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The Challenges of Infusing Sustainability in the Campus Operations and Curriculum at Florida Gulf Coast University

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Florida Gulf Coast University, located in southwest Florida in the United States, opened its doors in 1997 with approximately 1,500 students as the tenth institution in the State University System. It was born in controversy. Indeed, the site of the campus was a topic of disagreement between proponents of economic growth and development and proponents of sustainability and environmental sensitivity.

In 1992, the Board of Regents had noted the need for a campus in the fast-growing but environmentally sensitive southwestern Florida and saw an opportunity for an emphasis on environmental study. The founding mission statement of the university declares that:

The region in which the university will be located combines rapid population growth in a geographically constrained area, the Gulf of Mexico to the west and Lake Okeechobee to the east, with a unique and sensitive environment. The university, therefore, will be ideally suited to emphasize study of the environment. Building on a strong programme at the undergraduate level, the university will have the opportunity to ultimately develop as a center for environmentally oriented graduate programmes and research. (State of Florida 1992)

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When the state of Florida was offered 760 acres in the middle of several thousand acres of undeveloped land slated for minimal development on which to build the campus, it accepted the offer. The Army Corps of Engineers established a high environmental standard for the campus plan: of the 760 acres, only 360 could be used for development and the other 400 acres had to be restored by re-establishing natural waterways, removing invasive exotics and creating ponds and wetlands for aquifer recovery.

But building the university in the middle of ecologically fragile, undeveloped land led to the explosion of housing developments nearby, the creation of shopping malls and business parks and the widening of roads and canals. As a result, a special commission was created in the county to balance the needs of the university, the impetus for growth and the fragility of the landscape. This commission brought together community members, local politicians and business people, and faculty, staff and students to negotiate differences and reach a compromise.

Because of the rapid population growth in the area and higher-than-expected enrolment at the university (more than 10,000 students by 2009), we were less careful than we should have been during our initial building phase and we violated several standards of the campus and county plans, for which we were fined and our commitment to sustainability was questioned. Indeed, because of the rapid and unexpected growth of our student population, the administration proposed to build on some of the 400 acres originally slated for restoration and conservation. After an outcry from the public, faculty and students, the president decided to seek other nearby land for campus expansion.

While some of the university’s past practices may have been questionable in terms of its commitment to sustainability, the university community has been inspired by a set of guiding principles and learning goals that state:

Informed and engaged citizens are essential to the creation of a civil and sustainable society. The university values the development of the responsible self, grounded in honesty, courage, and compassion, and committed to the advancement of democratic ideals. . . . Integral to the university’s philosophy is instilling in students an environmental consciousness that balances economic and social aspirations with the imperative for ecological sustainability. (Deans Council 1996)

Likewise, our undergraduate learning goal number three, ‘ecological perspective’, states that students will:

Know the issues related to economic, social and ecological sustainability. Analyze and evaluate ecological issues locally and globally. Participate in collaborative projects requiring awareness and/or analysis of ecological and environmental issues. (Florida Gulf Coast University n.d.)

The concept of sustainability is built into the foundation of the university and although it has not always been upheld, it has led to some significant developments both in the curriculum and the physical plant as will be described in the other articles of this issue. Perhaps most important were the creation of a required, university-wide
course entitled ‘The University Colloquium: A Sustainable Future’ and the attempt to infuse sustainability into other parts of the curriculum, especially through our Quality Enhancement Plan, a primary feature of our regional accreditation.

Despite, and perhaps because of, the challenges and controversies, Florida Gulf Coast University has begun to realise its potential in terms of environmental sustainability. While the principles of environmental sustainability have shaped our consciousness since our inception, they have now truly begun to frame our practice at Florida Gulf Coast University as demonstrated in the recent, widespread reaffirmation of sustainability that we are experiencing on the campus as described in this special section.

Florida Gulf Coast University, as a relatively new institution of higher education, which states in its mission statement that we ‘practice and promote environmental sustainability’, is offered here as a case study for the advancement of sustainability practices. Our building construction and institutional practices, for which we received a National Wildlife Federation award, will be discussed as will our university-wide graduation requirement on sustainability called ‘The University Colloquium: A Sustainable Future’. We will also discuss our efforts to broaden the teaching and learning of sustainability across the curriculum through our Quality Enhancement Plan (defined later) and our work in our first-year writing courses and several upper-level courses that include a service learning component. Finally, our work with the American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment will be mentioned in terms of how it has guided our most recent activities.

Although the focus of these articles will be on the way in which we have advanced environmental sustainability, FGCU does embrace a wider view of sustainability to include such concepts as diversity, collaborative learning and assessment as a practice for continual renewal, all of which can be found in our guiding principles. This broader understanding of sustainability is incorporated into our curriculum and practices and is part of our community.

We work continuously to overcome the controversies into which we were born and those of our early years. We also continue to be inspired by the hope into which we were born. We present our accomplishments not as an ideal, but with the aspiration that they will help others. They are modest accomplishments. Nevertheless, we are earnestly pursuing the challenges of infusing sustainability into the critical dimensions of the life of our University.

References


Florida Gulf Coast University. n.d. ‘Student Learning Goals and Outcomes’. Available at http://www.fgcu.edu/info/outcomes.asp. (Accessed 14 August 2009)