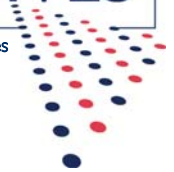


2007/2008 SERIES: ENABLING CAMPUS GROWTH AND OPTIMIZATION

# Achieving Campus Sustainability in the Curriculum and Culture

**PRESIDENTIAL  
PERSPECTIVES**

a higher education presidential essay series





PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

# ACHIEVING CAMPUS SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CURRICULUM AND CULTURE

JOHN F. BRENNAN, PRESIDENT OF GREEN MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

**T**his is a story about teaching an old college new tricks in a highly competitive higher education marketplace. It's about the challenge of helping to create leaders who will respond to the most pressing issues of our times. It's about creating a coherent vision among trustees, administration, faculty, staff, students, and alumni that can lead the college to success.

Green Mountain College was founded in 1834 in Poultney, Vermont, by the United Methodist Church. At 174 years old, this small liberal arts college in New England is one of the oldest around. Currently, 830 students from 33 states and 11 foreign countries study at Green Mountain College. We offer 19 undergraduate majors and two graduate programs, an MS in Environmental Studies, and an MBA in Sustainable Business.

Green Mountain College has increased its enrollment by 36 percent over the past five years. One of the reasons for this growth is the creation of the Environmental Liberal Arts Program in 1995. The college decided to convert the two-year general education core to a concentration on the environment and sustainability of the planet—starting with the campus.

It is difficult to imagine a more ideal setting to study the liberal arts and the environment than Green Mountain College. Situated in southern Vermont's beautiful lakes region, our 160-acre campus is flanked by the Adirondacks to the west and the Green Mountains to the east. In addition to its liberal arts offerings, the college is known for its strong preprofessional programs in business, education, recreation, and resort and hospitality management.

After 174 years, we are still in the business of educating young people with a values-based liberal arts program. However, we believe the challenges of our times demand that we emphasize stewardship of the environment and our communities, which is why we introduced the environmental concentration 12 years ago. Our goal to be a national leader in campus sustainability begins with our values-based mission. We use the term "environment" in the broadest sense to encompass natural, social, and physical communities.

*"We believe the challenges of our times demand that we emphasize stewardship of the environment and our communities."*

## The Environmental Liberal Arts Curriculum

Twelve years ago, Green Mountain College chose to adopt the environment as a unifying theme for its campus culture and a concentrating theme for academic curriculum. It was felt at the time that students could not thoroughly adopt a commitment and an abiding interest in sustaining the environment without relating it to their daily pursuit of the main body of study—the liberal arts.

Thus, the concept of Environmental Liberal Arts (ELA) was instituted—a concept for which Green Mountain College has received much acclaim over the ensuing 12 years.

The Environmental Liberal Arts Program ensures that our students learn to express themselves with clarity and precision in speech and writing, accurately identify and analyze complex physical and social problems, understand the cultural and historical contexts that shape the present environment, and develop creative and effective solutions to a range of problems.

Perhaps the greatest strength a liberal arts education provides is the desire and ability to acquire new skills and apply both new and old knowledge in innovative ways. A second strength is the development of moral courage and wisdom acquired by grappling with some of the most important issues we face today. The ELA Program works to ensure that our graduates are prepared to succeed in a future marked by rapid changes and difficult decisions. Graduates will require well-developed intellectual skills, substantial knowledge, and courage.

The administration and faculty set out to convert their traditional general education core program to environmental courses that could be matched to the central studies of the liberal arts core—writing, literature, history, mathematics, psychology, and more—combining these inside classroom activities with outdoor conservation projects and relevant service learning activities.

Every student, regardless of major, must take this 37-credit core sequence: Images of Nature, Voices of Community, Dimensions of Nature, and A Delicate Balance. Sample course titles include Native American Perspectives, Environmental Math in the Real World, The Western Imagination, Nature in Theatre & Film, Environmental Ethics, and Natural Disasters.

Combining our Environmental Liberal Arts Program with classical liberal arts disciplines and tying this educational core to the first two years of college education mandates that every Green Mountain College student has an understanding of the importance of sustaining the planet. The students should have some personal experience in pursuing conservation.

Green Mountain College has developed this unique program for 12 years, with a more accelerated pattern of both curriculum and cultural activities over the past five years. While Environmental Studies has become the largest of the 19 majors offered in our Liberal Arts Program, we have taken great care to weave this concentration into a liberal arts culture. An interdisciplinary approach, both within the core and the overall four-year degree program, has not resulted in a sacrifice of liberal arts tenets. Instead, a tremendous enhancement of students' relationships to their environment and an awakening of their performance as responsible citizens have emerged.

One of our goals at Green Mountain is to teach students how to approach complex problems from many different angles, so they can start thinking about long-term sustainable solutions that consider the many factors contributing to the problem. This approach gives students a realistic view of the problem and helps them avoid oversimplification. The courses typically have a regional focus and involve numerous field trips, research and reflective writing, overnight trips, a service project, and presentations.

Most courses are 12 to 15 credits and occupy a full semester's worth of study for students. Each faculty member on the teaching team provides the equivalent of a three-credit course.

## Project-based Interdisciplinary Education

Recent block courses include:

- The Northern Forest (Economics, Ecology, History, Sociology, and Philosophy)
- The Champlain Basin (Biology, Economics, Chemistry, and Geography)
- The Hudson River (History, Biology, Environmental Policy, and Literature)
- Vermont Wilderness (Environmental Policy, Literature, Philosophy, and Adventure Recreation)
- The Adirondacks (Chemistry, Anthropology, Geology, Forest Management, and Human Ecology)
- Food, Agriculture, and Community Development in the Northeast (Economics, Agroecology, and Anthropology)

## Service Learning in Action

A major focus on service learning is another initiative tied to the environmental curriculum. In 2007, 50 percent of Green Mountain College faculty used service learning projects; 558 students participated in service learning projects, with 6,978 hours of service completed by the students; and 64 community partners worked with the College.

Service Learning Sampler:

**2007**—Energy Economics course will work with local utility to test and gather data on a plug-in electric hybrid vehicle.

**2007**—Introduction to Women's Studies course worked with Poultney High School students on body image issues.

**2006**—Environmental Chemistry course worked with Poultney Historical Society to analyze contents of Civil War era doctor's bag with dozens of vials of medicine.

**2005**—Environmental Science course works with The Nature Conservancy to plant hundreds of trees for a Clayplain Forest Restoration project.

## Other Challenges

A major challenge in this kind of institutional transformation is to persuade many different constituencies on the worthiness of the mission—beginning with the president. While it has not been without growing pains, over time we have been successful in convincing trustees, alumni, and students that this is the right direction.

What this emphasis does not tell you is that at Green Mountain College, financial sustainability comes first. Without first achieving a culture of financial responsibility, you cannot reach the meaningful accomplishment of institutional sustainability and the curriculum development necessary to achieve the culture. I am happy to report that for six consecutive years Green Mountain College has produced a significant annual operating surplus, and in fiscal year 2007, an operating surplus of \$4.5 million was produced as a result of a capital campaign that successfully concluded.

## A Visionary and Innovative Faculty

Any college as small as ours faces an immense challenge in recruiting and retaining high quality faculty. We are continually amazed, however, at the strength our mission has in drawing excellent faculty who want to feel that their teaching has some greater good associated with it. Their course loads are too heavy, and they do not get paid nearly enough; however, their commitment is strong, and we see a remarkable amount of academic publishing for what is primarily a teaching institution. Fifty percent of our faculty has active research programs related to sustainability.

You may recognize the names of these nationally known faculty experts:

- Steven Letendre—Renewable Energy
- Philip Ackerman-Leist—Local Food and Farm programs
- William Throop—Ecological Restoration
- Jacob Park—Sustainable Business Strategy
- Laird Christensen—Environmental Literature

Our Flagship Academic Programs are:

- Environmental Studies
- Adventure Recreation
- MS in Environmental Studies
- MBA in Sustainable Business
- Three-year BS in Resort & Hospitality
- Management at Killington

These are programs that we consider of particular strength and innovation, and they are all ways that we believe we're helping define sustainability education.

Our MS in Environmental Studies uses a bioregional approach to distance learning. The program is fully online, but as part of the degree program, students must complete applied projects related to an environmental challenge in their home community. Then, through sharing the process and results with their classmates online, every student in the cohort gets exposure to environmental challenges and solutions in many different parts of the country.

We believe our MBA in Sustainable Business is one of the first fully online green MBA programs in the country.

Both programs have attracted diverse cohorts from across the country.

One such program is “Cow Power.” It is often said that there are more cows than people in Vermont. While I am not sure if that is true, it could be a very good thing for our energy needs at Green Mountain College.

Last fall, at considerable expense to the College (\$50,000 per year), we elected to receive more than half of our electricity from our local power company's Cow Power Program. This involved giving a speech to 2,000 cows in one barn. (Luckily, there were also 48 environmental journalists present.) In this great modern barn, there are milking stalls for each cow, and manure is automatically collected and removed to digesters, where it is heated for 17 days. Methane gas is then collected to run a generator, which produces electricity through a connection from the barn to a CVPS transformer, which puts it directly into the main line.

We decided to enroll in the program for a few reasons:

- It is a local, renewable energy source right here in Vermont.
- It provides extra revenue for farmers who urgently need it.
- It removes methane, a powerful greenhouse gas, from the atmosphere. The power company tells us that our contract is the equivalent of removing approximately 760 cars from the road.
- It is a big step toward our goal of carbon neutrality.

## Facilities, Grounds, and Operations

Students, faculty, and staff are highly interested in building sustainability into all aspects of campus life. New committees are sprouting like invasive species across campus—all with good intentions.

Last year, in accordance with our strategic plan, we formed a campus sustainability committee, which will serve as an umbrella organization for the many initiatives already underway and those yet to come. Needless to say, student interest in sustainability activities is intense.

Many of the College's sustainability programs began with prompting (and sometimes downright agitation) from students, including the installation of a wind turbine and solar panels, construction of a passive solar greenhouse for the campus farm, provision of more locally produced food in the dining hall, and composting of dining hall waste. The stark reality for all of us is that if we want our students to be change agents, we better expect them to start right here and try to change us!

These green initiatives are beginning to be popular now on college campuses, but they were very uncommon when we began this back in the mid-'90s. Converting a whole general education curriculum to the environmental remains unique.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

Our sustainability mission has led us to numerous awards and strategic partnerships that have proven very beneficial to students.

Green Mountain led the formation of the eco-league of small environmental liberal arts colleges. One of the biggest successes of this consortium is a student exchange program that allows students to study up to two full semesters at any of the other institutions, which range from Alaska to Maine, with no worries about credit transfers or loss of financial aid. We offer interested students seamless geo-diversity for up to one quarter of their BA curriculum.

Additionally, we have developed a very productive relationship with Killington, the largest ski resort in the East, through our three-year BS degree in Resort Management. Students live at our residence hall at the

resort, work continually in paid co-operative jobs, and have some of their courses taught by executive staff of the Killington resort.

Green Mountain College won the first 2004 EPA National Campaign Award for the Change A Light program. Our students worked very hard to get every household in our community to install one energy-saving light.

We have also just won the AASHEE Award for campus sustainability for schools with a population under 1,000 students. Only three awards were given nationally.

We are one of 15 prestigious colleges selected by the environmental newsletter *Grist*—bypassing such colleges as Yale, Stanford, and Arizona State.

Further, we are working with our power company on another energy-saving project—an electric plug-in car. Central Vermont Public Service Corp. has provided us with the second such car in the state for two years, and we will be conducting research on it in many ways over that period. We will continue to strengthen and support the programs that define our mission.

Finally, we will be putting a lot of attention into how we can best comply with the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment. We are committed to achieving carbon neutrality in a few years, having been the first college or university to sign the President's Climate Commitment.

After 12 years of exploring and developing the teaching and living of sustainability in our own curriculum, we have made a truly unique and workable change in our culture—one that allows students to both learn and live sustainably.



**John F. Brennan** assumed the presidency of Green Mountain College in September 2002, after serving 10 years as Dean of the Sawyer School of Management at Suffolk University on Beacon Hill in Boston. He has also served at Skidmore College as the F. William Harder Chair of Management, University of Limerick in Ireland as a Visiting Professor of Management, and Lally School of Management, RPI, and the University of Tennessee at Knoxville as Visiting Lecturer of Management.

*John served as a CEO in industry from the 1960s to the 1980s. He holds an AB in English from Williams College and an MBA from Harvard Business School. He has also received honorary degrees from the University of East Anglia (UK), DCL, and Quincy College.*



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