

Building a Sustainable Learning Community

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ABSTRACT

The University of New Hampshire Office of Sustainability Programs (UNHOSP) was established in 1997 with a multi-million dollar endowment from an alumnus to develop a University-wide education program linking sustainability to community life. UNHOSP's initiatives work to integrate the principles and practices of sustainability into all facets of our land grant mission including teaching, research, operations, campus culture and public service. All initiatives involve collaboration with faculty, staff and students as well as local, regional, national and in some cases international partners. From a transportation demand management policy for the campus and a graduate curriculum in Public Health Ecology to a Citizen Panel on genetically modified food and a documentary on internationally renowned potters Ed and Mary Scheier, OSP collaborates with partners that share the common goal of improving community life through education. Our mission is to unite the UNH community in the common purpose of educating all students to advance sustainability in their civic and professional lives.

As one might expect, any unifying effort within an organization and community as complex and chaotic as a university of 12000 students, 900 faculty and 3000 staff faces the formidable challenge of fragmentation. In our experience, reconciling the tensions of freedom, responsibility, diversity, and unity within an organizational structure built around the separation of disciplines and functions demands an integrative vision and framework. To be successful, that vision and framework must establish and maintain intellectual, pedagogical and organizational integrity while pursuing four intermediate objectives: Ensuring inclusive participation, linking core community functions to our educational mission, ensuring well-grounded programming and maintaining strategic networking within and beyond the university.

This article will focus on the integrative vision and framework that guide our work, and the concrete form they take in the structure of the UNHOSP and the projects that result. As will be seen, our overall approach is cultural and therefore long-term. We are currently completing our sixth year in what we see as a ten year undertaking to achieve the first plateau of sustainability in a much longer journey. Over the past six years UNHOSP has worked to integrate fragmented knowledge residing in disparate disciplines, professions and practices into a form that allows us to bring it to bear on community life. The integrating framework that is so fundamental to our effort is rooted in a public health outlook that emerged over the last decade from efforts to understand the relationship of climate variability, change and health.

The framework presents health outcomes as the result of interactions of the climate system with ecological and social systems. Health outcomes are understood in their broadest sense to include the health of ecosystems and communities. Climate includes physical and chemical climate on short as well as long time scales so an ozone event in summer is part of the climate system as is record cold temperatures or drought. Obviously, climate both impacts and is impacted by social systems and ecological

systems, which as noted above, are assumed to be inextricably linked. All of our programming is derived from this framework and is organized around four initiatives that flow directly from it: Climate Education, Biodiversity Education (incorporating ecosystem health), Culture and Sustainability and Food and Society. The latter is associated with health outcomes as the food system is a powerful integrator of biodiversity, climate and culture in which everyone feels they have a direct stake.