

Green Humility: How Awareness of Past Missteps Improves Sustainability Planning

Adrienne R Schwarte, MFA, Assistant Professor of Art, and Chair of the Environment and Forestry Advisory Committee (EFAC)

Mark J O’Gorman, PhD, Associate Professor of Political Science, and Environmental Studies Major Coordinator

Maryville College, Maryville TN, USA

ABSTRACT

Campus sustainability plans do not emerge overnight, and rarely are they crafted easily from whole cloth. Instead, schools hailed for efforts leading to a successful record of environmentalism can find itself struggling to move to the next level and implement campus-wide sustainability. What can schools learn from past struggles in order to better realize a greener future? Maryville College (MC) in east TN will unveil its first strategic sustainability document in fall 2010. Better crafted, with clearer objectives and action steps than past visioning exercises on campus, the MC Strategic Plan for Sustainability is tied to the College’s overall strategic plan, insuring greater institutional buy-in and implementation of this plan. Upon reflection, many of the better features of the plan exist because of the honest lessons learned (sometimes painfully) from past struggles to infuse sustainability on campus. Revealing past inconclusive meetings among MC sustainability advocates, disappointments over smaller-than-hoped-for green project outcomes, and frustrations with campus energy output monitoring can, now, all show to be positive stepping stones that aided the development of the current MC Strategic Plan for Sustainability. MC sustainability plan team members will review the process used to construct their document. They will discuss components of the current plan, and trace objectives and actions items to past greening efforts to show how any college sustainability effort – whether successful or not – can provide lessons that help create a better final document.

Strategic plan presentations rarely look deeply at the process behind crafting the final document to be used by an organization. Appropriate focus on the good product agreed to by all stakeholders, and a desire not to relive the complex journey leading up to the document’s creation, leads to a focus on a plan’s outcome rather than its process. Occasionally, however, centering on the long journey a school takes to craft a new strategic plan reveals lessons that may help other schools on that same path.

Greater case study research on the attempts of colleges and universities to craft campus sustainability plans would reveal best practices or richer lessons about process, and would lead to a greater number of successful outcomes. The campus sustainability revolution of the past decade, which has generated great interest in higher education,

has, sadly, led to uneven outcomes at best.¹ Schools of every type and size, with uneven resource levels, have achieved varying levels of success integrating accepted sustainability definitions into the culture, curriculum and operations of their campuses.² But with no single academic standard for sustainability to lean on (until STARS 1.0 this year!), or being unable to choose from the too many private 'green' calculators environmental interest groups threw together in an attempt to profit from the movement, schools having essentially been on their own, which has not been easy.

These external obstacles, coupled with college administrative resistance against supporting campus sustainability investments during the worst economic downturn in 50 years, were challenges for many schools hoping to head towards a desirous, but uncertain, goal of making their school sustainable. Finally, internal politics and campus personality conflicts, along with disgust over intra-campus bureaucratic ossification that inhibited change of the level and type that campus sustainability champions desired, frustrated many in higher education yearning for quicker action.

In spite of this gloomy assessment, hundreds of colleges and universities have overcome all the internal, external, micro and macro obstacles and are moving campus sustainability forward. How did they overcome such obstacles? What mix of professional acumen, campus activism, luck and timing overcame the hubris, personality clashes and ignorance that turned nascent sustainability work into full-flung and fruitful campus wide sustainability discussions?

Maryville College (MC), a small liberal arts undergraduate college in East Tennessee near the Great Smoky Mountains, plans to submit its first Maryville College Environmental Sustainability Plan by year's end. Building upon incomplete sustainability efforts at MC over the past decade plus, this year's Plan provides concrete definitions, goals and action steps for a number of key categories that must be met in order to insure sustainability gains firm footing on the MC campus.

This year's planning looks to be a success, and has a number of stakeholders buying into the Plan. That was not the case in the past. The story of MC's past sustainability journey, and how that informed the present sustainability work by the College, is

¹ "SCUP-45 Roundtable on 'Academic Planning: Baccalaureate and Masters Institutions.'" SCUP Links Blog" 13 July 2010, SCUP – Society of College and University Planning. <http://www.scup.org/blog/>.

² Carlson, Scott. "In Search of the Sustainable Campus." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 20 October 2006.

presented in hopes to provide lessons learned for future schools about to begin their journey.

Birth of a Sustainability Discussion

Maryville College's location as the closest four-year college to the Tennessee side of the Great Smoky Mountains has long infused its culture with an interest in conservation and environmental protection. By the 1990s, curricular and institutional commitments to ecological issues had led to the approval of an environmental studies major; the creation of an all-freshman January Term environmental course³; designation of the adjacent Maryville College Woods (MC Woods) as a TN Stewardship Forest; and the creation of a college-level presidential advisory committee on ecological issues, The Environment and Forestry Advisory (EFAC) committee.

EFAC's initial and primary focus was management of the MC Woods. However, the staffing of a new committee with staff, students and faculty with environmental passions immediately led to debates in philosophy between committee members and college administrators. A college proposal to work with a restaurant chain to refurbish a dilapidated building in the MC Woods became a lightning rod of that debate. Environmentalists in and out of the committee were concerned a corporate entity was gaining entry to a stewardship forest and would despoil the woods. The college countered that no alternative, cost-effective way to refurbish the building was available, and that this 6-acre rebuilding and leasing arrangement would have little overall impact on the 120-plus acre woods. The rebuilding and leasing arrangement took place, along with two expansions not revealed in initial EFAC discussions. Today the Ruby Tuesday (RT) Lodge hosts corporate and individual guests on its five building complex in the MC Woods. It has hired MC student workers, and has implemented recycling at the Lodge as part of a commitment to be a good campus sustainability neighbor. However, relations between the College and EFAC had been strained, irrevocably.

By 2003, College administrators were becoming increasingly displeased with the desire of EFAC members to use the committee to begin larger discussions of energy savings, land use and how to develop sustainability activities at Maryville College. EFAC was labeled by at least one college administrator as an "activist group," that did not understand the larger interests of the institution. In 2004 and 2005, changes in EFAC

³ The course FRS130-Perspectives on the Environment, is believed to be one of only, and the oldest, all-freshman environmental courses in US higher education.

membership led to its refocusing on the MC Woods. In Spring 2005, a *Maryville College Woods Use Plan* was developed. The plan, involving all MC Woods stakeholders including RT Lodge, became a model that helped to rehabilitate EFAC and environmental discussions on campus. Future sustainability discussions can trace some their success back to the positive process and product surrounding the MC Woods use discussions.

In 2005, construction work began on a new campus fine arts building. The Clayton Center for Arts (CCA) is a showcase of arts and entertainment activities involving college, city and regional arts programming. Sustainability discussions focused on the desire to attempt to gain Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) status for the CCA, showcasing the school's long standing commitment to alternative energies. During the 1982 World's Fair in nearby Knoxville, TN, MC created a wood chip boiler that used waste wood and repurposed wood packaging pallets to steam heat the campus in winter. World's Fair tours came to MC to view the boiler. The boiler, directly adjacent to the CCA and currently in use, provided a constant reminder that alternative energy has been part of MC's history for at least 25 years.

Campus groups requested that the College commit to LEED certification of the CCA. The college's reply was that the unique funding mechanism of the arts center, where two city governments, one state government, the national government and the college would all invest in the building, prohibited discussion of other-than-construction costs of the CCA. Even when architects for the building expressed interest in pursuing LEED certification, the College rejected the offer. Or more specifically, according to one party involved in the discussion, the "question of certification was never raised." Yet, multiple faculty, staff and students raised the question as early as the initial planning phase of construction...long before any formal architectural plans were drawn up.

College administrative decisions led to one turning point in the discussion of sustainability at MC. In Spring 2007, it was revealed that the College was about to pave a portion of a field to accommodate parking for campus varsity sports events. The original parking lot location was very close to a favorite student social spot, Lloyd Beach. Student protests and pamphlets saying "No Parking on Lloyd Beach," led to campus forums, that the campus President and the VP for Administrative Services attended, and were quoted as saying that no parking lot was to be built on Lloyd Beach. The protest died down. However, when students returned in Fall 2007, parking lot construction had begun. . The new parking lot design was double in square footage

from the original design. At least one edge of the new and larger paved lot was, to many students, located on the Lloyd Beach hill.

Student outcry was immediate and passionate. Students held forums; protested in front of Board of Director and alumni council meetings, and made clear that, from their point of view they were lied to by the administration and kept out of the land use process of a special part of campus. Technically, the parking lot did not go over the hill and down onto the slope and grassy field that forms the space that the campus community believes is Lloyd Beach. The semantic issue was lost to many students. To their credit, students quickly evolved from protest to substantive policy activism.

Student interest in sustainability increased significantly. Student environmental groups tripled in size. The campus student government association passed resolutions calling for greater environmental commitments by the College. Sustainability discussions on campus increased, and increased interest in finding energy savings on campus led to college-supported student initiatives replacing old light bulbs with CFL bulbs and to commit to leasing hybrid vehicles for the campus security fleet.

In hindsight, the well-meaning passion of the initial core of staff, students and faculty desiring greater sustainability created obstacles to campus-wide sustainability discussions. Administrative resistance to such discussions was immediate, and grew as passions solidified positions. It was only with the Lloyd Beach incident that the dynamic change. First, it activated a previously unheard from, but powerful, campus constituency – the student body. Second, it provided opportunities for new stakeholders to enter into the conversation and add new focus to the topic of sustainability at MC. Sustainability at MC began to grow up.

The “Toddler Years”

The journey towards a successful sustainability plan does lie within its original beginnings, but the reality of its success began only a few years ago. A campus with only the slightest of mighty advocates (and most of them seated outside of the vice-president positions) creates a cacophony of noise, but little action. Not because of their lack of desire, commitment or passion, (which are abundant and crucial), but because of their perception as outside the norm, which makes their suggestions and decisions seem to be outliers at best. This was the case at MC when sustainability or the concept of a sustainability plan was introduced around 2005, as part of the ‘growing up’ phase of

sustainability at MC. As the idea of 'green' had become less of an 'outlier' and more of a mainstream movement, the timing, the growth of advocates across disciplines and their appearance within the VP positions provided a unique opportunity for a sustainability plan to be slowly developed and made more successful.

Starting in 2005, the college was in a unique position to be engaged in creating a new campus building as mentioned previously. At a cost of over 50 million dollars, the 125,000 square feet of cultural art, music and theatre space, and over one million cubic feet of building envelope, this building would be, by far, the biggest ever built at the College. At this pivotal point in the College's history, in fact, the development of a brand new Civic Arts Center that would be funded in part by governments on the city and federal level, it seemed evident to many that this building could be the harbinger of sustainability in a decidedly public way. However, it was not long that even with community, faculty, staff and student input regarding the importance of a LEED certified building in the form of meetings with LEED-certified architects, student-led forums and faculty presentations about return on investment (ROI) and financial public support hinging on certification, the economic 'costs' were simply considered too high. As the building broke ground and was eventually dedicated, certification was off the table, but buzz about the College's commitment to sustainability was heightened and positive energy was directed towards how the College could, in fact, meet its Statement of Purpose regarding: "sharing genuine concern for the world."

It was from this inertia that a discussion about 'sustainability' in relationship to MC was propelled forward. In the coming years, a course focused towards sustainability for seniors would be developed and accepted as a two or three semester offering, a sustainability roundtable founded by students but attended also by faculty and staff would start and become part of the campus' regular calendar of events; a course trip to Costa Rica focused toward eco-tourism and sustainability would be offered as the first of its kind, tray-less dining would begin within the campus cafeteria, community organic gardens would begin on campus grounds and sustainability would become more prevalent a topic in a freshman level course entitled, "Perspective on the Environment." With all of these small, but monumental changes for this historically rooted southern College, it became apparent to some that all these events should be connected, but were not, in many ways, aware of each other, and clearly not a part of a master directive plan. These disconnected, yet sturdy underpinnings, propelled richer discussions (including faculty retreats and strategic planning teams) that all led to the building of a sustainability plan for the College.

In 2009, the Bridge to Distinction plan was introduced by the Strategic Planning Committee as the next strategic plan to be developed by the College and approved by the College Board of Directors as the action plan for MC. For the first time an 'official' line item was directed towards sustainability --- reduce the College's carbon footprint by 15% by 2015. The activists and advocates cheered, and then panicked at the realization that the directive queried...but, how? From what direction? From where do we commence? What data can we pull from? Do we even have data? Is it cohesive? Is it defined? How can this be measured? After the initial flurry of emotion subsided, it became clear that THIS was the time to develop a sustainability plan, which would start with the goal of reducing the College's carbon footprint by 15% by 2015.

It was apparent that the most cohesive place to develop this sustainability plan was within the framework of the EFAC, the Presidential appointed committee previously formed at MC in the 1990s. This same committee, stigmatized for over a decade because of member hubris, member unwillingness to work with the campus, and an unwillingness by campus administration to discuss sustainability issues now became the best place from which to create campus-wide discussions on sustainability. In the year that followed, the committee began with a brainstorming process, which included all areas that sustainability should exist on campus. During this process a critical shift happened within the EFAC committee, as one of the vice-presidential members left the College and another vice-president was appointed to be the ex-officio appointee to EFAC. This VP, one who just happens to own a pair of Toyota Priuses (and does own them for the symbolic gesture) had a completely different orientation towards sustainability than the past and first ex officio VP who had championed the Ruby Tuesday Lodge development and the Lloyd Beach parking lot expansion. The change in college representation jump started the committee. EFAC within a matter of three months, had created a plethora of abstract sustainable ideas which were organized into challenge areas and statements with succinct objectives and action steps.

After several revisions of the statements, including summer meetings, and a brief review of them with Maryville College's new President, operational definitions and linguistics were further refined and put into an official draft form. The very fact that the new MC President, while gently admonishing the group to clarify terms of sustainability and to consider including "old" energy forms as part of a more realistic energy mix goal, was generally approving of the sustainability draft discussion. The change in attitude was most welcome. In early Fall, the first faculty, staff and student

forum was held for feedback on the draft statement. Although the attendance was small, only about 1.6% of the entire campus, the feedback was positive and very descriptive as attendees were asked to provide constructive feedback on each of the challenge areas, including:

- Students,
- College woods & grounds,
- Energy consumption and waste reduction,
- Education and the curriculum,
- Transportation and travel,
- College advancement and external relations,
- Business practices, vendors and partners
- College buildings.

From these suggestions, the EFAC committee will revise the statements and objectives for another version of the draft, which will be then reviewed by the President and submitted to the College's Board of Directors (ideally) by the end of 2010. After Board approval the implementation of the plan will commence, and the real work will begin. But, for sustainable advocates and activists, getting their hands dirty is exactly what they have been waiting for.

Lessons learned while growing up with our sustainable adolescent:

- Activism only goes so far on a college campus, developing good relations with college-level stakeholders is essential.
- Students have a much greater voice than faculty and staff ever will.
- Creating campus wide official (EFAC) and unofficial (roundtable) venues to have sustainability discussions is crucial to develop and maintain momentum on this issue.
- Sustainability has common, and campus-specific, definitions. Both definitions must be included in any document.
- The phrase is correct, it is the economy, stupid. The spike in energy costs in 2007, the east Tennessee and Southeast US drought of 2005-2008, and the economic crises of Fall 2008 provided constant reminders of the economic costs related to energy and water use at MC. And that campus energy conservation efforts were incomplete, at best.
- Timing is critical and learning to wait for the optimum timing within your region is best; even if you know you are behind everyone else, the adage is true --- knowing the ideal pace will help you reach the finish line. But, don't stop pushing the envelope.
- Work of this type cannot be done alone. The most difficult thing for early sustainability advocates to do in an organization is to let go of the process and let other campus stakeholders

help create a 'green' outcome. However, if done correctly, an outcome created in this way has greater campus buy in, and has a greater chance of approval.

- The goal is worth the effort.

Abbreviated Timeline to Maryville College's First Sustainability Plan: Take 1

- MC focus on conservation and environmental protection, in part b/c so close to GSMNP.
- 1991 - TN Stewardship Forest Designation for Maryville College Woods (MCW), leads to creation of EFAC - primary focus on maintaining stewardship of MC Woods
- 1995 - FRS130 - All freshman environmental course during January Term of first year of MC Core Curriculum
- 1995 - Approval of Environmental Studies major at College, anchored in social sciences but interdisciplinary.
- 1998-2001 - EFAC discussions and pushback on development actions by College in MCW - Ruby Tuesday Lodge leasing and refurbishing of old Morningside Inn
- 2002 - EFAC considered by College Administration as 'activist group' not in concert with entire campus community.
- 2004-2005 - Development of Maryville College Woods Guidelines - retrenchment by new EFAC staff to refocus on core task of committee, greatly diminished focus on sustainability.
- 2006 - Proposal for course focused towards sustainability approved.
- 2007 - College vows 'not to pave Lloyd Beach' grassy lawn students have claimed as their own space on which to lounge and relax.
- Fall 2007 - Paving of space atop hill directly adjacent to Lloyd Beach activates student passions - great interest in space specifically, feeling lied to by College, and begin to ask questions about sustainability
- 2007 - Development of sustainability courses on campus - one time Senior Seminar (entitled Designing a Sustainable Future) greatly attended and offered in Fall of 2007 and Fall of 2008
- Spring 2007 - EFAC creates Campus Sustainability Suggestions Study - first attempt to define general sustainability issues on campus
- Fall 2007 - Attempt to ask for College to sign ACUPCC - denied.
- Fall 2007 - Faculty presentation calling for greater energy conservation efforts, especially in new arts center. Call for LEED certification by some students and sustainability faculty rejected
- January 2008 - A course trip to Costa Rica is lead by art and environmental studies faculty members focused on ecotourism, art and culture, the first of it's kind;
- 2008- 2009 - Downturn in economy; reconstituted EFAC commits to writing draft sustainability plan by end of 2010.
- Fall 2009 - New Bridge to Distinction Plan calls for a 15% reduction in carbon footprint of MC Campus by 2015
- Spring 2010 - EFAC begins brainstorming process to meet 15% reduction by developing a sustainability plan;
Summer 2010 - Categories are developed in forms of challenge areas and objective for sustainability plan

- Summer 2010 – New College President joins MC
- September 2010 – Forum is held including faculty, staff and students to provide feedback on current draft of sustainability plan
- Upcoming – Review of Plan by EFAC and MC President and presentation of plan to Board of Directors by December 2010
- January 2011 – New experiential course on Sustainable Art will be offered for the first time;