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Getting There from Here: Changing the Ecological and Social Footprint of Our Professional Conferences

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What does it mean to lead a “sustainable” professional life? In many ways, this is more challenging than the personal transformations many of us are making to lighten our ecological footprint on the planet. As with other professions, in academia our work life is shaped by countless forces over which we have limited control, from the buildings in which we work (environmental) to the ways the institution chooses to remunerate the employees at the bottom of the pay scale (social) to the big budgetary decisions (economic). If your institution is like mine, in aggregate these forces do not yet add up to a sustainable workplace. So what can we do professionally to align a personal commitment to sustainability — a concept I’ll define below — with our professional obligations? Conference travel is one of the professional expectations many of us face (and often welcome) where a personal intervention in the system can make a difference. And the stakes for making a difference are considerable.

We live in an age of profound contradictions when it comes to the human relationship with the physical system we call Earth (or Eaarth, as the environmentalist **Bill McKibben** argues we should now call our planet because we have so radically altered its original fabric). On the one hand human beings are demanding more than ever from that system. We have an insatiable demand for natural resources extracted from its crust, soils, waters, and other organisms. One need only have watched the tragedy of the Deepwater Horizon oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico or read about the magnitude of the unfolding great extinction of other species to appreciate some of the costs of these demands. We tax this system further by asking it to accommodate the staggering amount of waste our extractive and consumptive activities produce. We don’t know where to put our garbage anymore. We still don’t have a way to “dispose” of nuclear waste, the most toxic substances humans have ever produced (though many insist that nuclear energy is the solution to our energy crisis). We have loaded the atmosphere with so much carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that we are approaching — if we have not already crossed — the threshold of irrevocable climate change. And finally, these dynamics have generated great wealth for a relative handful of the world’s population but also produced great inequality.

On the other hand, most people — especially most of us in higher education — are painfully aware of these realities of the early twenty-first century and would like to be agents of the cultural transformation (or perhaps revolution is a better word) needed to reverse the trends described above. We don’t want more oil spills, more extinctions, more plastic clogging our world, more suffering on the part of those who have not profited from the liberal economic model of the past two hundred years, many of whom live *far* more sustainable lives than we do. As the other articles in this issue of *Against the Grain* show, a movement is afoot in academia as well as in society more broadly to effect such a reversal.

Like the word *democracy*, “sustainability” has been invoked so often as a concept over the past few years that some people have trouble knowing what is meant by the word. For me, the definition promulgated by the 1987 U.N. World Commission on the Environment and Development still captures the essence of sustainability: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” I would amplify this a bit by adding that we should not compromise the ability of other species with which we share the planet to flourish. It is important here to note one other dimension of sustainability that is often confused: sustainability is NOT merely a synonym for environmentalism. Conserving natural resources for future generations is only one of the three components of sustainable culture, something I alluded to in the introduction to this essay. The other two equally important dimensions are the social and, yes, the economic.

In many ways, higher education has taken an important leadership role on the issue of sustainability, as other articles in this issue illustrate. Hundreds of college presidents have now signed the Talloires Declaration, committing their institutions to concrete actions for forging a sustainable future. Hundreds of campuses now have sustainability coordinators. Operations on countless campuses have become more sustainable, at least in terms of energy consumption and the economic bottom line — though not, unfortunately, in terms of social equity (as most underpaid staffers and adjuncts can attest). But when we attend conferences we still often go about our business

as though no one had ever heard of climate change, the exploitation of service industry workers that is epidemic at most major hotel chains, or the terrible toll exacted on people and ecosystems by the industrial agriculture that provides most conference food.

There are countless ways many of us are attempting to become more sustainable in our personal and professional lives, and yet in terms of our overall ecological footprint (a way of calculating how many planets it would take to support an individual’s lifestyle if everyone on Earth lived the way she/he did), conference travel can negate all of these efforts. We jet around the country or the world, leaving plumes of carbon dioxide emissions behind us, not to mention the greenhouse effect of the contrails that linger in the atmosphere. We often stay in sterile high-rise hotels that by their very nature make heavy demands on natural and social capital; the ubiquitous signs in the bathrooms urging us to be “sustainable” by reusing our towels are little more than greenwashing. Darting in and out of our consciousness are dozens of low-wage workers, often people of color, who are instrumental not only in the smooth functioning of the conference but in facilitating our consumption of natural resources. Ask one of these folks about their view of our conferences sometime; it is revealing.

Fortunately, all of us and our various professional societies and organizations can take some concrete steps to addressing these inconvenient truths about conference travel. The first is to determine whether *annual* national conferences are necessary in the first place. Given the role that national (and international) conferences play in building professional community, it is probably unrealistic to advocate for their elimination (though if even the least dramatic predictions of peak oil come to pass, we may not have a choice). But we can certainly move to biennial big conferences, with regional conferences accessible to members by ground transportation in the off years. Another option becoming more viable every year due to continual technological improvements is virtual conferencing. In this area, I suspect, librarians and information specialists are well ahead of traditional disciplines such as history.

Regardless of how often we hold our meetings, one of the most dramatic steps we could take would be to hold them at one of the many conference centers and hotels in every region of the United States that are committed to more sustainable kinds of consumption. Such a choice would in itself address some of the issues I raised. Most of these facilities are committed to paying a living wage. More local and organic food would be served at the

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conferences' lunches, dinners, and breaks. Most such centers are in the vanguard for waste reduction and recycling as well. Our organizations can also make the decision on principle to never again hold conferences in a city such as Las Vegas, Los Angeles, or Tucson. The very existence of these cities — as large urban centers at the least, and perhaps as places of permanent human settlement at all — defies ecological common sense at every turn. Conversely, we could reward communities that have implemented sprawl control and brown-field development initiatives with our conferences and the revenue that comes from them. The site selection for our conferences is, after all, a collective consumer choice. In 2000 the Organization of American Historians boycotted the Adam Marks Hotel in St. Louis for its annual meeting after evidence of widespread racial discrimination by the chain became public. The OAH then used their boycott and the publicity it generated as an opportunity for public education. Other organizations can make public statements about why and how they make sustainability-related decisions about conference sites.

I suspect — I hope — readers of this journal are sympathetic to the idea of reducing the ecological footprint of conferences. And I am quite certain there are dimensions to this issue I have not thought of. The topic might even merit a discussion at next year's meeting in Charleston (or anywhere else conferences are held, for that matter). In any event, the stakes are high. For in the long term — and intergenerational equity is at the core of sustainability — the kind of personal and professional existence many of us take for granted will not be possible without the revolution in values this essay has only begun to address. 🌱

Further Resources: Reading

Peter Bardaglio and Andrea Putnam, *Boldly Sustainable: Hope and Opportunity for Higher Education in an Age of Climate Change* (2009).

Hermann Daly, "Economics in a Full World," *Scientific American* (2005).

Derrick Jensen, "The World at Gunpoint," *Orion Magazine* (2009).

Michael Lemonick, "Top 10 Myths about Sustainability," *Scientific American* (2009).

Michael M'Gonigle, *Planet U: Sustaining the World, Reinventing the University* (2006).

Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (2010).

Further Resources: Organizations and Websites

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) — <http://www.aashe.org/>

Second Nature: Education for Sustainability — www.secondnature.org

Talloires Network — <http://www.tufts.edu/tal-loiresnetwork/>

Terrapass (event footprint calculator) — <http://www.terrapass.com/event-carbon-calculator/>

Practicing Sustainable Environmental Solutions: A Call for Green Policy in Academic Libraries

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In recent years, librarians have taken a more proactive role in "green" practices and sustainable environmental solutions both in public and academic libraries. In order to fully understand this change, a short historical background might explain the proactive interest by academic libraries in environmental sustainable operations.

The 1970s brought dynamic changes in the American environmental movement when Congress passed both the *Clean Air Act* and the *Endangered Species Act*, DDT was banned, and the *Environmental Protection Agency* was created. On the first Earth Day in 1970, almost "ten million students from 2,000 colleges and 1,000 high schools participated in a wide variety of activities throughout the country."¹ Not only did students express their environmental concerns, but international environmental declarations also started making references to sustainability issues in higher education.² In 1990, the *University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (USLF)* signed the *Talloires Declaration*, which stated "universities bear profound responsibility to increase the awareness, knowledge, technologies and tools to create an environmentally sustainable future."³ (See the *Talloires Declaration* on p.18.) In 2000 the declaration was signed by leaders from more than 275 universities, thus challenging higher education to introduce sustainable development concepts into teaching and practice. Academic libraries, as part of the university community, supported universities by building environmental collections, providing public access to environmental information, and promoting environmental literacy that leads to practical, sustainable environmental solutions.

Environmental sustainability is an important part of the sustainable development concept that evolved from theory into practice in Rio de Janeiro after the *1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* (Earth Summit). Sustainable development advocates a balance between economic growth, social equity, and ecology "that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."⁴ Libraries' operations had the basic characteristics of sustainable practices long before the concept of sustainability gained a wider acceptance. The very principles around which libraries

are built align with those of human, social, environmental, and economic sustainability. Library operations have been characterized by frequent borrowing instead of constant buying of information materials, and by the sharing of resources rather than the unnecessary duplication for current and future users.

The evolving information and communication technologies, growing information needs of users, and growing operational costs of libraries have been calling for long-term economic, social, and environmental sustainable development planning. While libraries continue to thrive in meeting the information needs of their users, behind the scenes they struggle with ongoing costs of collections, equipments, supplies, buildings, and utilities (water, electricity, gas, heating, and cooling systems). Without an increased base of funding these growing costs and lack of sustainable strategies in libraries negatively impact major libraries' values as framed by the *International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)* in Glasgow in 2002. Their *Statement on Libraries and Sustainable Development*

declares that all human beings have the fundamental right to an environment adequate for their health and well-being, acknowledges the importance of a commitment to sustainable development to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future, [and] asserts that library and information services promote sustainable development by ensuring freedom of access to information.⁵

Academic libraries are adding more environmentally responsible practices in day-to-day operations and services offered to the users while working on reducing environmental waste and shrinking their "carbon footprint." But in a time of budget austerity and growing concessions to social responsibility, is this enough?

Reducing Libraries' Carbon Footprints

In September 2008 *Bloomberg.com* reported that "energy costs for U.S. colleges and universities soared 14 percent in the 12 months."⁶ With the growing popularity of