

## **The dangers of ‘sustainability’**

By Peter Wood, Rachele Peterson; National Association of Scholars, 29 March 2015

### **Sustainability: Higher Education’s new fundamentalism**

*The full report can be downloaded from <http://www.nas.org/images/documents/NAS-Sustainability-Digital.pdf>*

“Sustainability” is a key idea on college campuses in the United States and the rest of the Western world. To the unsuspecting, sustainability is just a new name for environmentalism. But the word really marks out a new and larger ideological territory in which curtailing economic, political, and intellectual liberty is the price that must be paid now to ensure the welfare of future generations.

This report is the first in-depth critical study of the sustainability movement in higher education. The movement, of course, extends well beyond the college campus. It affects party politics, government bureaucracy, the energy industry, Hollywood, schools, and consumers. But the college campus is where the movement gets its voice of authority, and where it moulds the views and commands the attention of young people.

### **The sustainability movement has distorted higher education**

While we take no position in the climate change debate, we focus in this study on how the sustainability movement has distorted higher education. We examine the harm it has done to college curricula and the limits it has imposed on the freedom of students to inquire and to make their own decisions. Our report also offers an anatomy of the campus sustainability movement in the United States. We explain how it came to prominence and how it is organized.

We also examine the financial costs to colleges and universities in their efforts to achieve some of the movement’s goals. Often the movement presents its program as saving these institutions money. But we have found that American colleges and universities currently spend more than \$3.4 billion per year pursuing their dreams of “sustainability” at a time when college tuitions are soaring and 7.5 percent of recent college graduates are unemployed and another 46 percent underemployed. In addition to the direct costs of the movement, we examine the growing demands by sustainability advocates that colleges and universities divest their holdings in carbon-based energy companies without regard to forgone income or growth in their endowments. What makes “sustainability” so important

that institutions facing financial distress are willing to prioritize spending on it? In this report, we examine that question.

### **The belief that the world is experiencing catastrophic warming**

Because the idea of “anthropogenic global warming”—or “climate change”—is so closely interwoven with the sustainability movement, we devote a chapter early in the report to laying out the arguments on both sides of this debate. The appeal of the sustainability movement depends to a great extent on the belief that the world is experiencing catastrophic warming as a result of human activities that are increasing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Is this belief warranted? We are neutral on this proposition, but we stand by the principle that all important ideas ought to be open to reasoned debate and careful examination of the evidence. This puts us and others at odds with many in the sustainability movement whose declared position is that the time for debate is over and that those who persist in raising basic questions are “climate deniers.” The “debate-is-over” position is itself at odds with intellectual freedom and is why the campus sustainability movement should be examined skeptically.

### **A hardening of irrational demands**

We support good stewardship of natural resources, but we see in the sustainability movement a hardening of irrational demands to suspend free inquiry in favor of unproven theories of imminent catastrophe. And we see, under the aegis of sustainability, a movement that often takes its bearings from its hostility towards material prosperity, consumerism, free markets, and even democratic self-government.

We offer ten recommendations under three categories:

#### **RESPECT INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM**

1. Create neutral ground. Colleges and universities should be neutral in important and unresolved scientific debates, such as the debate over dangerous anthropogenic global warming. Claims made on the authority of “science” must be made on the basis of transparent evidence and openness to good arguments regardless of their source.
2. Cut the apocalyptic rhetoric. Presenting students with a steady diet of doomsday scenarios undermines liberal education.

3. Maintain civility. Some student sustainability protests have aimed at preventing opponents from speaking.

4. Stop “nudging.” Leave students the space to make their own decisions about sustainability, and free faculty members from the implied pressure to imbed sustainability into the curricula of unrelated courses.

#### **UPHOLD INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY**

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.

6. Open the books and pull back the sustainability hires. Make the pursuit of sustainability by colleges financially transparent. The growth of administrative and staff positions in sustainability drives up costs and wrongly institutionalizes advocacy at the expense of education.

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 much broader agenda.

8. Credential wisely. Curtail the aggrandizement of sustainability as a subject. Sustainability is not a discipline or even a subject area. It is an ideology.

#### **BE EVEN-HANDED**

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.

10. Examine motives. College and university boards of trustees should examine demands for divestment from fossil fuels skeptically and with full awareness of the ideological context in which these demands are made.

The sustainability movement has become a major force in American life that has largely escaped serious critical scrutiny. The goal of this report is to change that by examining for the first time the movement’s ideological, economic, and practical effects on institutions of higher education.