

**PRESIDENTIAL
PERSPECTIVES**



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CHAPTER EIGHT

SUSTAINABILITY
**A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE FOR
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

Sustainability

A Strategic Imperative for Colleges and Universities

Dr. Thomas J. Haas: President, Grand Valley State University

The Background—What Are the Concepts of Sustainability?

A few years ago, sustainability awareness arrived on our colleges and universities. The sustainability movement was rooted in environmental concerns about natural resource consumption, waste, and climate change. These environmental challenges continue today and are being addressed in many colleges and universities through the greening of our campuses. However, green and sustainability are not synonymous terms, and the breadth of the challenges of true sustainability need to be addressed.

Green is usually defined within the boundaries of environmental preservation and restoration, including the use of natural resources, recycled raw materials, and overall environmental management systems. Sustainability, on the other hand, is grounded in a broader context, framed by the Native American proverb that, “We do not inherit the earth from our fathers; we borrow it from our children.”

In 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission further defined sustainability as “meeting the needs of today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainability, in its broadest sense, helps us address the question of, “What are we passing on to the next generations—our college students and their children?” The lens of sustainability focuses on the “triple bottom line” of environmental stewardship, economic prosperity, and social responsibility and enables us to look at complex socioeconomic and environmental issues at the same time and with a common set of guiding principles. Through these lenses, our culture and character are much sharper.

The guiding principles of sustainability are grounded in a value system that encourages integrated, interdisciplinary approaches across our campus.

Both green and sustainability are important to our campuses, but sustainability guiding principles are broader, more inclusive, and allow us to address deeper systemic issues and concerns for our campus operations, as well as our faculty, staff, and students. Sustainability's guiding principles are interdisciplinary in nature; involve whole systems design thinking; address root causes; provide life cycle analyses; focus on waste minimization; support transparency; establish accountability; encourage entrepreneurial and innovative approaches; safeguard the environment; and ensure the respect and dignity of all people.

At Grand Valley, our mission is to “educate students to shape their lives, their professions, and their societies.” Our liberal education focus emphasizes critical thinking, creative problem solving, and cultural understanding, preparing students for life in a fast-changing world. It fosters a commitment to economic, social, and environmental sustainability and an inclusive campus that values diversity. Through this forward-thinking education, students are empowered to affect the global community now and in the future. The guiding principles of sustainability are highlighted in our strategic thinking and grounded in a value system that encourages integrated, interdisciplinary approaches across our campus; in our operations; and among faculty, staff, and students to ensure an environmentally sound, socially just, and economically viable campus life and college institution.

The Understanding—What Does Sustainability Mean?

At Grand Valley, we have been on our sustainability journey for five years. When we started this journey, we asked several questions. First, if we wanted to commit to sustainability best practices on campus, how could we ensure that these practices supported all students, faculty, and staff? Second, how could we design the work so that sustainability best practices were applied to all facets of everyday campus life, including administration, facility services, and campus dining; faculty and education; student involvement; and community engagement? Third, how could we ensure that the use of sustainability best practices would generate efficiencies, leverage university assets, create value, and show continuous improvement?

The Application—Where Can I Apply Sustainability?

Administration and Campus Operations

Colleges and universities today are faced with many compelling issues, the first and foremost being funding resources for the future. State funding to colleges and universities is low in Michigan, but the need to educate the workforce is high. Grand Valley is committed to providing the highest level of education with the most efficiency and at the lowest-possible cost. We also are committed to providing state-of-the-art learning facilities and opportunities for excellent education, both in the classroom and in the community, to our more than 24,000 students. Viewing our campus through sustainability lenses has helped us meet that mission with economic, environmental, and social strategies and programs.

In 2004, we decided that all new construction projects would be built to U.S. Green Building Council Leading Environmental and Energy Design (LEED) standards. In order to generate additional cost efficiencies, Grand Valley has committed to LEED Silver Certification Building design. Grand Valley currently has 12 LEED buildings either certified or undergoing the certification process, now totaling 19 percent of our total square footage. Constructing LEED buildings has helped us to significantly reduce our energy and water consumption, as well as improve indoor air quality, which increases the productivity of occupants. Additionally, energy efficiency projects now save us \$1 million annually.

To reduce both the land used for parking lots, save students money on parking fees, and provide sustainable transportation, in 2000 the University committed to providing free bus transportation to Grand Valley students, faculty, and staff by partnering with the city bus system. During the 2008-09 academic year, regular and hybrid buses provided sustainable transportation for more than 2 million rides and saved more than \$15 million in fuel and maintenance costs.

Our dining partnership with ARAMARK Higher Education has also established new levels of sustainability best practices. Campus Dining uses biodegradable serviceware, developed worm composting, and, this year, supported our new community garden by buying its crop of zucchini. Our Fresh Food Market buffet dining service was one of the first in the nation to go trayless, and this saves the University more than \$80,000 per year in energy consumption. Additionally, Campus Dining now purchases local food at a 25 percent annualized consumption rate, which helps rebuild our local economy.

Sustainability best practices are now being implemented in administration, as well. We have developed the 2010-15 strategic plan that incorporates sustainability as a value into our goals and objectives. We also are beginning to institutionalize sustainability guiding principles at the Board level, so the University can make better overall decisions. Grand Valley believes in transparency with our reporting. Information on sustainability can be found in our accountability report, as well as in our Campus Sustainability Report on the Grand Valley Web site (www.gvsu.edu/sustainability).

Education for Sustainability

A commitment to sustainability also is important in attracting students and providing them with the tools they will need in the new economy. The American Association Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) has been tracking the effect of campus sustainability programs and activities on college admissions. In the “2008 College Hopes and Worries Survey,” developed by the *Princeton Review*, nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated that a college’s commitment to the environment might affect their decision to attend, and nearly one quarter said that such a commitment would strongly affect their decision. The “2009 College Hopes and Worries Survey” provided similar survey results. Additionally, a 2008 UCLA survey of 240,500 first-year, full-time students at 340 four-year institutions indicated that 45 percent of students said that adopting green practices to protect the environment was essential or very important.

Many organizations now rank colleges and universities on their efforts to green their campuses as well as on sustainable development best practices. Some of these publications include the *Sustainable Endowment Institute Annual Campus Report Card*; the annual *Kaplan College Guide*; and the annual *Princeton Review. U.S. News and World Report* also publishes an annual college guide that provides rankings in many categories. As college-bound students and their families review their choices and become more aware of the importance of sustainability, these reports and publications will provide a way to screen and focus on those colleges and universities that are leaders in sustainable development best practices.

Businesses, non-profits, and government agencies also are looking for new employees who understand sustainable best practices and can apply sustainable theory to their work. Literacy in sustainability is becoming a prerequisite for college and university graduates. In the 1995 “Essex Report to President Clinton’s Council on Sustainable Development,” education leaders provided a number of essential outcomes for student understanding. Some of the outcomes include an understanding of:

- The interrelationships between consumption, population, cultural capacity, and society
 - How our natural world functions and works
 - The interdependence of faculty, staff, students, campus operations, our community, and the environment (Environmental stewardship is a key principle for all of us.)
 - How and where to apply sustainable development best practices, such as through service learning
 - Strategies to encourage social justice, social responsibility, and corporate citizenship (Serving others in our community is another key principle for all of us.)
 - The capability to create additional efficiencies and value in our campus operations and the community (This is critical for our long-term viability.)
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Grand Valley faculty members have been developing new curriculum and incorporating sustainability theory in existing courses. Students can now major in sustainability through our liberal studies major, which allows students to develop their own emphasis areas. In the fall of 2009, Grand Valley students had the opportunity to enroll in a new environmental studies minor. New sustainable certificates are under development in business, engineering, and public policy. Additionally, Grand Valley has an integrative theme in the earth and the environment as part of its general education program. Currently, 15 percent of all student credit hours are taken in sustainability-related courses and subject matters.

Student Involvement

Involving students in sustainability requires innovation and creativity, and is critical to student service learning. Currently a *Student Sustainability Guidebook* is provided to all incoming students during freshman orientation week as part of their freshman planners. Annual Campus Sustainability Week, held in October, involves students and student organizations in planning and presenting ideas for sustainable living, careers, and service projects. More than 2,000 students attend campus sustainability week activities. Our student senate also has a standing sustainability subcommittee and holds sustainability roundtable discussions on campus to increase awareness and involve students in discussions of better practices on campus. This year, GVSU students successfully planned for the National RecycleMania Competition and placed 36th out of more than 500 colleges and universities. Our students also recently developed and implemented a campus-wide sustainability pledge that is being signed by an increasing number of students. On our campus, students have taken the lead in many of our initiatives and provided the energy and passion to act on a multitude of fronts.

Community Engagement

It is most important that colleges and universities engage with their local communities and cities in implementing sustainable development best practices. Our neighborhoods and cities at a local, regional, state, and national level are all faced with the same systemic issues that are inherent in our environment, economy, and society.

In 2005, Grand Valley along with four other founding partners, including the city of Grand Rapids, founded the Community Sustainability Partnership (www.grpartners.org). Today, more than 180 community stakeholders, including businesses, cities, schools, colleges and universities, service providers, and faith-based organizations, have collectively embraced sustainability guiding principles on a best effort basis. More than 2,000 Grand Valley students have worked with our community partners through internships and sustainability service learning projects, bringing their expertise to community problems and learning on site how to apply best practices. This area of our work with the community continues to grow.

Sustainability—What Lies Ahead?

Over the past five years of our sustainability journey at Grand Valley, we have established a strategic imperative for sustainable development best practices. Our new Strategic Plan 2010-2015 will build on the progress and results of our current projects, supporting sustainable initiatives, programs, and activities and setting our course for the next five years. We have been most encouraged by our results to date. We have been recognized at a local, regional, and national level for our efforts. However, we also realize that sustainability as a strategic imperative is a continuous development process.

What lies ahead for all of us is continuing to set the example of leadership that is collaborative, inclusive, trustworthy, empowering, and accountable. We look forward to a community that values leadership stewardship, relevance, and excellence at all levels in our institution, including the Board of Trustees, administration, departments, staff, faculty, and students. As Martin Luther King once said, “The time is always right to do what is right.”



About the Author

Dr. Thomas J. Haas is Grand Valley State University's fourth president. During the past 25 years, Dr. Haas has been a tenured faculty member, department chair, dean, vice president, and president. Just prior to his appointment in 2006, Dr. Haas was president of the State University of New York Cobleskill.

Dr. Haas is a 1973 honors graduate of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and served two years on the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Acacia in Port Huron. He then earned a Master of Science in chemistry and another in environmental health sciences at the University of Michigan. Dr. Haas also holds a Master of Science in human resources management from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (Troy, NY) and a Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of Connecticut (Storrs, CT).

Dr. Haas is an internationally recognized expert in hazardous material transportation and has published more than 70 articles in a variety of journals. Dr. Haas is active in the community, serving on the board for Grand Rapids Medical Education and Research Center, Grand Rapids Economic Club, Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce, and Grand Rapids Opera. He is a consultant and evaluator for North Central Association Higher Learning Commission and a Commissioner for the American Council of Education Commission on Effective Leadership. He also is president of the Michigan Public Universities Presidents Council.

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