Walking the Talk

Higher Education and the Sustainability Challenge

Integrating Knowledge and Practice for Environmental Stewardship

It is a well-known tautology that the future belongs to the young. Therefore, it is essential that environmental stewardship and the quest for sustainability be fully integrated into the higher education experience. Institutions of higher education can characterize their roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis sustainability from multiple perspectives: (1) as a responsible community member and model of environmental responsibility; (2) as an educational institution providing students with knowledge, research opportunities, and reasoning skills to face sustainability challenges; and (3) as a source of new knowledge and innovation in sustainability-related fields. The feature articles in this month’s issue address all three of these perspectives.

First, Aynsley Toews, project manager in the University of Maryland’s Office of Sustainability, describes the Smart and Sustainable Campuses Conference series, which addresses trends and opportunities for sustainability on university campuses. In its first 10 years, this annual conference has tracked the increased attention universities have placed on sustainability issues—reflected in the growth of higher...
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Next, Christie-Joy Hartman, associate professor in the Integrated Science and Technology Department and executive director of the Office of Environmental Stewardship and Sustainability at James Madison University, poses questions to three of her counterparts in university sustainability roles: Jennifer deHart (Unity College and Virginia Military Institute); Emily Schosid (Virginia Tech); and Andrea Trimble (University of Virginia). These individuals, all participants in the Virginia Sustainability in Higher Education Professional Network, provide unique and yet consonant perspectives on their institutions’ approaches to campus sustainability, including the challenges they face in trying to “walk the talk.”

These narratives help define the role universities are playing in the “sustainability space” and provide insights into higher education’s similarities and differences with industry. In addition to the environmental management aspect of campus sustainability (e.g., green building and waste minimization), the demands of campus sustainability efforts related to research, community engagement, curriculum, and the coordination among them, often mean a broad scope for a small office and voluntary collaboration across many areas of the university. This article further reminds us that the university environment is a unique place with students who are transitory and a core mission that includes education and often community engagement.

The third article provides insights into the opportunities that universities provide for experimentation, research, and innovation. Enid Cardinal, senior sustainability advisor at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), describes the intersection of campus sustainability efforts, research, and learning in her article about RIT’s “Living Lab,” an exemplar of an approach taken by a growing number of universities to combine campus operations with student experiential learning opportunities within the regular management activities of the university and its surrounding community. Such experiences range from hands-on service learning to focused and applied research projects, with aims of reducing the environmental footprint of the university and providing students sustainability-related skills.

Lastly, Shirley Vincent, director of the Center for Environmental Education Research (CEER) at the National Center for Science and the Environment, moves the discussion farther into the realm of academic programs by discussing the observations and perspectives of the CEER. Focusing on programs involved with the creation and use of environmental knowledge, CEER is helping sustainability-related programs around the country develop curricula, track student needs, and communicate with external stakeholders about opportunities and challenges of environmental education. Data collected by CEER provide an evidence-based foundation for university faculty interested in developing and refining interdisciplinary environmental and sustainability programs within their academic institutions.

We hope this issue of EM provides readers with an impetus to reach out to institutes of higher education or to work with their home institutions to expand the role of universities in the sustainability arena. Environmental professionals have multi-faceted relationships with universities, whether through their businesses, communities, or alma maters. We encourage readers to explore or expand partnerships among universities, businesses, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and the community in the increasingly daunting quest for sustainability and environmental excellence.