

# **Cornell College: Blueprint for Sustainability**

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## **Executive Summary:**

### **Introduction**

Sustainability, or “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nation’s “Our Common Future” 1987), is neither a new nor radical concept. The idea of sustainability is based on the fundamental fact that earth is a closed system with finite resources which cannot support continuously high rates of human growth and consumption. The sense of urgency surrounding sustainability grows ever greater, as global crises resulting from deforestation, aquifer depletion, species extinction, wide-spread famine, and climate change are possible. Yet, the goal of sustainability is not environmental preservation at the expense of humans. Unless humans manage the global resources in a sustainable manner, the development of human societies will not be able to continue. Thus, sustainability is critical for the continued existence and prosperity of all global systems.

The United Nations Earth Summit drafted their definition of sustainability in 1987 and it is still the one used most commonly today. The Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economics wrote the CERES principles of sustainability in 1989, an international conference of 22 university presidents and chancellors wrote the Talloires Declaration of sustainability in 1990, and the Business Council for Sustainable Development published the book *Changing Course* in 1992. Yet, nearly 20 years after these large-scale efforts from multiple sectors of the global society, sustainability is just beginning to infiltrate popular media, common vocabulary, and mainstream life. Colleges and Universities are in a unique position to integrate sustainability into the behaviors and thoughts of the people of the world. Cornell College should embrace the challenge of sustainability as another way to set itself as an extraordinary and forward-thinking leader among liberal arts colleges.

Although actions which support sustainability can be taken in any realm of human society, institutions of higher education are, for many reasons, poised as ideal venues for fully integrating sustainability into community life. To better prepare future leaders (i.e. students) to work creatively toward a more sustainable society, colleges and universities need to take the initiative and lead by example. Also, because colleges and universities are typically long-lived, they should be particularly concerned with the long-term health of themselves and their communities.

### **Sustainability at Cornell**

Cornell is not an environmentally-focused school, but neither is sustainability a purely “environmental” concept. In fact, the basic framework for making a commitment to sustainability is already present at Cornell College. While it is not stated explicitly at present, sustainability is an easy continuation of the college mission statement, as well as the 5 points of pride and strategic goals. Cornell has many other assets, too, which will be able to enhance and facilitate the initiation of a sustainability program. These include small size; present interests of faculty, staff, and students; timing; and a history of making rapid and significant wholesale changes to the institution (e.g., the establishment of OCAAT)

An environmental audit of Cornell College was conducted to evaluate the college’s current status in the context of sustainability. The results are used to erect a plan for making Cornell College

more sustainable. In addition, several opportunities for continued student-directed projects are provided.

- **Buildings and Grounds:**
  - *Strengths:* Many native plants are cultivated on campus. The several building projects planned for the near future provide opportunities to implement green building techniques.
  - *Opportunity for Improvement:* Implement green building techniques, such as those presented by the US Green Building Council.
- **Dining Service:**
  - *Strength:* Vegetarian and vegan options are available at every meal in the dining hall.
  - *Opportunities for Improvement:* Purchase local food, when possible. Compost food waste.
- **Energy:**
  - *Strengths:* President Garner signed the Presidents Climate Commitment in March of 2007, pledging to reduce the campus' net CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. A transition is underway to replace incandescent bulbs with fluorescent bulbs in all campus lights.
  - *Opportunity for Improvement:* Implement the Climate Commitment.
- **Purchasing:**
  - *Strengths:* Many college departments use paper with 30% post consumer content. The majority of college-owned computers have flat-screen monitors.
  - *Opportunity for improvement:* Create and implement an Environmentally Preferable Purchasing Policy.
- **Transportation:**
  - *Strength:* With a small, residential campus, very few students commute to class. Roads and parking lots are on the campus extremities and so do not dominate the campus.
  - *Opportunities for improvement:* Implement programs to reduce driving (incentives, car/ride sharing, public transportation, etc). Incorporate high-efficiency or alternative-fuel vehicles into the campus fleet.
- **Waste:**
  - *Strengths:* A recycling program is run through work-study during the academic year. Lawn waste is composted.
  - *Opportunity for improvement:* Enhance and extend the recycling program. Implement a waste-reduction campaign.
- **Water:**
  - *Strengths:* Most dormitories have low-flow showerheads and faucets. Irrigation is done on an as-needed basis.
  - *Opportunities for improvement:* Implement a water conservation program. Use rainwater harvesting techniques for irrigation.
- **Structure and opportunities:**
  - *Strengths:* The Environmental Studies Program offers both a major and a minor. Several student groups address sustainability-related themes.

- *Opportunities for improvement:* Write a formal sustainability mission statement and incorporate sustainability into the Strategic Plan. Hire a sustainability coordinator. Form a sustainability advisory council.

### **Making Cornell More Sustainable:**

At Cornell College, one of the biggest hurdles to sustainability initiatives is that the costs to sustainability are often perceived as outweighing the benefits. However, sustainability need not be a purely additional expense. Many sustainability initiatives, especially those which focus on waste reduction, will be able to save the college money which can subsequently be allocated to cover elements of the sustainability initiative which cost money to implement. Sustainability programs at numerous colleges and universities have documented substantial cost savings which have more than compensated for the cost of the programs. A visible and comprehensive sustainability program can also be an indirect source of revenue as it may attract potential donors and prospective students.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of successful sustainability programs is having active participation in all realms of the university with a “simultaneous top-down and bottom-up approach.” The sustainability initiative must include all offices, academic, administrative and managerial, and all levels of participants, including administration, faculty, staff and students. It must be clear to the college community that sustainability is not a concept that can be restricted to a particular issue or audience; it is applicable to absolutely every procedure, every policy, every action, and hinges upon the consistent participation of every individual.

A second critical aspect of successful programs is an organizational structure which can take a direct leadership role within the institution. The majority of successful sustainability programs at other institutions have full-time, permanent staff positions and an advisory council. To be effective, these positions must not only exist, but must have high degrees of institutional authority. Ideally the coordinator will report directly to the president and will chair the committee which is made up of faculty, staff and students. Creating a full time staff position and a committee should be top priorities at Cornell.

The words “sustainability,” “environmental” and “green” are controversial, but the actual components of them, such as maximizing resource efficiency, conservation of resources, and acting with consideration for the future, are not. Consequently, a successful sustainability initiative must focus on the meaning of sustainability rather than basing the effort on the word itself. Environmentally-themed colleges could frame a sustainability movement solely on environmental grounds. A college such as Cornell, however, which has a wider range of students, should tailor its sustainability campaign to reach that mainstream audience.

The term sustainability is one which can be defined and utilized in a productive manner. However, Cornell’s movement should be centered not on the word sustainability, but on the concept of sustainability. Doing so would create a movement which is radically different from that of most other institutions. Sustainability tends to be used as a unifying theme; and it is. But the unifying aspects of the concept can too often be counteracted by the divisiveness of the word itself.

In planning a sustainability movement, lessons can be learned from green marketing campaigns. Perhaps the most pertinent lesson for Cornell College is to avoid relying on educational campaigns. The campus setting facilitates the dissemination of information and education should certainly be a component of a sustainability campaign, but it should not be the only method used to generate change and spread ideas.

In any setting, changing behavior is not an easy task, and the negative perception of many people to sustainability may make it even more difficult. However, if the behaviors are not seen as “environmental” and are framed with the barriers removed so that the desired behavior is also the “laziest” behavior, widespread behavioral change can occur even without equally-widespread philosophical change. At Cornell, a sustainability campaign can begin during New Student Orientation, to instill sustainable behaviors, and use positive incentives whenever possible.

The Sustainable Universities Initiative of South Carolina says “*we will have succeeded if we eventually don’t need a program to teach sustainability. It will be so ingrained in our behaviors, curriculum, and operations that we don’t have to think about how to be sustainable—we will simply do what is right as a matter of course.*” This is the ultimate goal of all sustainability campaigns.

Cornell has a history of rapid institutional change; if OCAAT can transform an overlooked Midwest institution into a “college that changes lives,” just think of the possibilities with an equally unique Cornell-style sustainability campaign. Cornell is in the position where it can decide to be bold and adopt the concept of sustainability as the central tenet of a campaign to unify the campus, save money and resources, and truly create community of caretakers who are committed to sustaining Cornell and the world not only for the present and for the next five years, but for many generations to come.