

## Framing Sustainability

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### Abstract

As institutions of higher education continue to embrace sustainability as a guiding principle, administrators, campus sustainability leaders, and researchers in the field struggle to present a holistic picture of the changes necessary for complete organizational change. While resources available for decision-makers typically focus on individual case studies on specific concepts, few have worked to address the field as a whole. This paper aims to address sustainability within the *frames* conceived by Bolman and Deal in their seminal work *Reframing Organizations* (2008). Specifically, it looks at reframing organizational change within the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames, as well as adapting Kotter's Change Stages to address how sustainability can, and should, transform colleges and universities, while providing the tools necessary for sustainability professionals to enact this innovation.

**Keywords:** Administration, Theoretical Framework, Change

### Framing Sustainability

*Green. Ecofriendly. Corporate Social Responsibility. Social Entrepreneurship. Intergenerationally Equitable.* Sustainability, and all its accompanying interpretations and catch-phrases, have become buzzwords across all sectors: private, public, and non-profit, and fully embraced by the media. Despite their common prevalence in our everyday language, few truly understand the key concepts behind creating a sustainable organization – even in higher education, where *sustainability* has become fully integrated into strategic plans, the curriculum, operations, student life, etc.

Pinning a definition on sustainability often proves difficult for scholars of higher education, even those who serve as administrators overseeing sustainability initiatives. One definition that is often cited comes from the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), which states that sustainability meets “the of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

More recently, many point to the definition coined by the administration of President Barak Obama as part of Executive Order 05-01 (2009), which states sustainability means “to create and maintain conditions, under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony, that permit fulfilling the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations.”

The opportunity to achieve this harmony, which many see as the balance of people, prosperity, and planet, creates the prospect for innovation within higher education. This innovation occurs in all aspects of higher education including facilities, dining, transportation, curriculum, student affairs, and even endowment investments. This paper aims to discuss the innovation of sustainability as an opportunity to recreate change within colleges and universities, with the goal of creating harmony between the institution's actions and its effect on the environment.

## Background

The history of sustainability in higher education, as described by Walter Simpson (2008), can be traced back to Earth Day in 1970 and the emerging environmental movement. Beginning in the 1990s, college campuses began to take notice of each other's actions in addressing their resource consumption and looked to find common ground to provide leadership in improving their ecological footprint. An outgrowth of this common ground was the Talloires Declaration, which has had over 350 signatories since 1990. To share information with one another, Yale University started the Campus Earth Summit in 1994 with 160 schools represented, followed by the bi-annual Greening of the Campus Conference hosted by Ball State University. In between these meetings, schools began to develop organizations to share ideas and provide support. These include the Campus Ecology Program, supported by the National Wildlife Federation and the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), which has over 890 members as of 2011. The most recent development is the American College & University Presidents' Climate Commitment (ACUPCC, 2010), which has over 677 signatures as of 2010. Signatories agree to help their institutions become carbon neutral as soon as possible. The most common way for institutions to exchange information is through publications, online resources, listservs, and conferences organized by groups such as the ones included above. Most often, these exchanges take the format of case studies, in which a single institution describes the change (*innovation*) they made on their campus, how that decision was reached, and the outcomes from the decision, which can include energy savings or changes in behavior or perceptions, for example.

Even given the common acceptance of case studies, there are some researchers who are hesitant to utilize this methodology. In an analysis of 54 journal articles related to sustainability in higher education, Corcoran, Walker, and Wals (2004) felt that many of these studies did little to improve higher education and lacked disciplined research methodology. The authors suggest that case studies in sustainability should document how "research is conducted, documented and shared" (p. 18). They also suggest that individual institutional authors work together with other institutions to look for similarities, common barriers, and trends. Finally, they argue that the intent of case studies should be purposed so that the reader can place the writing into their own context.

## Analytic Framework

To work toward achieving a common picture of innovations, barriers, and trends, a number of case studies and best practices in sustainability within higher education will be reviewed through the *frames* analytic framework coined by Bolman and Deal (2008), consisting of the following four components: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Using these four frames, organizational change can be examined through the lens of sustainability at the institutional level.

In addition, Bolman and Deal (2008) present Kotter's Change Stages through the same four frames, which can be summarized as creating a sense of urgency, guiding a team, uplifting a vision, communicating the vision, removing obstacles, celebrate early wins, keep going, and use the new culture to support old ways. Each frame will be introduced and discussed throughout the rest of this paper and demonstrate a number of the innovations used by institutions in achieving the goal of sustainability.

## **Reframing Organizational Change**

Within *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman and Deal (2008) make the argument that organizational change must occur across a number of factors, which they identify as *frames*. Each frame consists of concepts, metaphors, and images specific to the institution, as well as presents challenges to organizational leaders. As such, sustainability professionals are usually confronted with barriers across each of these frames and luckily, institutions have developed best practices to present these professionals with strategies at their own institutions. These individual innovations can be assembled under the umbrella of *campus sustainability* and provide a holistic approach to institutional change. Each frame is presented below, along with potential barriers and strategies for implementing sustainability at colleges and universities.

### **Structural**

Bolman and Deal (2008) describe six assumptions of the structural frame (p. 47), which can be summarized as: goals and objectives, division of labor, coordination and control, prevalence of rationality, importance of current circumstances, and analysis and restructuring to address deficiencies. Institutions of higher education are incredibly complex organizations, with a number of stakeholders and decision makers from across a variety of units – each with their own agendas, goals, and resources. Sustainability professionals tasked with institutional change are presented with a number of obstacles toward implementing sustainable practices and policies; however, strategies do exist to overcome these.

#### **Barriers.**

A common barrier to change put up by administrators when working with sustainability include a general loss of direction and clarity. As earlier mentioned, even finding a common definition of the term *sustainability* is challenging, so one can imagine it much more so for those actually developing and implementing policies related to sustainability. As such, it is often difficult to establish a chain of command, decide who makes final decisions related to sustainability, and who will be responsible for carrying those initiatives out.

#### **Strategies.**

Communication is often the key here: involving all stakeholders as often as possible, and at all levels. In this way, the common goals and objectives of a sustainability plan can be shared with constituents from all areas. In many institutions, this is task of a central committee focused on sustainability on campus. As an example, at Ball State University, that responsibility falls to the Council on the Environment, or COTE (2011). COTE brings together representatives from each academic unit and vice-presidential area, as well as the surrounding local community, to discuss sustainability initiatives on campus. Each representative is tasked with not just reporting progress from their respective areas to the group, but also with taking the meeting's agendas back to their peers so the entire campus community can be involved as issues are debated and policies created and recommended to administrators.

Moving beyond communication, these committees (or offices, departments, etc., depending on the institution), must also work to create or revise policies so that the goal of sustainability is not just given lip-service. The Campus Sustainability Policy Bank (2011), assembled by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) presents a large collection of sustainability policies covering areas such as energy conservation, green building, planning, procurement, investment, and water conservation, among others. For example, 18 institutions have written policies requiring new buildings be certified at least at the LEED Silver level by the U.S. Green Building Council.

Another way of ensuring structural support toward sustainability goals is the development and implementation of sustainability plans. Much like strategic plans, these documents allow individual units, departments, offices, or colleges to define how they will act upon the common goals of increasing sustainability, whether through energy savings, behavioral change, or within the classroom or laboratory. These plans can occur across a number of campus-wide operations documents; a review of the AASHE Resource Center's listing on Sustainability Coordination and Planning provides the following statistics:

- 41 institutions have university-wide strategic plans that incorporate sustainability concepts
- 46 institutions have master plans that include sustainable practices
- 36 institutions have campus-wide sustainability plans
- 22 have campus climate action plans
- 15 have campus energy plans

These plans are testaments to how colleges and universities are becoming more innovative in their approach to structuring institutions to become more sustainable by placing them within their planning document, including baseline data and target goals to define success.

### **Human Resource**

The human element of higher education is often central to the success of an institution of higher education. For example, students make acceptance decisions based in part on the reputation of an institution's faculty. Notably, presidents and other senior administrators (including sustainability professionals) have the ability to inspire and equip faculty and staff toward making major innovations – including in the arena of sustainability.

To Bolman and Deal (2008), the human element in an organization is key to fulfilling human needs, while organizations feed off of the energy and ideas of its employees. At the core of a sustainability initiative on a college campus are people. Often, sustainability leaders are faculty, staff, and students with a real passion for the environment – and who are not receiving pay, benefits, or grades for the work they do. The challenge for the sustainability professional is how to engage the entire campus, including those who might not find the value in addressing the environmental impact of the organization.

#### **Barriers.**

For campus faculty, staff, and students the largest barrier to fully engaging in sustainable practices is a general apprehension to change. From losing their personal heaters to banning bottled water and dining room trays to paying a *green fee* each semester, many stakeholders find it difficult to change their behaviors and habits, regardless of the benefit to the institution's bottom line or the environment. As such, sustainability professionals have to find creative ways to include students, faculty, and staff in taking personal responsibility for each sustainability initiative.

#### **Strategies.**

One easy way for campus community members to gain an understanding (and even get excited) about sustainability initiatives is through simple participation and involvement. Many institutions have adopted *Green Office* certificate programs, while residence halls encourage students to participate in campus challenges related to energy usage or recycling.

An example of this program at work is the Program for the Assessment and Certification for the Environment and Sustainability (PACES) at the University of California, Santa Clara (2009). PACES aims to make sustainability changes within the office or building level by

empowering its occupants – students, faculty, and staff to become local sustainability leaders through education and behavior change. Often these changes are immediate, cost saving, and can be easily transferred to home life as well. In short, sustainability staff work with a building by conducting an assessment and analysis of building occupants and their energy and waste levels. After a presentation of results, departments and units work to create localized sustainability plans to implement changes – all decided by the occupants themselves.

### **Political**

The political frame concentrates on the interests of both individuals and groups. Bolman and Deal (2008) propose five assumptions of this frame (pp. 194-195): organizations are coalitions; members have enduring differences between them; decision-making surrounds the allocation of scarce resources; scarcity creates conflict between members and groups, and bargaining and negotiation are central to making goals and decisions.

To anyone involved in campus sustainability, this frame is probably the most familiar – and frightening. At its core, sustainability involves decision-making at the personal and organizational level to address the realization that resources are scarce and a balance must be found so that the scarce resources can both be utilized now – and saved for future generations. Reaching these goals regularly involves compromise between groups and individuals and how to balance these needs and wants often falls to the sustainability professional.

#### **Barriers.**

The core barrier to addressing this frame for realizing institutional change is simply conflict. Higher education consists of a seemingly overwhelming number of internal and external stakeholders: employees, students, parents, alumni, trustees, lawmakers, accreditors, etc. That also, per Bolman and Deal (2008), means that power can rest in a number of places and rarely, if ever, with a single person. As such, sustainability leaders might be called up to act as a politician – and often a campaign of sorts is required.

#### **Strategies.**

A key strategy for campaigning for a sustainability goal or initiative is to *sell* the idea – whether through open forums, editorials, social media, or campus-wide announcements, which can both distribute information, negating rumors and miscommunication, and encourage participation. This is often seen when campuses work to initiate *green fees* on campus for sustainability projects. Moreover, facilities managers on campuses that have green fund programs have noted that they have “helped remove silos and [have] given isolated working groups the proper incentive – a budget – to collaborate” (Sustainable Endowments Institute, 2011, p. 31). This opportunity for campus-wide collaboration and participation is a key aspect of building successes through the political frame by concentrating on a scarce resource – funding.

### **Symbolic**

Symbols are important to many organizations and colleges and universities are no exception. Symbols help provide meaning and context – a shared experience – for stakeholders regardless of institutional role. These symbols help define campus culture by bringing together the organization under a common theme.

In the same way, casting a vision for the institution helps to influence and shape its purpose, which can have a profound effect on campus culture. Most institutional leaders embracing sustainability for their organizations see themselves as casting a vision of how the institution can become an example in living within its resources, within the environment, and

remaining successful while doing so. However, along with the political frame, getting an entire organization to adopt the sustainability leader's vision can prove difficult.

### **Barriers.**

There are two common barriers institutions working to embrace sustainability can find themselves confronted with. First is the general resistance to change. As mentioned above, even decisions that can improve the economic, environmental, and even personal well-being of faculty, staff, and students, might be rejected or resisted simply because they move away from the status quo. Even something as relatively minor as removing printers from labs or reducing print allocations can cause an outcry from students who do not even utilize the printers on campus.

### **Strategies.**

One way to help create an appreciation for the actions the campus community takes toward sustainability is through celebrations. Celebrations help to create a new culture within the organization and to help members embrace the new attitude. These celebrations can be simple: such as pizza parties or t-shirts for dormitory competition winners. Other examples include campus awards for faculty and students who are leading initiatives and innovations on campus or through the granting of *green funds* for further development of projects.

A key aspect of each Council on the Environment meeting at Ball State includes the celebration of previous events and initiatives, given the group a chance to reflect and share before working on current and future business. This activity provides an opportunity for the group to grow closer, while at the same identify successes to share with the rest of the community.

## **Leading A Culture Shift: Kotter's Change Stages**

To this point, we've demonstrated how taking a holistic approach to innovative sustainability initiatives can help reduce barriers to implementation. And while there is recognition of how each initiative can impact the structural, human resource, political and symbolic frames, little discussion has been given to empower change agents (the role so many sustainability professionals often find themselves in) on how to lead this organization change.

Luckily for students of Bolman and Deal (2008), they also take the frames approach to self-professed leadership guru Dr. John Kotter's 8-step process described in *Leading Change*. His argument, according to Bolman and Deal, is that change agents too often rely on only the structural frame and by ignoring the remaining areas, have difficulty bringing all the organizational parts along through change. Sustainability leaders can often identify with this concept – if faculty, staff, and students are not on board with a specific initiative, then it will face resistance or simply be ignored. To help ensure every aspect of organizational culture is addressed, Kotter identifies the following eight steps, which have definite applicability for sustainability professionals in higher education.

### **Sense of Urgency**

By creating a sense of urgency, sustainability professionals are able to demonstrate their initiatives as a campus necessity, whether they meet the needs of students, new policies, or fiscal considerations. That said, Bolman and Deal (2008) suggest reinforcing this urgency by involving as many constituents as possible, networking with those in positions of power, and making sure to share these need through stories.

A recent example of using urgency to advance sustainability innovations occurred in April 2011 at Indiana University. Facing increasing fiscal cuts, finding funding for sustainability

initiatives on campus was become difficult. To address this, the Student Sustainability Council was able to petition for the inclusion of an optional \$5 green fee each semester. Student leaders involved 18 different student organizations, as well as obtained the approval of the Dean of Students, University Registrar, University Information Technology Services (Inside Indiana Business, 2011).

### **Guiding Team**

As mentioned previously, having a guiding team in place is quite important to change in organizations. Most importantly, this team must be comprised of constituents from across the organization. Ball State University's COTE is a perfect representation of this, with faculty, staff, students, and community members sitting around the table to discuss sustainability initiatives for the entire campus. Other institutions might have sustainability offices or centralized directors, but in each case, these planning teams bring together a diverse group of voices to address issues related to sustainability.

### **Vision and Strategy**

Leaders and the teams they form also must integrate the core concepts of sustainability into the essence of the organization. With organizations, this is often demonstrated through the mission, vision, and values statements of the institution. When reflecting on how sustainability works to shift cultures on campuses, Portland State University President Wim Wiewel demonstrates the importance of putting sustainability into context – both on and off-campus (2011). For her, adopting a sustainable vision involves the community as well as ensuring that the “political, civic, social, and environmental climate [are] well suited to sustainability” (p. 1). Along with that, however is a commitment to seeing implementation across the community and participation from all stakeholders. By having a strong leader focused on sustainability innovations, Portland State is well positioned to have a supportive environment for current and future changes.

### **Communication**

Equally important is that those committees or office share information across campus. Even if constituent representatives on a committee feel an initiative is important, the rest the department or office they represent needs to be aware of the proposed changes, their impact, and any resulting policies or procedures. In examining student engagement at colleges campuses across the country, Ted Mero (2011) found a number of common ways of engaging stakeholders, including t-shirts, social media, online sustainability calculators (to show savings), giveaways (including power strips and timers), and holding open meetings among sustainability decision makers – and including input from the campus community.

### **Remove Obstacles**

Communication plans will not ensure acceptance, however. One way to remove obstacles organization members might put up is through training. The PACES training discussed earlier, which has been adopted by a number of colleges and universities, is a great example of training creating action. Most importantly, this training is at the hyper-local level, within individual offices and departments, which allows the sustainability planning and decision making that occurs to be the direct input of those local stakeholders who can then see the effects of their planning and effort around them.

## Early Wins

The ability for individual offices, units, and departments to witness changes, both in behaviors and actions, helps demonstrative early wins that leaders can build on to enact more broad-based policies. For example, if a PACES-level training is successful and staff begin to see how their actions have direct impacts on energy consumption, fiscal savings, and personal benefit, the sustainability team could look to policies such as bottled water sale bans or trayless dining facilities. Capitalizing on these *early wins* can help faculty, staff, and student move from *easy* steps to those that might have earlier created more resistance.

## Keep Going!

Here is where a strong communication plan can come into play. As the early wins start adding up and plans for more widespread initiatives are discussed, it is important to keep the entire institution aware of progress toward a sustainable future, and provide opportunities for stakeholders to share their ideas for how to continue. Such communication strategies involve celebrating the progress made, what the current picture looks like (such as the current status in reducing greenhouse gas emissions), and ideas for future development.

## New Culture

Of course, the ultimate goal for sustainability leaders is the total adaptation by the community and an embrace of the concepts inherent in sustainability. Exactly where this point occurs is, quite honestly, unknown among sustainability professionals; in fact, many might argue that that point cannot ever truly be reached.

Anthony Cortese, the President of Second Nature, a non-profit organization focuses on sustainability in higher education, argues that this point might be realized when sustainability becomes the goal of higher education (2011). He notes that sustainability is *not* only about the environment, but having basic needs human needs met, while addressing social justices such as poverty and health. He also argues that, as mentioned above, this organizational shift, at its core, requires “a fundamental change in mindset and action” (p. 1). Higher education, many think, is in the best position to prepare professionals the skills required to embrace this mindset.

## Conclusions

The issues surrounding the context of sustainability are pressing – and this urgent challenge can best be addressed by higher education. Doing this, and making it the goal of higher education, requires a complete culture shift among institutions of higher education – as well as a number of innovations in all aspects of higher education administration. That said, frameworks already exist to help guide in this culture shift, reducing barriers and providing guidance so that the entire campus community can not only be educated about sustainability, but also fully embrace its practices.

At the center of this innovation is the sustainability professional. This recent addition to higher education administration often requires professionals to bring together diverse interests, from faculty, to students, to staff from all areas of campus operations. In turn, sustainability directors and coordinators are presented with an opportunity to address a common problem through their expertise in these diverse areas. This paper has presented a number of suggestions and resources to assist the sustainability professional in finding where their institution is currently situated within each frame – and where they can grow.



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