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Sustainability Efforts at South Dakota State University

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ABSTRACT

South Dakota State University wants to develop a sustainable environment. However, the University has, thus far, refused to make a formal commitment to sustainability. This paper examines how the ecology, communication networks, politic decisions, and issue networks of the University have influenced the University administration to have a goal towards sustainability yet refuse formal commitments to improving the sustainability of the University. Interviews with individuals intimately involved with issues of sustainability at the University are used to present a case study of events from the time sustainability became a goal of University to current. Public administration theory is used to provide a deeper understanding of the events, such as why the University does not make a formal commitment to sustainability, and draw some informed conclusions. Recommendations are provided throughout the paper in order to aid students, faculty, and the University administration in improving sustainability efforts at the University.

INTRODUCTION

South Dakota State University (SDSU) has four goals on which decision makers rely. The goals are listed in the University's strategic plan titled, "Achieving National Distinction, Strengthening Local Relevance: The South Dakota State University Plan, 2008-2012." The plan creates a vision that is shared by the individual colleges and other components of SDSU. The purpose of the plan is to ensure that the University continues to fulfill its mission and develop along its envisioned path. (Achieving National Distinction)

Goal two of the SDSU strategic plan promotes "economic growth, vibrant communities, and [a] sustainable environment" (Achieving National Distinction). The University clearly wants to promote sustainability efforts on campus in order to meet its goals and accomplish its mission. Sustainability is "meet[ing] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations..." (The Sustainable Campus). Is SDSU meeting its goal? It has made some progress towards that end, however, the University has not made any formal commitment to sustainability outside of its strategic plan.

¹ Because the terms green and sustainable are synonymous with reducing humankind's impacts on the environment the terms are used interchangeably throughout the paper.

METHODOLOGY

The above question is answered by examining sustainability efforts at SDSU as a case study. Key personnel in the administration, faculty, and student and faculty organizations were interviewed in order to establish a clear picture of campus sustainability efforts. The information is introduced and analyzed alongside public administration theory in order to broaden the understanding of events and draw some informed conclusions. At the end of the paper recommendations are provided so that the administration, faculty, and student and faculty organizations may enhance their efforts to improve sustainability on campus and achieve the goals of the institution.

LIMITATIONS

Interviews were conducted with people that have direct and intimate knowledge about the issue of sustainability at SDSU. However, the interview designed to represent the position of the President's office was conducted with Bob Otterson, the Executive Assistant to the President, and not with President Chicoine himself. As a result, this paper does not present the direct positions of the president on the issue of sustainability. Additionally, there are many other people involved with the issue of sustainability on campus. Because not all people can be interviewed, people representing the administration, faculty, and student and faculty organizations were interviewed. Their accounts of events and positions on the issue of sustainability do not provide the entire picture or depth of the actual issue of sustainability on campus. Nonetheless, they have the most intimate knowledge of the issue and can provide the best insights.

Another, and less clear, limitation of the paper is that it is difficult to understand the actual state of sustainability efforts at SDSU. The University doesn't provide any data as to its progress towards sustainability on campus. As a consequence, there is no independent, quantitative, and objective review of the state of sustainability on the University campus.

WHY SUSTAINABILITY IS IMPORTANT

According to its mission statement, SDSU wants to "create a prosperous future for the people of South Dakota and their communities, and for the region and the nation, through excellence in education, in innovation and new knowledge creation and in putting knowledge to work." However, environmental degradation, resource exhaustion, and global warming threaten the University from being able to accomplish its mission in providing "a prosperous future." If the University fails to adapt to the changing environment and prepare future generations by addressing the current global climate change problems it cannot provide the "excellence in education" it states as its mission. (Achieving National Distinction)

Many colleges and universities across the United States have recognized the dangers presented by unsustainable practices at their institutions. As a result, they have signed onto the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment. This highly respected and recognized commitment serves as a framework for colleges and universities to combat

the problems of global climate change. Colleges and universities in all 50 states have signed onto the commitment with a total of nearly 600 members. Its goal is for colleges and universities to create and work on plans that significantly cut greenhouse gas emissions and get campuses carbon neutral as soon as possible in order to provide a model for the communities they operate in and prepare students for the number one challenge of tomorrow – global environmental change. (Presidents Climate Commitment) In South Dakota, the University of South Dakota, Black Hills State University, the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, and several peer institutions have signed the commitment (Poppinga).

Formal commitments such as the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment are important for universities who that want to improve sustainability because they make the institution accountable to people outside the home institution, allow the institution to collaborate and pool resources with other institutions, and provide a framework for data collection and reporting that make progress towards sustainability measurable. While SDSU has a goal of creating a sustainable environment in its strategic plan it has not signed any formal commitment such as the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment.

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY'S APPROACH TO SUSTAINABILITY

SDSU recognizes the importance of developing a sustainable environment. Otterson pointed to goal two of the strategic plan as a demonstration of the University's commitment to sustainability. But the University's sustainability efforts are far behind other schools. As Jane Hegland, leader of the campus organization known as Project Sustainability, said "I come from Minnesota and to be just starting a recycling program shows just how far back this University is in terms of sustainability." So where exactly is the University in terms of sustainability?

In 2006, David Chicoine was selected to be SDSU's executive and as President he developed the University's current strategic plan. He has demonstrated that he is concerned with campus sustainability by considering environmental impacts in planning, aiding in the formation of an organization concerned with sustainability on campus, and providing support for efforts to reduce energy consumption on campus such as replacing outdated and/or inefficient minor appliances (i.e. compact fluorescent light bulbs and energy efficient radiators). However, despite the improvements in sustainability, the University has refused to clarify its commitment to sustainability through a formal commitment like the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment.

UNDERSTANDING THE DEPTH OF COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY

The ecology of SDSU must be examined in order to understand why sustainability efforts on campus have improved but the administration has refused to make a formal

commitment to a sustainable campus. As John M. Gaus details in his essay "The Ecology of Public Administration," by looking at the "ecology" or "setting" it can be determined exactly what an administration is doing and why they are doing it. Gaus suggests that examining the "people, place, physical technology, social technology, wishes and ideas, catastrophe, and personality" will lead to the fullest understanding of an administration. (Gaus, 79).

The ecology of SDSU changed when Chicoine took office in 2007. It was a year when people came together to improve sustainability at SDSU. The general public was becoming increasingly conscious of global environmental change as a problem that needed to be addressed. As a result, the South Dakota State Legislature passed legislation requiring all new construction and major renovations on South Dakota university campuses to be carried out in accordance with LEED Silver standards.² LEED Silver standards establish a minimum set of actions that must be made in construction for the construction to be environmentally friendly and conserve energy (U.S. Green Building Council). The growing public consciousness of the global environmental change and the legislation passed by the South Dakota State Legislature were important changes in the ecology of SDSU.

Chicoine took office in a setting of people and place expressing growing concerns for sustainability efforts at SDSU. Chicoine's executive assistant, Otterson, noted that Chicoine was aware of the demands for sustainability and sought the aid of knowledgeable faculty members to help him with sustainability issues. One such individual was Dr. Jane Hegland, a Professor and Department Head of Design, Merchandising, and Consumer Sciences.

Hegland was given the role of organizing the first annual Plain Green Symposium by Chicoine. She was selected because of her academic work on responsible textile practices, interest in sustainability, and training in permaculture. The symposium was planned and executed in partnership between SDSU and Koch Hazard Architects with the purpose of "bring[ing] together building professionals, government officials, students, and the general public to learn about and discuss varied issues affecting [the] environment" (Koch Hazard Architects).

As Hegland organized SDSU's role in the Plain Green Symposium, she developed a good working relationship with the President. She expressed to him her desire to create an organization of faculty and students that would be concerned with matters of sustainability on campus. The President supported her and so with the help of her colleagues and friends she founded the new organization, Project Sustainability, on September 19, 2007 (Frank).³ Hegland detailed the organization's main goals as educating people on the issues, expanding recycling on campus and helping ARAMARK, the University's food service provider, improve sustainability. The organization she helped create has been part of the reason sustainability efforts have improved on campus.

Some successes Project Sustainability has made are expanding recycling on campus, coordinating with the SDSU's ARAMARK Food Service Manager to improve practices, and holding meetings consisting of faculty and students that help to create a node for information on the goal of a sustainable campus. Most of the group's accomplishments have been achieved by working from the bottom up. Project Sustainability will set a goal and

² The legislation known as Senate Bill 188 passed and was signed into law on March 17, 2008 by Governor Mike Rounds.

communicate with others in order to achieve it. It doesn't result from administrative policies but, rather, from the voluntary actions of people in the position to influence procedures on campus. For example, the organization was able to convince ARAMARK to go trayless at select dining locations in order to conserve water and energy. Such achievements can be attributed to the hard work and dedication of individuals in the organization and those they influence. Without the organization's close connections with the administration and Chicoine's support they wouldn't have been able to achieve as much as they have.

As Garnett discusses in his essay, "Administrative Communication: The Concept of Its Professional Centrality," decision makers are influenced by the many channels of communication at hand. Among those numerous channels of communication available, it is the "informal lines of communication" that often heavily influence the decisions that are made (Garnett, 259). Hegland and other faculty members a part of Project Sustainability have the unique advantage of informal lines of communication with the administration. This is because the faculty members often know each other, and when brought together through an organization, they are able to communicate outside of the traditional communication channels. They often have long lasting work and non-work related relationships. For example, Hegland is able to communicate directly with the President because she forged a working relationship with the President when she organized the University's role in the Plain Green Symposium. Hegland said that Otterson often sends emails asking how things are going for Project Sustainability. This level of communication between faculty members and the administration allows the organization to let its concerns be heard by the people in the positions to do something about them.

While the close relationship between Project Sustainability and the administration can be helpful, it also creates some problems. One problem is that faculty members may be unwilling to ask others to make the necessary changes because it may strain their relationships. This conflict of obligations negatively impacts the goals of the organization. Another problem is posed by the temporal quality of accomplishments achieved through "informal networks". Agreements that are made through "informal networks" are usually based on the relationship over which they were made and lack the official quality of agreements that arise through the formal communication channels. As such, the advancements made through informal networks can easily be reversed. Project Sustainability's type of relationship with the administration helps explain why the University has made changes towards sustainability but has not made any formal commitment.

Project Sustainability often works with Sierra Club, another green organization on campus. Andy Janes and Alison Wipf, concerned about environmental issues, founded Sierra Club in the fall of 2007. Janes explained that the organization was formed because they felt that their previous organization Students Helping Animals and the Environment (SHARE) wasn't accomplishing anything because it's concerns were too broad. Sierra Club would focus on just the environment and "hopefully make some positive changes at the University." Janes says the goal of the organization is to inform and educate people about environmental issues.

³ The organization wasn't given the name Project Sustainability until a couple months later.

⁴ Informal lines of communication are often referred to as the "grapevine."

Hoping to accomplish some positive change at SDSU, Sierra Club asked Chicoine to sign the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment. Sierra Club believed that, because the commitment is so widely accepted and because it does not require any concrete limits to be set, they would be able to get Chicoine to sign the commitment. They chose to show student support for the commitment by getting signatures from faculty members, student organizations, and the Student's Association. They were able to get nearly 20 student organizations and 60 faculty members to endorse the commitment. Their major accomplishment came when the Student's Association, which represents the entire student body, voted in favor of endorsing the commitment. In April 2008 they made an appointment with the President's office to present the commitment.

The club did not meet with Chicoine. Instead, they met with his executive assistant, Otterson. Otterson explained that he makes decisions based on what he knows of how the President thinks. He also advises the President as to what he thinks is the best course of action. During the first meeting between Otterson and Janes, Janes explained what the commitment was, how it worked, and why the University should sign it. When Janes was finished, Otterson told Janes that he didn't think the President would go for it but he should stop back in a week to make sure.

A week later, Janes again met with Otterson in his office. Otterson explained that Chicoine was unwilling to sign the commitment because it required a reduction in green house gas emissions. Because the University relies on a coal-burning central heating plant it would be unable to "abide by the spirit of the commitment." Janes explained that the commitment did not require the University to stop burning coal but merely required the University to come up with a plan to replace the burning of coal in the future but Otterson held firm. By returning to the examination of SDSU's ecology, it becomes apparent that "physical technology" is an important influence on the administration because the coalburning central heating plant is not something that can easily be replaced.

While Janes was disappointed with the President's decision not to sign, he hopes that in the future the President will sign the commitment. One aspect that Janes found surprising about the new administration was that he was unable address the President directly. The limited openness of the new administration effects how decisions are made in the administration. Students and student organizations are unable to influence the administration. As a result, the administration has made only small efforts to improve sustainability on campus. The students are unable to get the formal commitments to sustainability that they seek from the administration.

Because the students are unable to openly communicate with the President the administration cannot reflect the student's desires in policy. Recalling Garnett's ideas of communication, it can be determined that the students will not have the same effectiveness in communicating with administration because they may experience "blockage[s]" when Otterson acts as an intermediary (258). They must rely on Otterson to properly transmit their message to the President. Students and their organizations lack the informal lines of communication that serve as such an integral part to decision making. Thus, what the students communicate to the administration has less influence on the decision making process.

Because students experience blockages, when it comes to creating a sustainable campus, students have worked within their own organizations in order to get things done.

Janes gave one such example with the original recycling program that was later expanded through the efforts of Project Sustainability. As Student's Association senator, Justin Goetz worked hard to establish a recycling program on campus in 2006. Goetz encountered many problems in getting his message heard by the administration, and when they did hear he had problems with their willingness to cooperate. When creating the recycling program, Dean Kattelmann, the Assistant Vice President of Facilities and Services, told Goetz that he would not allow his janitors to empty the recycling bins that were being put up. As a result, Goetz created a recycling taskforce consisting of student volunteers on campus that would empty the recycling bins and take them to designated dumpsters that they obtained through a donation from Cooks, the garbage disposal company that services the University. Eventually, Goetz was able to secure money from the Student's Association in order to create a paid position on campus to handle recycling which ensured that the program would remain effective and continue into the future.

As new programs arise Kattelmann is placed with an increasing burden on his department. He must be able to manage more when he already has a lot to manage and do so without adequate funding. Facilities and Services is responsible for supporting all functions of the University, such as maintaining buildings.

Kattelmann sees sustainability efforts on campus as something that should be weighed with a cost/benefit analysis in order to make fiscally smart business decisions. "Many things just make sense," he said in reference to sustainability measures. However, he feels that students need to share the responsibility and that everything can't be put on the administration. He gave an example, "We don't have a parking problem. We have a problem with students not wanting to walk."

Kattelmann is interested in seeing certain developments on campus that will make it greener. He has been known to show up for pProject sSustainability meetings in order to hear the groups concerns. He has taken several measures to conserve energy and water on campus such as installing motion sensors in rooms so that lights will only turn on when they are required. Often, however, blame falls on him for not doing more to make the campus greener. As a result, Kattelmann is quick to defend his position. But, he notes, "not every idea is bad, just some can't be implemented."

A reason that some ideas may not be able to be implemented is, for example, a lack of money to do it. When SDSU was mandated by legislature to meet LEED Silver standards on all new construction and major renovation projects they did not include any appropriation of funds. As a result, Kattelmann must make tough choices on how to spend the money he does have. "It takes money away from other things we could be doing," when talking about things he could do to help make the campus greener.

Chicoine, like Kattelmann, is willing to accept measures that make the University more sustainable as long as they make financial sense. But if they don't, he will reject them. This was the case with his rejection of the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment. For the President and his assistant, it didn't make sense to go green because coal is a cheap way to heat the University (Poppinga). Financial decisions enter into public

⁵ While the example comes from an interview conducted with Andy Janes, the author also knows Justin Goetz's story.

administration as political choice as is described by Rubin in her essay, "The Politics of Public Budgets."

According to Rubin, because budgeting is an open process, it reflects the political environment of the administration creating the budget. Chicoine has been busy expanding fundraising from "philanthropists, state funding, corporate relations and money from tuition and fees" (Fugelberg). According to Otterson, His efforts have resulted in an increase from fundraising sources but no funds have been allocated to expand sustainability efforts on campus.

While the ecology of SDSU includes efforts to create a sustainable campus they are relatively small given the overall environment. The budget reflects this political choice. While a green campus is not a high priority for Chicoine, he is willing to improve sustainability on campus in areas that don't require an allocation of scarce resources. The President doesn't want to be obligated to allocating scarce resources to sustainability efforts on campus. This is why there have been some small increases in sustainability efforts on campus by the administration but not a formal commitment.

Chicoine has acknowledged the role for sustainability in ways that don't require him to allocate scarce resources. As stated by Janes and Otterson, two major steps the University has taken are; one, purchasing as much energy as possible from renewable energy sources and two, moving the University towards a walking campus. These steps do not require any serious changes in expenditures but go a long way in moving the campus towards sustainability.

Chicoine is aware of movements to improve sustainability on campus and reflects it in his goals and actions. His actions seem to reflect the successive limited comparisons method of decision-making as is detailed by Lindbloom in his essay, "The Science of Muddling Through" (Lindbloom, 223). He understands that some groups, like Project Sustainability and Sierra Club, have a goal to create a green campus while other groups also have their goals which sometimes stand in stark contrast to a green campus.

As a result, he makes small incremental decisions that continually adjust to the changing inputs and demands from the parties involved. The goal is non-comprehensive and based on successive comparisons. For example, in implementing a walking only campus, Chicoine is doing so with successive comparisons. In 2008, he cut off access to vehicles on select parts of campus. Next year, he will cut off access to even more parts of campus based on the responses he received from the public in 2008. As Chicoine successfully implements his current goals he will certainly draw from his experiences and attempt to implement other green campus measures in the future. This also explains why the University has not made a formal commitment to a green campus but has taken small incremental changes towards sustainability.

One reason that sustainability on campus has not been a priority for the administration is the lack of information networks around the issue. According to Heclo in his essay titled, "Issue Networks and the Executive Establishment," issue networks are "the many whose webs of influence provoke and guide the exercise of power" (Heclo, 441). Members of issue networks have shared knowledge on the issue they wish to influence.

At SDSU, issue networks concerned with sustainability on campus consist of environmentally concerned faculty and students. Since environmental issues such as global environmental change are part of so many disciplines one might suspect that the issue

network formed around sustainability on campus would be larger then it really is.⁶ However, for an issue network to exist, knowledgeable individuals must attempt to affect policy with their understanding of the issues. (Fugleberg)

Few faculty members and students seek to influence the sustainability policies of the administration. Hegland feels that there are not many people on campus that act on their concerns and attempt to influence the administration towards sustainability. Another indicator is the membership in organizations such as Project Sustainability and Sierra Club. Membership in these organizations is low and active membership is much lower. Whatever the reason, it is clear that few people that who are knowledgeable about the issues seek to influence the administration's policies. This limits the pressure on the administration to pursue a green campus. As a result, SDSU has not made a formal commitment to a sustainable campus. Instead, the University makes small changes towards sustainability on campus reflective of the pressure the small issue networks are able to apply to the administration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order for SDSU to meet its goal to provide a sustainable environment it needs to strengthen its efforts. One weakness has been the University's hesitation to make any formal commitment to sustainability. A formal commitment would clarify the University's goal of sustainability, allow the University to collaborate with other institutions in order to achieve sustainability, and provide a framework in which it can work to achieve sustainability. In order to improve sustainability on campus it is important that the University understands its current state and devises a clear plan on how to improve sustainability. A formal commitment to sustainability through such a framework as the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment would serve to formalize the University's goal to provide a sustainable environment and make progress quantitative and traceable.

Because students experience communication blockages with the President's office it is important that those blockages be removed. As Hegland said about Chicoine, "he has said time and time again the reason we are here is the students." By removing communication blockages between student organizations and the President's office the President can account for their concerns in administrative decisions. It is also possible that the President may decide differently about making a formal commitment to sustainability after hearing the student's concerns directly.

It is also important for the faculty and students to take extra steps in order to improve the University's sustainability. The small issue networks that have been formed around campus sustainability are not enough to pressure the President to increase his efforts towards sustainability. It is important that faculty and student organizations broaden their bases, encourage active membership, and actively seek to influence the administration on the issue of sustainability.

⁶ Political science, biological science, architecture, design, and many other fields of study encounter the subject of sustainability or global environmental change in their disciplines.
 ⁷ There are fewer than 7 active members in Sierra Club and nearly the same for Project Sustainability.

The successes that have been achieved through informal lines of communication need to be formalized. By formalizing the accomplishments that have been achieved through informal lines of communication it is more difficult for the administration to reverse course. This does not mean that all communication must occur through formal networks. Rather, once an agreement has been reached through an informal network it should also be made through the formal network.

CONCLUSION

The ecology at SDSU changed when Chicoine took office. A growing political consciousness of global environmental change, mandates by the South Dakota State Legislature, and the formation of faculty and student organizations around the issue of sustainability and the environment influenced the President to improve sustainability on campus. Reinforcing the President's commitment to improving sustainability on campus is the informal communication networks that exist between the President and Project Sustainability members.

However, there is not enough pressure to convince Chicoine to allocate scarce resources towards improving sustainability. The President's reliance on the limited successive comparisons method of forming public policy reflects the pressures different issue networks are able to bring to bear upon him. The President is attempting to balance the different demands and wants of various groups and information networks but may be unable to adequately gauge their demands due to the limited communication that exists between the President's office and student organizations.

SDSU has a goal of providing a sustainable environment and has taken steps to improve the sustainability of the University. However, it has not made any formal commitment to sustainability. The University's reason for making small changes towards sustainability but not making a formal commitment can be explained by the ecology, communication networks, politic decisions, and issue networks of the University.

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