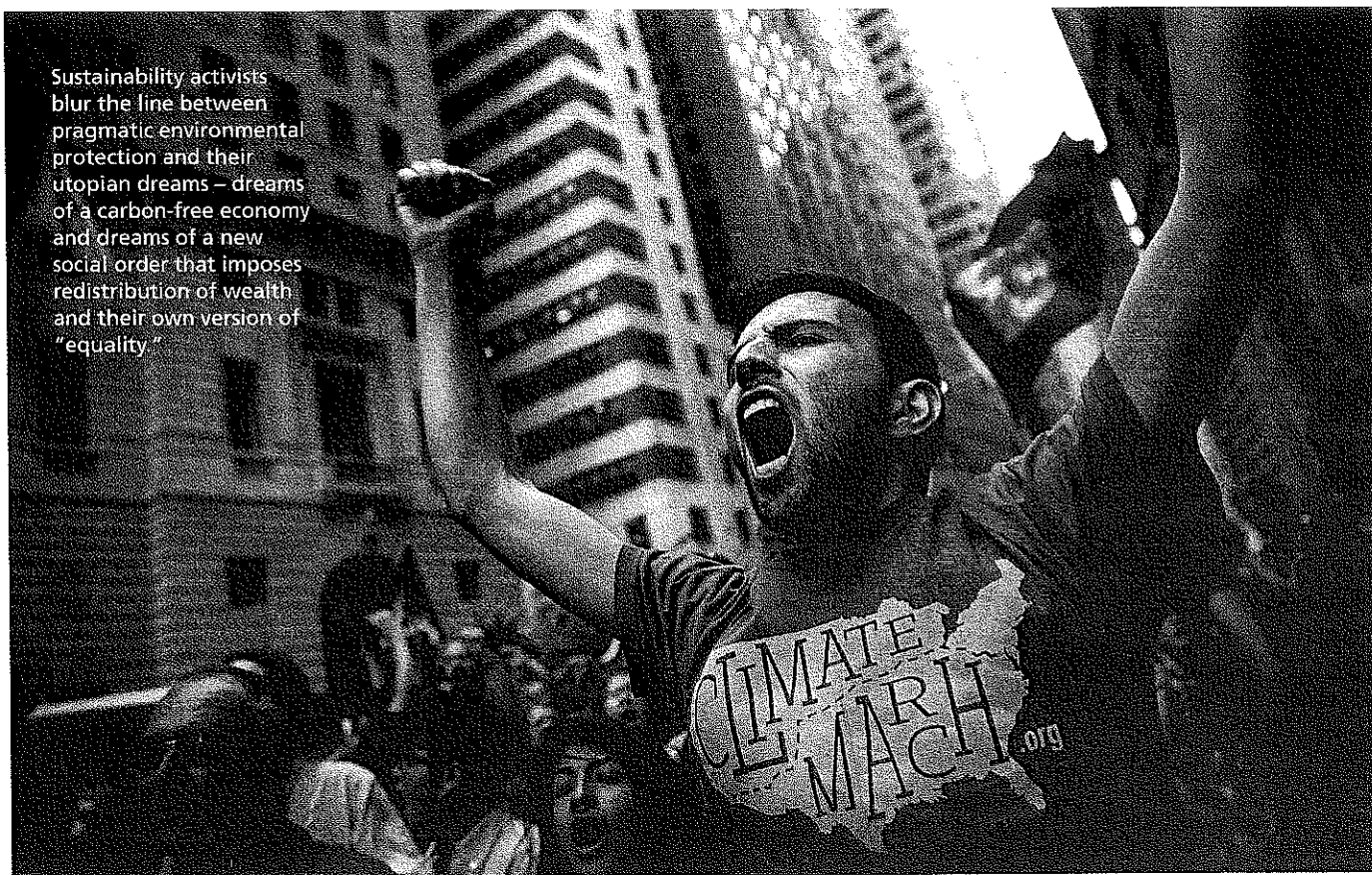


Sustainability

Higher Education's New Fundamentalism

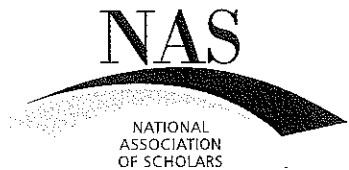
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF A REPORT
BY THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS
2015

Sustainability activists blur the line between pragmatic environmental protection and their utopian dreams – dreams of a carbon-free economy and dreams of a new social order that imposes redistribution of wealth and their own version of “equality.”



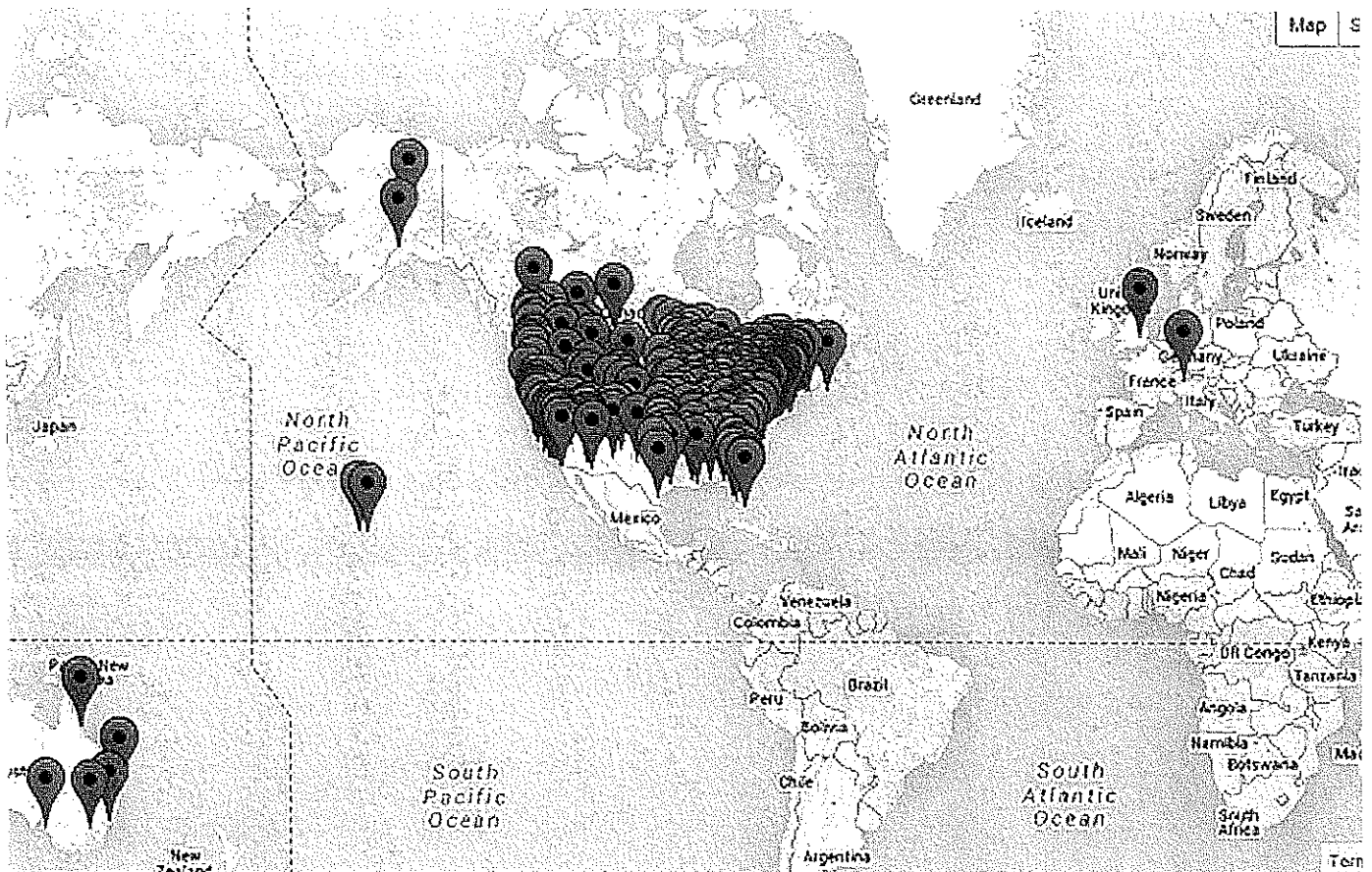
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The full 260-page report
is available at
www.nas.org/sustainability



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Ninety-five percent of degree programs in "sustainability" are offered by colleges and universities in the United States.

Quick Takes

- Sustainability has become a discipline in its own right. We identified 1,438 degree programs at 475 colleges and universities in 65 states and provinces focused on or relating to sustainability studies.¹ In the U.S. alone, there are 1,274 programs, with at least one program in each of the 50 states.
- 697 institutions are signatories of the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment, obliging them to eliminate or offset 100% of all greenhouse gas emissions and to integrate sustainability into the curriculum.²
- Middlebury College offers 422 courses in sustainability – about 25% of all course offerings. Of 51 academic departments there, 37 offer at least one course in sustainability. Cornell University offers 290 sustainability courses – 13% of all course offerings.
- Globally, 772 colleges and universities are members of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). Ninety percent of the membership – 694 colleges and universities – are in the United States.³
- 664 institutions (587 of them in the United States) report to AASHE's Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS),⁴ where they can earn points for growing an organic garden, subsidizing child care for employees, and offering gender-neutral housing (0.25 points each); incorporating sustainability into new student orientation (2 points); offering professors incentives to research sustainability (6 points); and purchasing clean or renewable energy (7 points).
- Sustainability initiatives at Middlebury College, a STARS member institution, cost an estimated \$3.7 million annually, net of savings reported by the college to have resulted from its sustainability efforts. All told, sustainability costs American higher education \$3.4 billion a year.
- More than 400 student-led fossil fuel divestment campaigns are active on campuses across the United States. Twenty-two U.S. universities have announced plans to divest endowment holdings in fossil fuels.⁵

Introduction

The sustainability movement – a major force on college campuses in the United States and the rest of the Western world – has largely escaped serious critical scrutiny, until now.

This executive summary highlights the findings of *Sustainability: Higher Education's New Fundamentalism*, a report from the National Association of Scholars examining for the first time the movement's ideological, economic, and practical effects on institutions of higher education.

To the unsuspecting, sustainability is just a new name for environmentalism. But the word marks out a new and larger ideological territory in which it is claimed curtailing economic, political, and intellectual liberty is the price that must be paid to ensure the welfare of future generations.

The 1987 United Nations report, *Our Common Future*, better known

as the Brundtland Report, ignited the sustainability movement. It united environmentalism with hostility to free markets and demands for “social justice.”

The Brundtland Report defined “sustainable development” as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” It also proclaimed, “Development involves a progressive transformation of economy and society.”

Sustainability advocates illustrate the concept using a diagram of three overlapping circles: economy, environment, and society.⁶

Sustainability links environmental issues to economic and social ones by emphasizing the effects of Western colonialism and patriarchy. Its advocates attempt to turn other leftist causes – diversity, sexual liberation,

and redistribution of wealth – into subordinate parts of sustainability. Sustainability is the current catch-all for social grievances.

The NAS takes no issue with conservation, pollution caps, or recycling. Thrift and forethought are virtues. We like clean air and clean water, and we appreciate measures that achieve both.

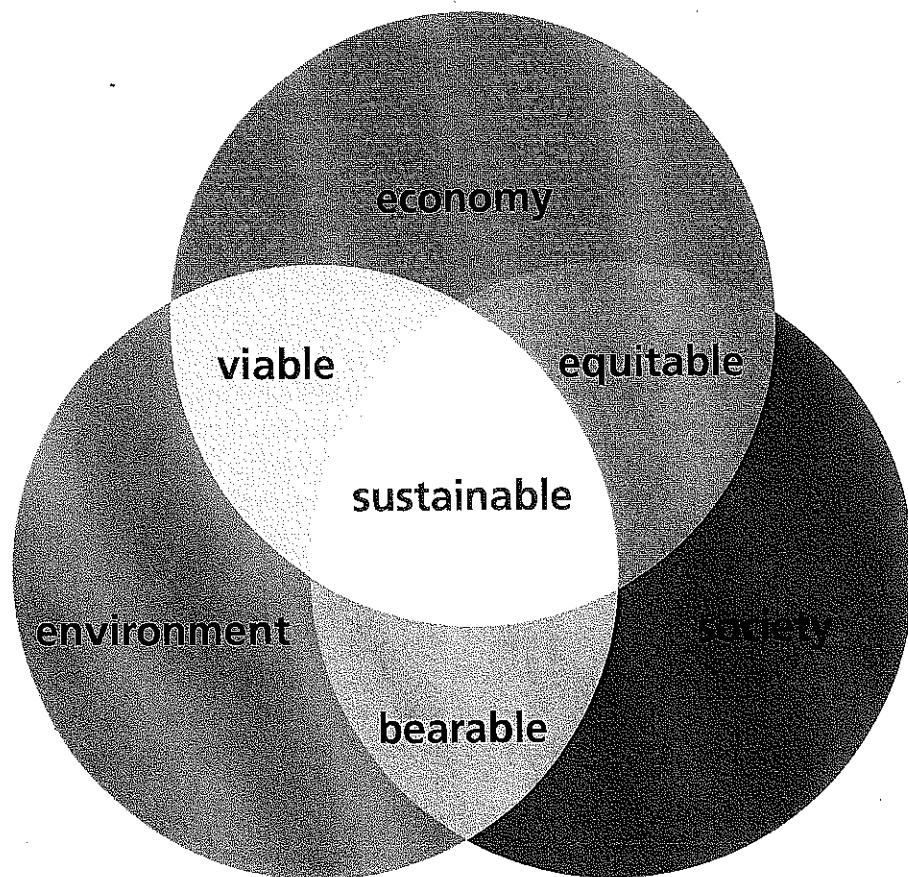
We also advocate for economic sensibility, respect for individual liberty, and civil debate, and these are conspicuously lacking in the sustainability movement. We advocate for principles of academic freedom that enable all sides in important debates to present evidence and be given a fair hearing. On matters such as global warming, the campus version of sustainability replaces debate with doctrinaire declaration and enforces the party line – and that's what we take issue with.

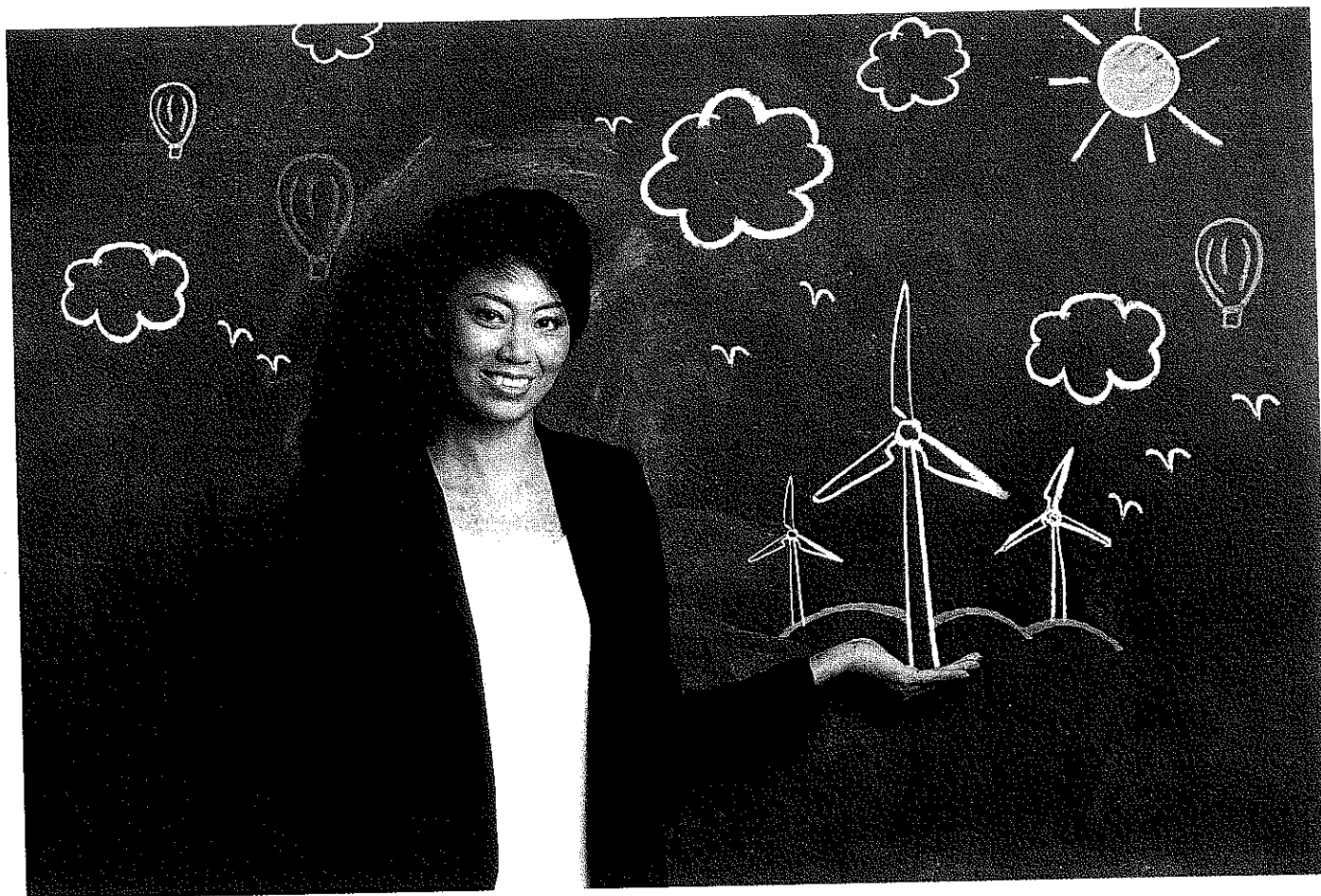
1 The Corruption of the Curriculum

Sustainability has become a subject with its own academic degrees. According to the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), 1,438 academic sustainability programs, ranging from certificates to doctorates, are offered at 475 colleges.⁷

These sustainability programs range from scientific explorations to immersions in political theory. Among the latter we find “Environment, Economics, and Politics” at Claremont McKenna College and “Global Environmental Change and Sustainability” at Johns Hopkins University.⁸

How rigorous are these programs? The sustainability movement trades heavily on its claim to represent the best and most up-to-date scientific views about the environment. We found, however, that science is represented erratically among the





Colleges and universities that launch themselves into this movement often make sustainability part of hundreds of courses.

requirements of sustainability programs. In a sample of 25 programs we found nearly half (12) required three or fewer science courses.⁹

Sustainability also makes large claims based on complicated mathematical analyses. We found the mathematics components of the 25 programs in our sample to be even more porous. Of the 25 programs, 24 had three or fewer math requirements, and nine of them had no math requirement. The program we found with the largest component of science – 15 required courses – was an online institution, the American Military University.

What do students learn in sustainability programs? Four things: 1) that catastrophic manmade global warming is an indisputable fact, and switching to renewable energy from

inexpensive and abundant fossil fuel energy is the only plausible answer; 2) that today's society and economy are built on greed and waste, and thus we must rebuild society along progressive political lines; 3) that mass environmental activism is the way to achieve goals 1 and 2; and 4) that we must either persuade the skeptics or silence them.

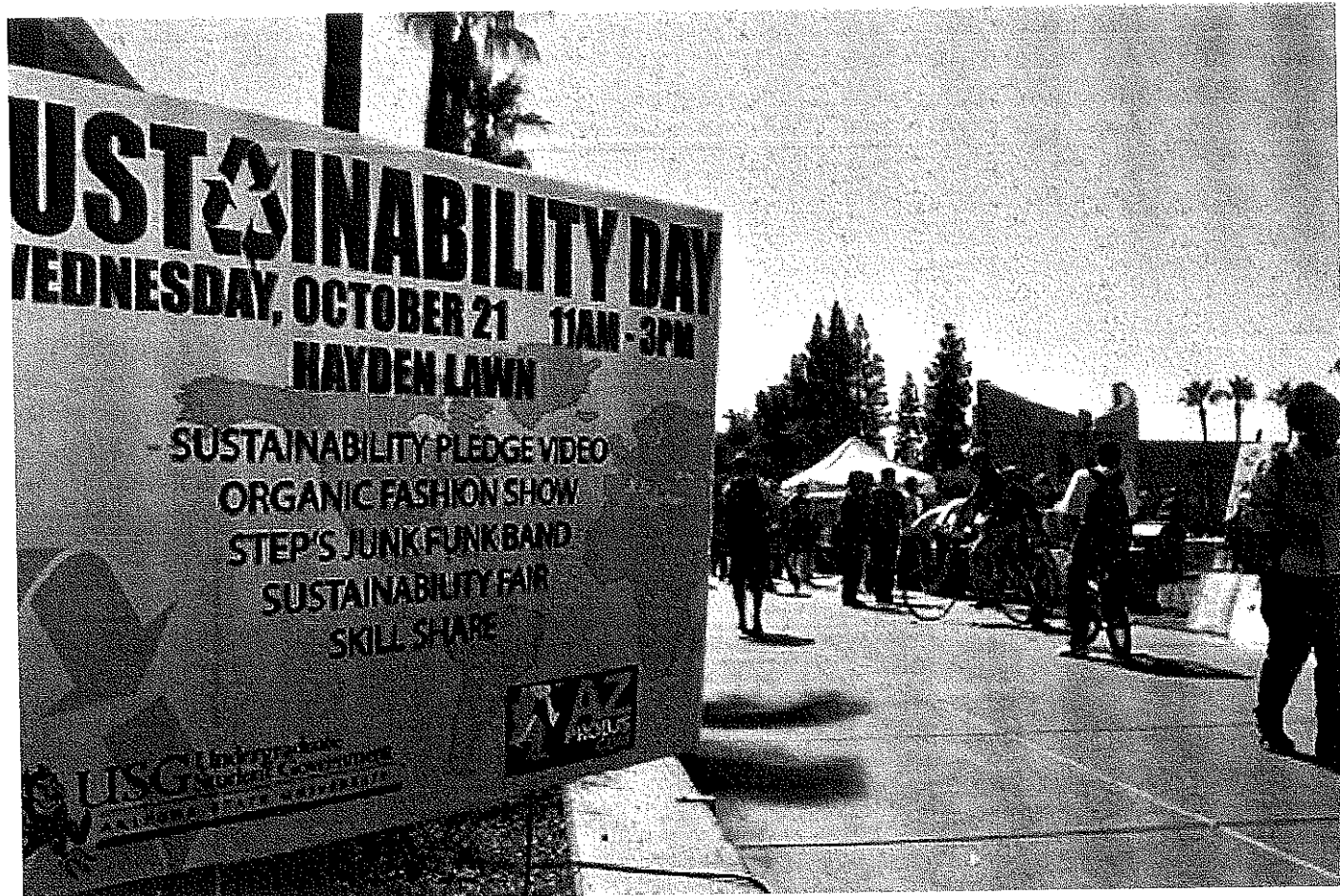
Integrated Across the Curriculum

Sustainability-focused programs are not the only way sustainability enters the college curriculum. It is also "integrated" into departments seemingly remote from the core topic.

Colorado State University boasts that sustainability is "an integral part of all courses in the fashion department." Penn State wanders into "Sustainable Tourism and the Environ-

ment." SUNY Stony Brook ponders "Ecoaesthetics in Art." Swarthmore College offers students the dirt on the "Politics of Pollution." Cornell meditates on "Religion and Sustainability." Two-thirds of the academic departments at Yale offer at least one sustainability course. At Middlebury College, three-fourths of the departments do.

Colleges and universities that launch themselves into this movement often make sustainability part of hundreds of courses. Colorado State, which holds pride of place as the only "platinum" institution on AASHE's Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS), offers an astonishing 445 courses in sustainability. Yale and Middlebury offer more than 400 each; Cornell offers 290.



The goal is to modify students' values. The movement pushes a new mission for higher education: "education as sustainability."

Cornell University's apparent emphasis on incorporating sustainability into science and engineering courses involves a little creative classification by the university. It uses a wide net to capture courses such as "Raptor Natural History" and "Sharks" under the rubric of sustainability, though those courses may not have all that much to do with world-ending catastrophe.

Driving this initiative to make sustainability part of every course is the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment (ACUPCC, or Presidents' Climate Commitment), an effort launched by Second Nature, a group founded by John Kerry and Teresa Heinz. As of 2015, 697 colleges and universities have signed this commitment, which includes a pledge to "make climate neutrality and sustainability a part of

the curriculum and other educational experience for all students."¹⁰

Undermines Liberal Learning

Environmental advocates portray sustainability as the "ultimate liberal art" – essentially as a lens through which to view the world. Universities seek to use the campus as a "living laboratory" where students will not only learn about sustainability in the classroom, but will encounter it everywhere on campus. The goal is to modify students' values. The movement pushes a new mission for higher education: "education as sustainability."

But making sustainability the purpose of higher education undermines liberal learning. It treats other disciplines as mere grist for sustainability's mill. It replaces education with

social advocacy. It is a force of ideological conformity. It makes the dogmas of environmentalism the foundational premises of college learning, and sets them above rational debate.

2 Anatomy of the Campus Sustainability Movement

Beginning in 2007, the Presidents' Climate Commitment tapped the power of college presidents to set the agendas for their institutions. It replaced the marketplace of ideas with a monopoly, and it replaced skeptical examination of rival views with emotional passion for a single theory it declared (without warrant) to be "consensus." Sustainability is now among the highest priorities at colleges and universities.

Colleges are now ranked by their success in meeting sustainability goals. Students take international

“sustainability literacy tests.” They are urged to “pledge” themselves to sustainability. At the University of Virginia, for instance, students are asked to avow:

I pledge to consider the social, economic, and environmental impacts of my habits and to explore ways to live more sustainably during my time here at U.Va. and beyond.¹¹

Campus Sustainability Day has been celebrated since 2003. In 2014, 70 schools participated.¹² James Madison University held a public “trash sort” to rescue recyclables. Students at Arizona State University watched *Carbon Nation*, a film about transitioning away from a carbon-based economy; observed a solar sewing machine demonstration; and competed in “Green Team – Kill Your Vampire Energy.” At the University of Iowa, student environmental groups set up

stations to survey their peers’ carbon footprints.

The sustainability movement piggybacks on the success of the diversity movement by blending in the tenets of multiculturalism and social justice. Environmental degradation is treated as a form of racial injustice because it affects minority communities more than affluent ones. In an article for *Nation* titled “Why #BlackLives-Matter Should Transform the Climate Debate,” activist Naomi Klein insisted racism drives denial of climate change, resistance to environmental regulations, and reluctance to engage in climate treaties.

Activists in the sustainability movement also view gay rights, gender parity, and the (hoped for) dissolution of the traditional family as kindred issues. “Save the Earth, don’t give birth” is one slogan.¹³ Another, “wrap with care, save the polar bear,”

is emblazoned on condoms one environmental group distributes for free.¹⁴

The sustainability movement has its roots in the late eighteenth century Malthusian theory that population control is the key to saving the planet. Demographics have proven Malthus wrong. Wealthy countries tend to have fewer children, and poorer countries have more. Worldwide life expectancy has risen alongside worldwide population, thanks in great measure to the Green Revolution and genetically modified crops that have fed a worldwide population now approaching eight billion.

3 Habituated: The Nudge-Culture of Sustainability

“Nudging” is a way of prodding students to do what activists want. The technique was promoted in a 2008 bestseller, *Nudge*, by Richard Thaler



and Cass Sunstein. Their adherents contend people should be manipulated into making the choices that social planners think are the best options.

About 80 institutions hire student "eco-reps" to shame their peers into composting their cornstarch-based disposable flatware, riding a bike to class, buying carbon offsets to make up for their flights home at Christmas, and giving up bottled water. Seventy institutions have restricted access to bottled water on the pretense that the plastic overloads landfills. Other popular targets include plastic bags, plastic straws, paper napkins, disposable to-go boxes, and even cafeteria trays, in an effort to save dishwashing water and prevent students from wasting food. Students are left technically free to choose, but constrained as to what choices they have and which choices are deemed socially laudable.

The student awkwardly juggling plates, cups, and cutlery isn't saving all that much dishwashing water, but he is acutely aware at meals three times each day of his commitment to protect the planet's resources. He is taking small measures with upfront tangible inconveniences that alert him to the need for other, larger measures he may take in the future. Today he'll renounce the tray and refill a reusable bottle from the tap; tomorrow he'll prefer the thrift store over the mall; and 20 years from now, he'll power his manufacturing facility with windmills.

Yale University adopted the nudge blueprint in its newest sustainability strategic plan, which calls for creating "a robust culture of sustainability" and "offering students the experience of living, studying, and playing in a setting that is imbued with sustainability values." Yale President Peter Salovey told student reporters the plan would draw heavily on social psychology research to find out what

would best trigger long-term student habits.

The sustainability movement represents a significant shift in higher education: from educating students with rational and moral knowledge that prepares them to make prudent, conscious choices to covert training operations that elicit Pavlovian responses. Yale's program is alarming because it is aimed at teaching students to act uncritically. It seeks to change behavior by targeting the subconscious.

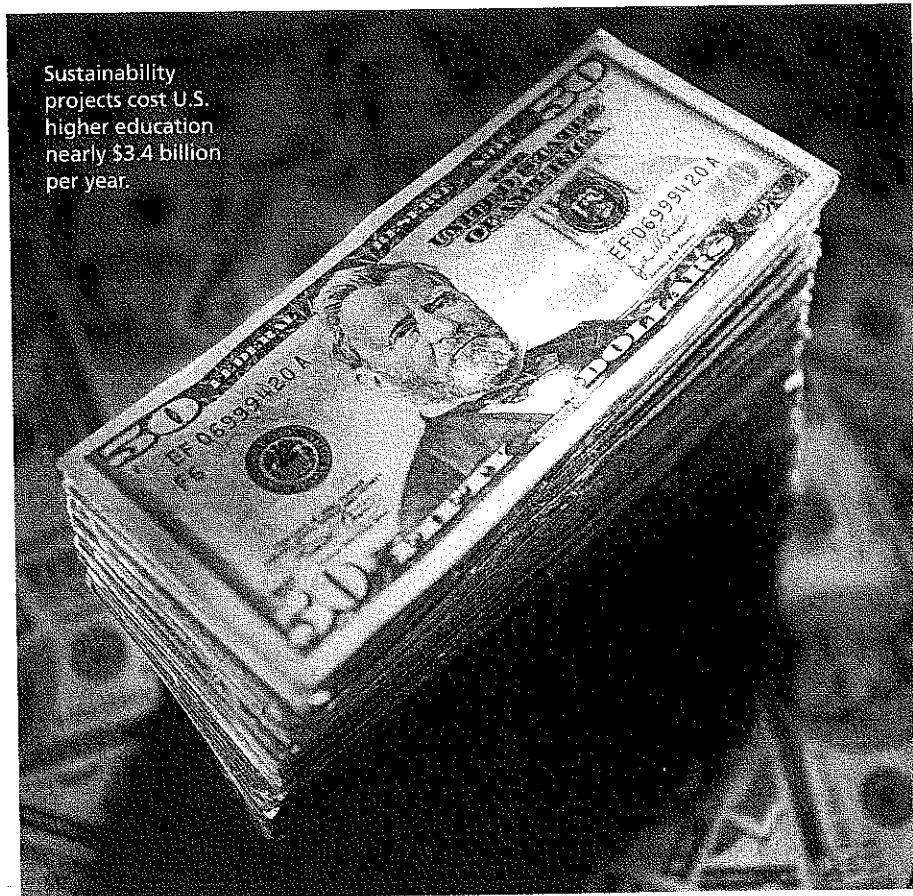
4 Amazing Waste: What Sustainability Costs

In hoping to erase carbon footprints, sustainability leaves an economic footprint of its own. Measuring that footprint is difficult. We could not find a single institution with a transparent budget showing the cumulative costs of sustainability projects across programs and departments.

To estimate what sustainability costs U.S. higher education, we examined sustainability-related projects at one college, Middlebury College in Vermont, according to *U.S. News* the seventh-ranked liberal arts college in the country.

We researched what it costs to staff Middlebury's sustainability department and the environmental studies program; to buy carbon offsets; to hire student sustainability interns; to purchase organic food for the dining hall; and to upgrade infrastructure. Middlebury's biggest sustainability expense was \$12 million for a biomass gasification plant that ignites woodchips.

We found Middlebury spends nearly \$5 million each year on programs undertaken in the name of sustainability. Factoring in the savings Middlebury claims to achieve through its sustainability initiatives, by our



calculation the college spends a net of \$3.7 million per year.

If each signatory of the Presidents' Climate Commitment spends something close to Middlebury's sustainability budget, sustainability projects cost U.S. higher education nearly \$3.4 billion per year. That's a rough estimate, to be sure, but it's also a low estimate. We estimated conservatively at each point, and Middlebury is a small college, with fewer than 2,500 students. Many of the climate commitment signatories are large public universities with substantially higher costs. And hundreds of institutions, such as Harvard, have taken on ambitious sustainability projects without signing the Presidents' Climate Commitment; we didn't include those in our estimate at all.

Eliminating 100 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions is a gargantuan task with escalating costs and diminishing returns – in economic terms, low “marginal utility.” One reason colleges have so fully embraced actions toward sustainability is that the principles of marginal utility have given way to a new economic rationale, the “precautionary principle.”

The precautionary principle urges regulating or eliminating activities – such as burning fossil fuels for energy – without regard to the cost of doing so, unless the activity can be proven to pose no risk. Because it is impossible to prove the absence of potential risk, the precautionary principle always rules in favor of regulating or eliminating the activity, and no cost is seen as too high. We compared the average price per pound of greenhouse gas Middlebury refrained from emitting with the costs of similar reductions elsewhere and found Middlebury spends as much as 45 times per pound as some companies did under a cap-and-trade program in Europe.

5 Divestment: Sustainability's Last Frontier

In fall 2012, the longtime environmental writer Bill McKibben, founder of the activist group 350.org, chartered a biodiesel bus and launched a national speaking tour, called “Do the Math.” The math, according to McKibben, is simple: In order to keep the planet from warming more than 2 degrees, fossil fuel companies must leave four-fifths of their reserves in the ground, untouched and unburnt. The fossil fuel industry is, according to McKibben, “a rogue industry, reckless like no other force on Earth. It is Public Enemy Number One.”¹⁵

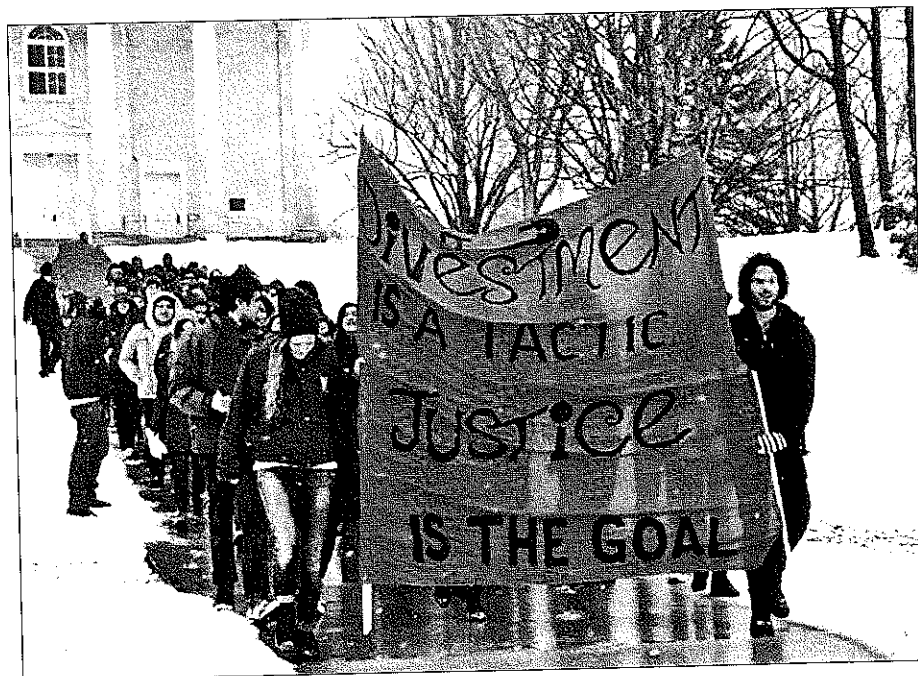
McKibben's fiery rhetoric ignited the campuses. More than 400 student-led fossil fuel divestment campaigns are active on campuses across the United States. Twenty-two U.S. universities have announced plans to divest endowment holdings in fossil fuels.¹⁶ On February 13–14, 2015 which 350.org declared Global Divestment Day, activists held 450 demonstrations, including Valentine's Day

parties asking campus administrators to “break up with fossil fuels.”

The activists are organized, aggressive, and determined to win. In May 2013 a hundred Swarthmore students marched into a board meeting, hijacked the microphones, and clapped down the one student who requested the meeting return to order. Meanwhile, the Swarthmore's president, dean of students, and chairman of the board watched passively. From March 19 to April 20, 2015, dozens of students occupied Swarthmore's college finance office demanding divestment.

In November 2014, seven Harvard students launched a lawsuit against the university for “intentional investment in abnormally dangerous activities” and for undermining their educations and job prospects by funding climate change denial. When the Massachusetts Superior Court dismissed the case in March 2015, Divest Harvard launched a new protest called “Harvard Heat Week” in April 2015.

The New School in New York City announced in February 2015 its



The activists are organized, aggressive, and determined to win.

plans to divest. It also unveiled a new core curriculum focused on climate change that aims to make all students into what they call "climate citizens."

6 The Global Warming Debate

Global warming is clearly the sustainability movement's source of cultural capital. It gives credibility to otherwise very odd declarations.

At NAS, we regard catastrophic manmade global warming not as an indisputable fact but as an open question that cannot be settled by an examination of how colleges have wrapped themselves up on one side of the debate. In our view, the important questions about global warming require good scientific investigation, transparency, and debate.

But on campuses across the United States, where sustainability has become dogma, honest investigation of global warming is nearly impossible.

Scientific debate requires openness, not conformity to a fixed theory exempt from external review.

Those who dare question the "consensus" pay a high price for their intellectual openness. Scientists who persist in raising questions have been vilified. A special term of abuse, "denier," and its stronger alternative "denialist,"¹⁷ modeled on the term "Holocaust denier," are frequently applied to such skeptics, along with a fair amount of personal vitriol and *ad hominem* attack. Such skeptics as Harvard-Smithsonian astrophysicist Willie Soon are also accused of aligning their research with the aims of corporate funders, and in 2015 seven scholars were targeted in a smear campaign by U.S. Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva for dissenting from the party line on climate change.

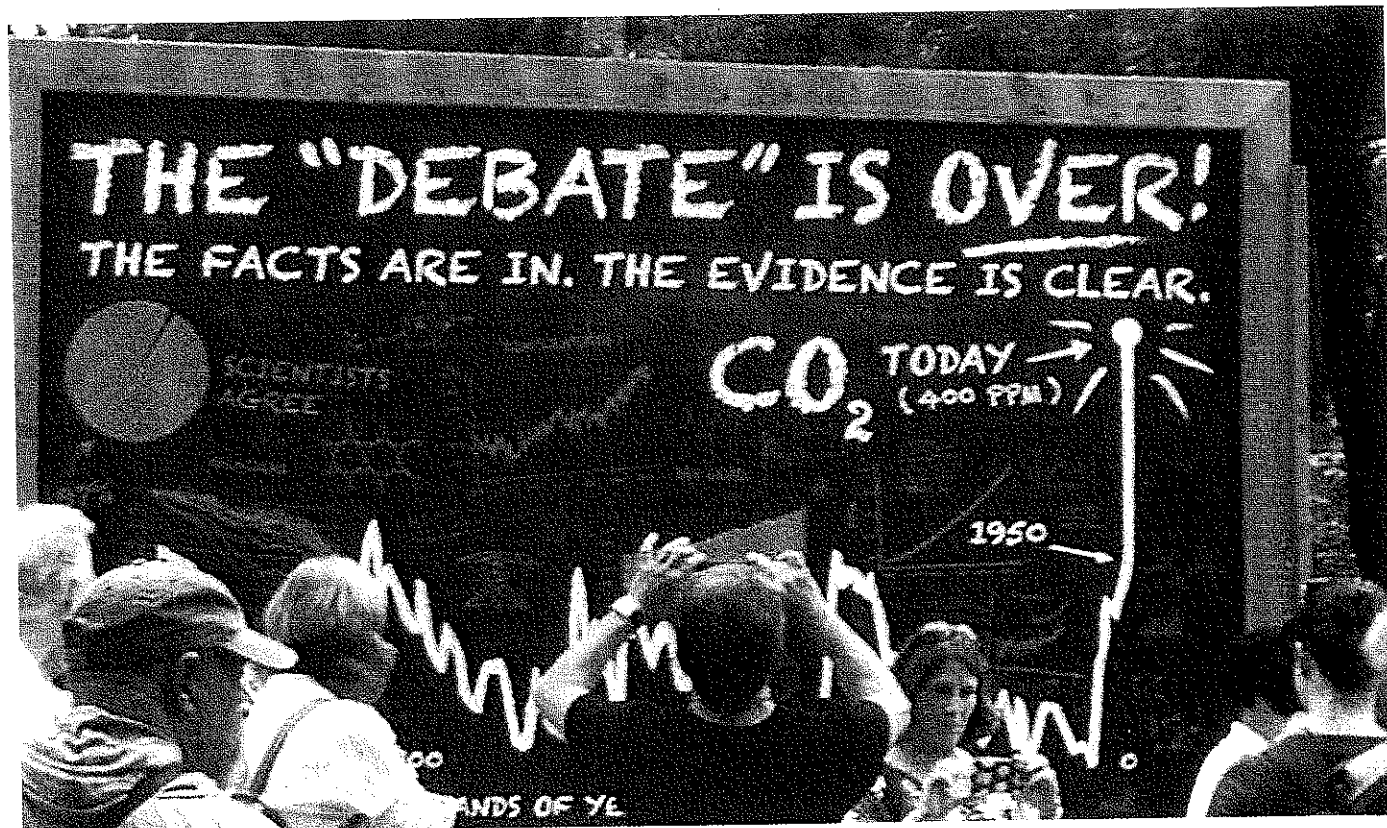
Regardless of one's position in the debate over catastrophic manmade global warming, there should be no

question institutions of higher education must uphold the principles of fair-minded examination of evidence and open debate. Those principles have been damaged by sustainability activists, who seek an end to any public expressions of doubt about their extreme and unscientific positions.

Conclusion

Sustainability activists blur the line between pragmatic environmental protection and their utopian dreams – dreams of a carbon-free economy and dreams of a new social order that imposes redistribution of wealth and their own version of "equality."

We support good stewardship of natural resources and agree common-sense conservation measures should be encouraged. The sustainability movement works against those goals by turning environmental policymaking into regulatory power grabs. Theories of imminent catastrophe excite



Sustainability activists seek an end to any public expressions of doubt about their extreme and unscientific positions.

the true believers but alienate and offend the general public.

The public senses what our report demonstrates: The sustainability movement only pretends to be about good stewardship of the environment. It really takes its bearings from hostility towards material prosperity, consumerism, free markets, and representative self-government.

To redress the harms being done by the sustainability movement in higher education, we offer ten recommendations under three categories:

Respect Intellectual Freedom

1. Create neutral ground. Colleges and universities should be neutral in important and unresolved scientific debates, such as the debate over dangerous anthropogenic global warming. Claims made on the authority of "science" must be made on the basis of transparent evidence and openness to good arguments regardless of their source.
2. Cut the apocalyptic rhetoric. Presenting students with a steady diet of doomsday scenarios undermines liberal education.
3. Maintain civility. Some student sustainability protests have aimed at preventing opponents from speaking. Personal vitriol and ad hominem attack have no place in institutions of higher learning.
4. Stop "nudging." Leave students the space to make their own decisions about sustainability, and free faculty members from the implied pressure to imbed sustainability into the curricula of unrelated courses.

Uphold Institutional Integrity

5. Withdraw from the President's Climate Commitment. Colleges that have signed the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment should withdraw in favor of open-minded debate on the subject.
 6. Open the books and pull back the sustainability hires. Make the pursuit of sustainability by colleges financially transparent. The growth of administrative and staff positions in sustainability drives up costs and institutionalizes advocacy at the expense of education.
 7. Uphold environmental stewardship. Campuses need to recover the distinction between real environmental stewardship and a movement that uses the term as a springboard for a much broader agenda.
 8. Credential wisely. Curtail the aggrandizement of sustainability as a subject. Sustainability is not a discipline or even a subject area. It is an ideology.
- #### Be Even-Handed
9. Equalize treatment for advocates. Treat sustainability groups on campus under the same rubric as other advocacy groups. They should not enjoy privileged immunity from ordinary rules and special access to institutional resources.
 10. Examine motives. College and university boards of trustees should examine demands for divestment from fossil fuels skeptically and with full awareness of the ideological context in which those demands are made.

About The National Association of Scholars

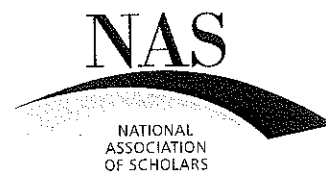
The National Association of Scholars is a network of scholars and citizens united by a commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American higher education.

We uphold the standards of a liberal arts education that fosters intellectual freedom, searches for the truth, and promotes virtuous citizenship.

We expect that ideas will be judged on their merits; that scholars will engage in disinterested research; and that colleges and universities will provide for fair and judicial examination and debate of contending views.

We publish reports and commentary on a number of topics related to higher education; they can be found at our website, www.nas.org.

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Endnotes

- 1 According to the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, as of February 23, 2015. <http://www.aashe.org/resources/academic-programs/>
- 2 American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment, as of March 25, 2015. <http://rs.acupcc.org/>
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RESEARCH AND COMMENTARY ON SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS

Sustainability: Higher Education's New Fundamentalism

March 25, 2015

by Peter Wood, Rachelle Peterson

An in-depth report on the campus "sustainability" movement and its implications for American higher education, available for free online at nas.org/images/documents/NAS-Sustainability-Digital.pdf

SUSTAINABILITY HIGHER EDUCATION'S NEW FUNDAMENTALISM



March 2015



A report by the National Association of Scholars

Sustainability FAQs

Mar 25, 2015 by Peter Wood, Rachelle Peterson

Executive Summary - Sustainability: Higher Education's New Fundamentalism

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