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COMMENTARY

From Diversity to Sustainability: How Campus Ideology Is Born



Michael Glenwood for The Chronicle

By Peter Wood | OCTOBER 03, 2010

Recently I came across a photograph of students at an event gathered around a cake that bore the iced command, "Celebrate Sustainability!" Clearly the candle had been passed. For more than a generation, cakes at campus events have tutored students

to "Celebrate Diversity!" Something has changed—besides the frosting.

The pursuit of diversity on campuses remains a highly visible priority, but it is being subtly demoted by enthusiasm for sustainability. As an ideology, diversity is running out of steam, while sustainability is on fire. This month hundreds of colleges will mark the eighth annual Campus Sustainability Day, with activities to include a Webcast offering "social-change strategies and tools" to help campuses lower carbon emissions.

How did this happen? Partly it is the Macy's-window effect: Ideologies have to be replaced from time to time to attract attention. But sustainability is gaining ground also because it offers college students a stronger sense of personal significance than diversity does.

Diversity and sustainability are the two most characteristic ideas of the modern academy. Diversity asks us to focus on group identity and personal affiliation, and it puts race at the center of the discussion. Sustainability asks us to focus on humanity's use of natural resources, and it puts climate at the center of discussion. Outwardly, diversity and sustainability belong to separate narratives. They deal with different topics and might, in principle,

have no more friction between them than typically exists between English departments and physics labs. Or between polar bears and tropical fish. But in fact, diversity and sustainability have a complicated, decades-old rivalry.

They vie, in effect, for the same conceptual space and the same passions. Both are about repairing the world; both invite exuberant commitment; both are moralistic; and most of all, both are encompassing ideas that crowd out other encompassing ideas. They also compete for the same financial resources.

Diversity and sustainability are also both second-wave movements. Diversity is second-wave affirmative action; sustainability is second-wave environmentalism. Like all second-wave movements, each embodies a complicated awareness of its predecessor, by turns appropriating and repudiating the earlier movement. Diversity set aside the ideal of racial integration as a moral imperative for equity in favor of a convoluted claim that racial preferences should rest on pedagogical advantages. Few proponents of racial preferences actually believe this, and the old moral imperative lurks in the background. But the pedagogical rationale became enshrined in law in Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's majority opinion in the 2003 case *Grutter v. Bollinger*.

Likewise, sustainability set aside the driving idea of the original environmental movement, that we help ourselves when we clean up the environment. Sustainability shifts the focus to both the imagined future and the supposed needs of the earth itself. Sustainability decenters environmentalism from the health and enjoyment of living people to the world beyond and replaces a focus on the dangers of pollution with the idea that Western society itself is profoundly at odds with the earth.

Diversity and sustainability are not simply repackaging of old ideas. Both are distinct ideas in their own right, and both aspire to be cultural concepts that impose a general order, not only on the university but also on society at large. Both express vigorous dissatisfaction with the social order, but beyond that, they convey ideals that are probably irreconcilable. Diversity calls for a fractionated America but leaves intact a vision of personal success and amenity. Sustainability is, not far beneath the surface, a doctrine of privation, offering only the psychological comforts of asceticism.

One index of the rise of sustainability at the expense of diversity is the size of the institutional memberships of their professional groups. The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education now lists as members 800 colleges and universities in the United States. The National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, by contrast, has about 150 member institutions.

Diversity is a story of a once-fresh ideology that swept through higher education in a spirit of triumph but that quickly seems to be losing its status as the sexiest ideology on campus. Diversiphiles would like to keep the adrenaline flowing, but it is hard. Freshmen now arrive on campus already having sucked on multicultural milkshakes from kindergarten to senior prom. Diversity for them is just the same ol' same ol'.

That doesn't stop the diversicrat establishment from trying to pump new excitement into the project. California State University at Chico, for example, recently circulated a new "action plan" titled "To Form a More Inclusive Learning Community," in which the university president sets his sights on placing "diversity at the core of our mission, vision, and priorities." The practical goal is to get Chico State listed as an official "Hispanic-Serving Institution" by 2015, which requires substantially increasing Hispanic enrollment past the university's current 13.5 percent. (Chico State serves mostly a local population in a part of the state with relatively few Hispanics. Hispanics are already "overrepresented" at Chico from a purely demographic standpoint.) The federal designation "Hispanic-Serving Institution" would bring access to additional federal support. But the diversity game is never about just numbers and dollars. It is also about ideology and intimidation, and Chico State is actively pursuing those, too. As part of the new campaign, it invited the "Diversity Guru" Lee Mun Wah to provide workshops including "Unlearning Racism in the Classroom." Faculty members get the message: Openly expressed doubts about the diversity program will be treated as racist conduct.

Sustainability hasn't yet achieved this level of intimidation, but not for want of trying. AASHE keeps a directory of "peer-to-peer sustainability outreach programs," or "eco-reps." These are the busybodies who do things like go through students' trash to make sure that everyone is diligently recycling, and who hector everyone to squeeze into a tighter carbon footprint. The

Green Gator at Allegheny College is promoting dorm-based compost bins and planning to map energy usage. It urges lights out in the bathrooms and laundry. Bard College students, meanwhile, are working on "the psychology of fostering sustainable behavior" and are promoting "Recyclemania." If it sounds like the "psychology" of sustainability is akin to OCD, maybe that isn't far off. At the University of California at San Diego, the enforcers posted a shocking discovery complete with photos: "Sadly today we found a bunch of recyclables in the GARBAGE!" A happy ending, though: "We rescued all the recycling ... and got them in the recycling bin."

The power to enforce something, of course, always finds takers, no matter how petty the rules. Sustainability, however, seems especially suited to the rise of student enforcers. They might best be described as sustainabullies. Why does this have the power to light up the imaginations of so many students? How did it become the distinctive banner of this generation?

I view this changing of the ideological guard with wariness. Diversity was pretty bad; sustainability may be even worse. Both movements subtract from the better purposes of higher education. Diversity authorizes double standards in admissions and hiring, breeds a campus culture of hypocrisy, mismatches students to educational opportunities, fosters ethnic resentments, elevates group identity over individual achievement, and trivializes the curriculum. Of course, those punishments were something that had to be accepted in the spirit of atoning for the original sin of racism.

But for its part, sustainability has the logic of a stampede. We all must run in the same direction for fear of some rumored and largely invisible threat. The real threat is the stampede itself. Sustainability numbers among its advocates some scrupulous scientists and quite a few sober facilities managers who simply want to trim utility bills. But in the main, sustainability is the triumph of hypothesis over evidence. Its scientific grounding is mostly a matter of models and extrapolations and appeals to authority. Evoking imminent and planet-destroying catastrophe, sustainatopians call for radical changes in economic arrangements and social patterns. Higher education is summoned to set aside whatever it is doing to help make this revolution in production, distribution, and consumption a reality.

Sustainability combines some astonishingly radical ideas with mere wackiness. Many sustainability advocates want to replace free markets (a source, as they see it, of unsustainable growth and exploitation) with some kind of pan-national rule with little scope for private property rights. On the other hand, sustainatopians also busy themselves with eliminating trays from cafeterias and attacking the threat of plastic soda straws. Sustainability thus unites vaunting political ambition and comic burlesque. Both are at odds with patient and open-minded intellectual inquiry.

The diversity movement has always been rife with contradictions. Seeking to promote racial equality, it evolved into a system that perpetuates inequalities. But whatever else it is, the diversity movement thirsts to be part of mainstream America. Its ultimate goal is to make diversity a principle of the same standing as freedom and equality in our national life. The sustainability movement, by contrast, has no such affection for the larger culture or loyalty to the American experiment. It dismisses the comforts of American life, including our political freedom, as unworthy extravagance. Sustainability summons us to a supposedly higher good. Personal security, national prosperity, and individual freedom may just have to go as we press on to our low-impact, carbon-free new order. In this sense, it goes beyond promising to redeem us from social iniquity to redeeming us from human nature itself.

Many campus adherents to sustainability may eventually tire of its puritanical preachiness and its unfulfilled prophecies, but for the moment, sustainability has cachet. Diversity, meanwhile, has aged into a static bureaucracy, and diversicrats increasingly spend their energy polishing the spoons. The current displacement of diversity by sustainability can be traced back to two developments. In June 1992, Sen. John Kerry and Teresa Heinz attended the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development—the Rio Summit. On their return to the United States, they founded an advocacy group called Second Nature, specifically dedicated to bringing the sustainability movement to the American college campus. Second Nature is explicitly radical. It calls for making "sustainable living the *foundation of all learning and practice in higher education*." Second Nature chose as its primary tactic the winning over of college and university presidents, and it has so far succeeded in getting 674 to sign its "American College & University Presidents' Climate Commitment."

The other development that seems to have pushed sustainability forward as a campus movement was the rise of social activism in residence-life offices. Responding to a call from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching for colleges to do more to promote "community" on campus, residence-life staff stepped up in 1994 with new "co-curricular" programs heavily freighted with leftist ideas about social transformation. Sustainability soon became part of that package. In 2005, nine higher-education associations teamed up to create the Higher Education Associations Sustainability Consortium. They aimed, like Second Nature, to make "education for sustainable development" the priority for American higher education. The HEASC announcement was timed for a "United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development," from 2005 to 2014.

Sustainability thus did not grow up organically on campus. While there were faculty members who pursued research on climate change and a few, such as the Oberlin professor David Orr, who gained recognition as uncompromising proponents of radical environmentalism, there was no mass movement behind them, nor did such a movement well up from students. It arrived, Cortés-style, as a well-financed and shrewdly organized expedition bent on conquest. And its immediate target was academic administrations.

One wouldn't think on that basis that sustainability would have had much of a chance in displacing diversity as the dominant campus ideology. Yet here we are, eating our sustainability cake without a tray and sipping our bug juice without a plastic straw. In the end, I suspect that a quarter-century or so of hugging identity politics close and trying to feel perpetual shame about the nation's racial past just proved too dreary. Sustainability may be based on a grimmer view of life in general, but it offers relief from that ever-expanding story of group oppression that had eventually become all that diversity had to offer. In an odd way, sustainability is liberating.

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