

# PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



A HIGHER EDUCATION  
PRESIDENTIAL THOUGHT  
LEADERSHIP SERIES

*2013-2014 Series:*

**Elevating Sustainability Through Academic Leadership**

CHAPTER

**8**

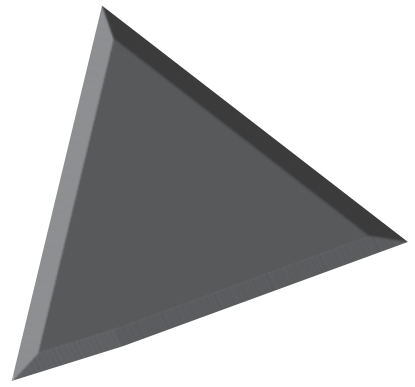
**Sustainability:**  
*Then and Now*

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## PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

# Sustainability: *Then and Now*



Dr. Theodora J. Kalikow: President of Southern Maine

In 1970 it was not called “sustainability.”

On April 22, 1970, the first Earth Day, the nice word for what we were doing was “environmentalism.” Maybe we planted some trees. We did not hug any.

Environmentalism was a somewhat late arrival, after the civil rights, anti-war, and women’s movements, but we brought tactics learned in those earlier movements to it. For a generation that read Euell Gibbons, Helen and Scott Nearing, the Foxfire books, The Whole Earth Catalog, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, and of course Rachel Carson, the motivation at that time was saving the land, air, and sea, and all Earth’s inhabitants, from pesticides and pollution.

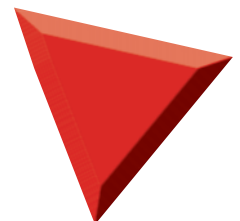
There were significant early successes—the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, The Endangered Species Act. DDT was banned. Rivers were cleaned up. People started to realize there was nowhere to throw stuff away to.

What were we youngsters thinking at the time? Probably, we were going to take care of all these social and environmental problems and then go to the beach. A nicely preserved and environmentally healthy beach.

We still have not made it to the beach, and by the way, the beach probably was washed away in the last storm.

As happens with movements, wherever you start, when you focus on a few issues and study and act on them, you learn more, and the issues and problems ramify, grow, and change. As you start collecting some actual data, you get new problems, and new awareness, and as you fix one piece of the puzzle, new pieces come into view, and if it’s a social/political problem, then there’s backlash.

“*... the most important implication of sustainability now for higher education is that it may help in the survivability of higher education itself.*”





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Nobody was worrying about global warming in 1970. Nobody had taken climate change seriously enough to have a fight over it. The greenhouse effect was not yet conceived as more than a theoretical possibility and there were few measurements. It was just being realized where data might be found and that we needed to get it.

Fast forward to 1987. By then the international political situation surrounding the roles of richer and poorer nations in addressing development and resource use, and care for the planet, led to the commissioning and publication of the UN document, "Our Common Future," commonly referred to as the Brundtland Report.

Enter "sustainability." The Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as meeting the "triple bottom line"—social, economic, and environmental—needs of present and future generations. Since that report, the concept of "sustainability" has come into wide use, helped by the fact that the concept easily morphs a little with each sector to which it is applied. For example, the triple bottom line was relatively easy to apply to higher education—we were teaching future generations, doing some cost containment, and saving the planet. And now we have a whole book devoted to answering the question, has sustainability run its course? Can sustainability be more than a cost center for higher education?

*My answer is, yes it can!*

Every part of sustainability's triple bottom line is newly important for us. The economic aspect is perhaps most obvious. Fast forward again to 2008 and the Great Recession. Sustainable practices saved campuses from even worse economic consequences than they might have otherwise experienced. As annual large tuition increases or increasing state and philanthropic support went away almost overnight, the early payback on projects like re-lamping, going to alternative energy sources, or improving insulation, actually made it possible to exist for another year or two while other longer-term cost-saving measures could be applied. Those simple and cheap behavioral interventions like composting, taking away the trash cans, recycling, turning off lights and desktops when not in use, which might have been done as demonstration projects or to provide a learning laboratory for students, now turned out to save actual money. Longer-term projects like downsizing the fleet, changing transportation/parking/travel policy, constructing or retrofitting green buildings, converting to alternative energy sources such as wind, geothermal, solar, or co-generation, have been coming on line and have contributed to the financial sustainability of individual campuses.

But sustainability has even more to offer higher education. In its environmental aspect, as our society recognizes the urgency of global warming, there is much that our institutions can do in partnership with other community members to achieve a smaller carbon footprint. Your campus is probably one of the biggest employers in your area. You can partner with the local school system, hospital, manufacturing plants, community organizations, the town government, even your own food service provider and other campus service contractors, on projects such as joint procurement for supplies or energy, composting, recycling, shared services, or even facilities. For example, our food service provider has always taken the leadership in composting. In small towns your college may be one of the biggest suppliers for a community composting works, or for recycling.

But perhaps the most important implication of sustainability now for higher education is that it may help in the survivability of higher education itself. As we save the planet, we may be saving ourselves as an enterprise.



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For institutions which serve traditional-aged students, especially those in the Northeast and Midwest, the demographic decline has hit. Decreases of 20 percent and more in the numbers of high school graduates have already happened or will soon. What new markets can there be? International? Adult? Online? But wait—it's not so simple. "Creative destruction" is upon us, no matter our geography, as our enterprise has changed from a monopoly into a commodity, subject to intense and new pressures from new forms of competition, new forms of credentialing, and the open flow of information and learning resources online. Why should anyone still invest the time, money, and life costs to go to a traditional college or university?

What will help students choose a campus-based learning experience? Where is the value for their investment? Sustainability can provide it! The interplay, consciously designed by us, between theory and practice on this capacious topic, will provide the skills, abilities, knowledge, and characteristics that make students employable, productive members of the community, and enabled to have a rewarding life aware of our human heritage and able to contribute to the next generations of it on a viable planet.

We need to state this as a set of outcomes, promote it to students as a benefit of their time with us, and encourage the campus and your community partners (local, state, national, or international) to make it come true. It is time to deploy, consciously and strategically, our most precious resource—students, and the faculty and staff who teach, advise, and mentor them—to address real problems on campus and in the community. This resource can be used to meet mutual goals—active engaged learning for the students, and problem-solving, consulting, and person-power, as well as participation in the educational process—for your partners. And it's renewable!

Sustainability brings ready-made issues and benefits. You can promote active learning through living in and helping to create a sustainable community. Students can go from taking part in campus sustainability activities to leading them, to networking with peers, to meaningful employment and committed citizenship/activism. There is learning through research, service, the arts and sciences, and social activism.

Of course you are doing active learning, service-learning, undergraduate research and the like right now, but these are often presented and thought of as extra- or co-curricular activities that we do out of a sense of community obligation, noblesse oblige, from privileged campus to needy recipients, or to give a little fashionable active learning after all the theoretical, classroom-based real stuff. Not anymore. What will cause students of any age and stage to choose you over the competition? There is no reason why higher education should survive if it goes out of fashion in favor of other ways to gain knowledge and credentials. Community partners and your own students can save you if you let them.

If you want to start, start by telling your story. This always contains excellent paths for student engagement. If you design your campus with water-saving landscape features, you need to tell about it. If you have green buildings, then give tours, numbers, and reports. If you have a windmill, let people climb it during open house and then tell them about it. (OK, don't tell your risk manager this.) Have students give the tours, take the photos, run the websites, write the reports.

If students do a recycling/trash day, egg them on to dump the trash on the green and invite the media. There can be service-learning projects to make inexpensive storm windows for citizens, and there can be all kinds of other campus-community partnerships around energy audits, local food, gardening, recycling, or hazardous waste collection. Start anywhere and let student, faculty, staff, and community interests lead your campus to even more complicated topics like global warming, sustainable design, transportation policy, lean process design, alternative energy, etc. Be prepared for change, but also for success.

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One area of student activism that is surfacing now is the movement to divest college endowments from fossil fuel-related investments. We have been here before on another topic. It is another excellent subject for student activism, and I am happy to report that so far it feels like a spiral instead of a futile circle, in terms of attention and discussion. Earlier this year, for example, our Board of Trustees finance and investment committee had a reasoned discussion with me and some students about divestment. They took it seriously—like me, the trustees remember apartheid—but their investment counselor informed all of us that the market had not yet come forth with a suitable level of investment vehicles for us who might want them. I predict that the level of student and community activism will influence the market to provide suitable investment vehicles for endowment managers.

The trick will be moving the campus along to a new focus on sustainability, via active learning and community involvement. Lurking in these words is a whole process of institutional re-focusing, curriculum redesign, and resource reallocation. Faculty, facilities, modalities of instruction, assessment, and credentialing, and student services, will all be radically different. We will be doing more with less, or less with less, but in any case, higher education practices will be very different in 20 years. And that will be the success story. Will higher education be sustainable itself? Those of you around then will know.



**Dr. Theodora J. Kalikow** Theodora J. Kalikow was named President of the University of Southern Maine in July 2012 after serving as President of the University of Maine at Farmington for 18 years. Under President Kalikow's leadership, the University of Maine at Farmington was recognized as one of the nation's top public liberal arts colleges for 15 consecutive years.

She received the Green Building Leadership award for establishing high standards of environmental responsibility for higher education in Maine. In 2012, the University of New England conferred an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree on Dr. Kalikow. Dr. Kalikow received her A.B. in Chemistry from Wellesley College, a Sc.M. in Philosophy from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Boston University.