

Can the Universities Contribute to Sustainability?

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ABSTRACT

On the 25th anniversary of the founding of EPA, Columbia University and the EPA cosponsored a conference that included a session entitled “Can the universities contribute to sustainability?” The conclusions to the discussion were far from clear, even though the focus was limited to environmental matters almost to the total exclusion of issues to equity and justice. The problems raised by dealing with issues of ‘interdisciplinary approaches’ were cited, among other things.

The paper will first address the issue of what is meant by sustainability or sustainable development, going well beyond the conventional focus on the environment.

This paper will argue that universities by-and-large cannot seriously address issues of sustainability. It will look at the structure of the institutional setting and particular the control of disciplines and departments and related matters. In addition the failure to take seriously policy needs will be addressed, particularly with a focus on the different questions and time frames that the policy maker places on research.

The paper will also note the failure of most institutions to look systematically at their own footprint on sustainability, whether it be in the form of their investments, their labor practices, their procurement, their relationship to the communities in which they are located, and the like.