Are We Really Educating about Sustainability?

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Abstract: As sustainability peer educator programs continue to develop on college and university campuses, it is important to consider how such programs define and manifest sustainability within their operations. In this article I review a guide, recently published by two international associations, for developing sustainability peer educator programs, and argue that it signals an insufficient approach to sustainability within such programs and that more attention is needed on the economic and social dimensions of sustainability.

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In *Student Sustainability Educators: A Guide to Creating and Maintaining an Eco-Rep Program on Your Campus*, published by the National Wildlife Foundation and the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, Erickson (2012) points to over 60 sustainability peer educator programs in existence at colleges and universities across the United States and Canada. While the nuances of each program are influenced by its host campus, the guiding principle of all documented sustainability peer educator programs, according to Erickson, remains relatively consistent: to engage college students in teaching other students about sustainable living on- and off-campus (2012). Despite the apparent success of sustainability peer educator programs, as exhibited both by the number of programs currently in operation and by the historical relevance of peer educator/leadership programs for other campus services, there seems to be little research on the success and outcomes of peer programs designed for sustainability education. The deficiency of knowledge in this area may serve as one of many factors leading to what seems to be a concerning trend among such programs, as highlighted by those mentioned in *Student Sustainability Educators*: do such programs actually educate on sustainability?

Representing both a goal and a process, *sustainability* is a term used to represent an international movement that has emerged from the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s, though many principles of this movement have historically been core elements of African cultures and communities indigenous to North America (Edwards, 2012). Defined in *Our Common Future* by the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) as an ability to "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," sustainability, or sustainable development, is intergenerational in scope and has a focus on two key concepts: the needs of human populations and the limitations of the earth's systems to provide for those needs (1987, p. 1). It is a concept that requires a systems thinking view of the world we live in, one that draws connections between economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability. With a primary focus on addressing global poverty, *Our Common Future*,

> called for a broader understanding of sustainable development that could address, particularly, the growing issue of poverty through a global ethic to develop societies in ways that would foster greater equity, would not be environmentally detrimental, and were economically viable. (Edwards, 2012, pp. 20-21)

Often referred to as the "triple bottom line" (Elkington, 1997; Kerr & Hart-Steffes, 2012), this more expansive and integrated view of the connections between economic, environmental, and social problems and their impact on human wellbeing, though arguably problematic in its anthropocentrism, helps to expand conversations about environmental issues to include their relevance to economic and social justice. While each is valuable in its own right, the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability, when combined, offer a more complete frame for considering and working to improve our common future. Unfortunately, as Edwards notes, "not all institutions of higher education include all three aspects of sustainability in their efforts" (2012, p. 23). Specifically, this seems to be true for sustainability peer educator programs.

Sustainability peer educator programs, as Erickson (2012) notes, are most often referred to as "Eco-Rep" programs and "seek to shift student culture toward pro-sustainability behaviors through education and outreach" (p. 4). The first of these programs began at Tufts University in 2001, with the goal of broadening student participation in on-campus climate action work (Erickson, 2012). Erickson further explains that this program was "designed as an opportunity for students to learn about environmental issues (…) and become actively involved in greening projects in the residence halls" (p. 4). Its goals included developing students as environmental educators/activists, increasing student awareness of environmental actions, and institutionalizing environmental stewardship (Erickson, 2012). As such, sustainability peer educator programs have developed from a foundation that was primarily, if not entirely, focused on environmental issues.

Of the sixteen Eco-Rep programs with best practices highlighted in *Student Sustainability Educators*, eleven frame their success with a specifically environmental lens, failing to include either the economic or social dimensions of sustainability in their description. The remaining five do not reference any of the three dimensions specifically and instead use the overarching terms *sustainability* and/or *sustainable* to describe behavior change and outreach efforts, the generality of which may or may not represent a complete attention to the various elements of sustainability. Moreover, recruitment materials included for three sustainability peer educator programs call specific attention to recruiting "environmental change agents," students who "understand environmental topics," and students who are prepared to "raise awareness about ecological issues (and) encourage environmentally responsible behavior" (Erickson, 2012, pp. 26-28). Missing from each of the sustainability peer educator programs highlighted is a clear attention to the economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Students, faculty, and administrators in higher education should, then, wonder whether sustainability peer educator programs are in fact educating on sustainability per se or if they are instead environmental programs by a different name.

While Erickson (2012) notes that "not all student sustainability education and outreach programs have 'Eco-Rep' in their title," the predominance of that title amongst those in the guide implies a perspective much more grounded in the importance of environmental education and/or representation than it does an approach to the interconnected and systemic nature of sustainability (p. 4). The focus of such programs on creating extended outreach efforts for "issues such as waste reduction and energy conservation to a broader student audience, beyond those students that are already 'eco-minded,'" neglects issues such as economic stability and social justice issues of access and equity (p. 4). The triple bottom line, a key distinction between sustainability and environmentalism, should be a cornerstone of sustainability peer educator programs, if the design and implementation of such programs is to live up to the expectations implied and declared in their name. Doing so represents a more informed and current understanding of sustainability as a movement that incorporates, but is not limited to, a dedication to environmental protection, one that can result in what Edwards (2012) refers to as "the unbearable whiteness of being green:"

> Despite good intentions, many green solutions end up perpetuating environmental racism by not addressing the problem and moving it away from those with access, power, and resources to a place where it affects those with less access, power, and resources. This

can result not just in environmental racism, but also environmental classism and nationalism. (pp. 22-23)

An integrated approach to peer education on sustainability that aligns environmental conservation/preservation with economic security and social justice is more apt to ensure the process of education for sustainability represents the values inherent in the concept. Sustainability becomes, for example, as much about waste reduction and energy conservation as it does the public health impact of pollution and the national/international economic security and stability of chosen energy sources. Moreover, incorporating all three dimensions of sustainability can lead to more successful and widely-adopted beliefs in sustainability and commitments to sustainable living and operations on campus (Edwards, 2012).

As Timpson et al. (2006) suggest, a "holistic, interconnected perspective makes sense in both practical and theoretical terms. Complex topics resist simplistic, reductionist analyses and, instead, require sophisticated interdisciplinary thinking and creativity" (p. xvi). The policy implications proposed in *Our Common Future*, which include attention to a rising population, the growing challenge of food security, the importance of biodiversity, energy security, industry inputs and outputs, and the impacts of regional planning are not easily suited for simplified approaches. Though the complex, macro-level nature of such issues may be difficult to fully address within the micro-level scope of college sustainability peer educator programs, they nevertheless represent the span of sustainability as inclusive of more than solely environmental issues. While sustainability peer educator programs do not necessarily need to adopt a comprehensive focus on all of these issues, in order to remain consistent with the sustainability – rather than environmental – movement, they should adopt a comprehensive focus on the concept of sustainability itself. Sustainability education warrants attention to more than eco-representation. Those involved in the process of sustainability peer education should work to more accurately represent the scope of the concept. Within the context of an issue that has direct relevance to the quality and security of life in current and future generations, sustainability peer educator programs could benefit from being more mindful of and responsive to the imperative offered in *Our Common Future*: "the time has come to break out of past patterns. Attempts to maintain social and ecological stability through old approaches to development and environmental protection will increase instability" (WCED, 1987, Introduction, para. 104). Over 25 years ago, the WCED (1987) argued "our inability to promote (sustainability) is often a product of the relative neglect of economic and social justice within and amongst nations" (Chapter 2, para. 26). As associations and individuals essential to the development of leaders poised to affect change in economic, environmental, and social terms, those working with and encouraging the development of sustainability peer educator programs would do well to avoid repeating the patterns of history and instead embark on both a new and more fitting, though perhaps more challenging, path of sustainability education.

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