce of her garden. Such cases are no doubt exceptional but they illustrate how this CSM movement can indeed reshape the minds and ambitions of young people away from mainstream goals to entanglement in eccentric fantasy.

The university may be fundamentally an instrument of the continuity of civilization but it also has had a byway that takes a certain number of students into psychological cul-de-sacs. Marxism was the cul-de-sac for many American students in the last century. Diversity became a cul-de-sac for many students in the last quarter-century. Sustainability is the new cul-de-sac for those who are susceptible to the lure of utopian ideology.

Ideology

Our critique of the sustainability movement makes significant use of the concept of “ideology.” It is a word with a rich history, much of which is relevant to what follows. But we will leave that history in the background. By “ideology” we mean a doctrine that is self-contained. It presents itself to the believer as a body of premises that are self-evidently true and important. It anticipates arguments against those premises and has built-in reasons for the believer to reject such arguments. It also anticipates facts that will appear to be at odds with the premises and offers the believer built-in intellectual and emotional maneuvers to discredit such facts.

An ideology has both intellectual and emotional content. It asks for belief or assent, but it also demands action. It requires the believer to conform his life to the doctrine, to help recruit others to the belief, and to participate in some larger struggle to bring the world into alignment with the belief.

Finally, an ideology is always in conflict with something. It assumes the existence of people who have other beliefs, and it assumes that these other beliefs are invalid.

A well thought-out system for understanding the world is not entirely bad, of course. The main task of philosophy is to come to understand an integrated, complete picture of reality and to live well within it. Ideology, by contrast, fits the facts to doctrine and takes on some of the characteristics of a religion.

A number of observers, perhaps most significantly the French social theorist Pascal Bruckner, have written at length about the manner in which the sustainability movement has absorbed much of the dynamic of traditional Christianity, selectively picking up its themes of sin and condemnation in an increasingly secular world. Sustainability, like Christianity, offers a view of the Earth as once-pristine and pure but now fallen; it recognizes the sinfulness of humanity; it offers forms of expiation and absolution; and it puts these elements together in a master narrative of an impending catastrophe that will punish mankind for its iniquity. Sustainability, like Christianity, insists on our guilt, which is both collective and individual. Sustainability also elevates certain individuals as exceptional and able to show others the way. The prophets or saints or the elect of sustainability are those who foresee the catastrophe ahead and are warning us now. Unlike Christianity, which sees redemption ultimately actualized in the next life, sustainability’s adherents believe it is in their power to redeem themselves and other sinners here and now.



Some proponents, too, have embraced the religious label. The outgoing chair of the IPCC, Rajendra Pachauri, resigning after accusations of sexual harassment, commented in his letter of resignation that "For me the protection of Planet Earth, the survival of all species and sustainability of our ecosystems is more than a mission. It is my religion and my dharma."²⁴

Whether sustainability is a religion or is merely like a religion is too fine a point for our purposes in this report. We will stay with the thesis that sustainability is an ideology with some religious overtones. This does not mean that everyone in the CSM has embraced the ideology with the same fervor or the same degree of resistance to counter-argument and discrepant evidence. We will deal with these matters as they come up.

Catastrophe

The sustainability movement is an ideology, but it is also a form of catastrophism. We have touched on this already, but it is worth adding that real and imagined catastrophes play a very special part in Western thought.

The Bible, of course, offers the narrative of the flood survived by Noah and his family. Plato in his work *Timaeus* transmitted the story of Atlantis, an island civilization that is destroyed when it sinks in the ocean. A key debate in the development of modern geology was whether the earth was shaped by colossal events or by gradual processes. The latter, called uniformitarianism, gained the upper hand in scientific theory for the better part of two centuries, partly because it fit so well with Darwinian theory of natural selection. In the uniformitarian picture, catastrophes of course do occur: volcanoes erupt, continental ice sheets form, etc. But such events can be seen as long-cycle parts of an underlying, generally uniform order. Uniformitarianism, however, began to lose some of its standing in the 1980s when the Alvarez hypothesis—that the extinction of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago was caused by a giant meteor impact—found support in the analysis of the Chicxulub crater in the Yucatan Peninsula.

Scientific catastrophism came back into vogue. Clearly, some major changes occur outside the range of even long-term cycles. It is best not to make too much of this change in the scientific zeitgeist, but it corresponds fairly well with the rise of global warming catastrophism. We happen to live in an age when the idea of abrupt and irreversible shifts in nature are seen as well within the range of possibility. The step from imagining that global catastrophes could happen to believing that one is happening right now deserves some consideration. One of the major alternatives to the manmade global warming hypothesis, in fact, is a version of the older uniformitarian theory. It holds that the rise in global temperature recorded

24 Letter from Rajendra Kumar Pachauri to Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the United Nations, February 24, 2015. http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/ar5/150224_Patchy_letter.pdf

in the 20th century is a part of a regular long-term pattern associated with cycles of energy output by the sun.

Our contemporary receptivity to catastrophism, of course, has other sources as well. The fears of atomic warfare during the Cold War and the nightmare visions of environmental degradation that followed Rachel Carlson's 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, have primed us to imagine a world poised on the precipice of some kind of epic disaster. Catastrophism, once it becomes a habit of mind, becomes an expectation in search of something to be truly worried about.

Where Did Sustainability Come From?

Sustainability as a highly visible concept is usually dated to the release in 1987 of the United Nations' report, *Our Common Future*, which set out an idea that the nations of the world should seek a "sustainable development path." Sustainable development, according to the report, is:

*Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*²⁵

The commission that produced this report, headed by former Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, was taking exception to an earlier UN action, the *Stockholm Declaration* of 1972, which had attempted to balance strong protections for the environment with the need for economic growth. The *Stockholm Declaration* enunciated 26 principles, among them Principle 11,

*The environmental policies of all States should enhance and not adversely affect the present or future development potential of developing countries, nor should they hamper the attainment of better living conditions for all.*²⁶

The Brundtland report rejected this development-to-enhance-living-conditions principle in favor of an approach that focused on development as a tool of improving the environment. The Brundtland commission also linked efforts to improve the physical environment with efforts to improve political and social conditions around the world.

Sustainability was thus launched in 1987 as a composite program—something that combined environmental goals with economic, social, and political objectives, and laid this encompassing project out as a multi-generational program and as a worldwide project. But global warming was not a major theme of the Brundtland report. The commission did indeed mention global warming in the report—fourteen times. These mentions, however, are in the context of listing many possible threats, including ozone depletion,

²⁵ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*. United Nations, 1987.

²⁶ *Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*, United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, June 1972. <http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?documentid=97&articleid=1503>

nuclear fallout, acid rain, dryland degradation, hazardous chemicals, population movements, and species loss. Global warming is named, for example, as something that “may cause the flooding of important coastal production areas” within “40-70 years.”²⁷ The earliest date that the commission imagined for the arrival of global warming was “by the 2020s.”²⁸

Today, of course, the sustainability movement is closely identified with the anthropogenic global warming hypothesis. It is important to understand how these two ideas became intertwined—a history that is included in Chapter 3. Global warming brought on by increases of a few molecules of CO₂ per million per year from the burning of fossil fuels may happen as well, and it may be a more plausible peril than some of the others.²⁹ Even if it is, the evidence so far is inconclusive.

The evidence for a different peril, however, is much more solid—the peril of our doing severe damage to our economy, to our personal freedom, and to our form of representative government by ceding our better judgment to an ideology. In the pages that follow, we will trace how that happened and suggest some ways to put that peril in its place.

The Report

The campus sustainability movement has become part of almost everything colleges and universities now do. Our aim in this report, however, is selective. We highlight the aspects of higher education that seem seriously harmed by the movement, and we fill in needed context as we proceed. Chapter 1 deals with the ways in which college curricula have been reshaped by the movement. Chapter 2 offers an anatomy of the campus movement: how it is organized both locally and nationally, who leads it, and how it goes about its business. Chapter 3 pulls back to the broader debate about global warming. In keeping with our agnostic position, we present both sides of the debate. Chapter 4 offers an in-depth look at how the movement attempts to motivate and sometimes manipulate students into cooperating with and, ideally, actively supporting the cause. Chapter 5 is our attempt to estimate the financial costs of the movement to

27 *Our Common Future*, pg. 106.

28 *Our Common Future*, pg. 146.

29 Observations from the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii made by the Scripps Institution of Oceanography and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration show the annual rate of increase in CO₂ in the atmosphere to be at or below 2 parts per million.

Decade Total Increase Annual Rate of Increase

2004 – 2013	20.71 ppm	2.07 ppm per year
1994 – 2003	18.70 ppm	1.87 ppm per year
1984 – 1993	14.04 ppm	1.40 ppm per year
1974 – 1983	13.35 ppm	1.34 ppm per year
1964 – 1973	10.69 ppm	1.07 ppm per year
1960 – 1963	3.02 ppm	0.75 ppm per year (4 years only)

Pieter Tans, *Monthly Mean Concentrations at the Mauna Loa Observatory (PPM)*, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, March 1958 - August 2014. <http://co2now.org/images/stories/data/co2-mlo-monthly-noaa-esrl.pdf>



a sample college. This is especially important because the movement often portrays itself as eventuating in major savings for the institutions that participate. In fact, it appears to be a cost-driver, not a form of thrift. Chapter 6 takes up the effort by sustainability activists to convince their colleges to divest their holdings in fossil fuels. We conclude the report with a set of recommendations and a set of appendices that introduce the voices of others who are playing active roles on our topic: a faculty member, a student, a scientist, and a lawyer.