

DePaul University

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What must be done? DePaul as Sustainable Learning Community

Scott Kelley, *DePaul University*



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What Must Be Done?

DePaul as Sustainable Learning Community

White Paper on Sustainability at DePaul University
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St. Vincent's vocation and therefore the Vincentian age emerged in January 1617 when Madame de Gondi turned to Vincent de Paul and asked "What must be done?" Often referred to as *the Vincentian Question*, it has shaped the Vincentian mission ever since.¹ At various times and in various contexts over the last 350 years, the Vincentian family has faithfully been witness to the profound vision of its founders, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Each effective response over the last few centuries, however, presupposed an accurate response to a prior question: "what is going on?" Reading and responding to the signs of the times, in other words, is what makes the Vincentian mission relevant for us today. In his times, Vincent's vision allowed him to see the hidden poverty and suffering that so many refused to acknowledge. In response to the poverty he witnessed, Vincent created sustainable and institutionalized solutions to address it.

Today's signs are even more ominous than the ones facing Vincent 350 years ago. Many recent commentators have noted that the world is now at a tipping point: every living system is declining and the rate of decline is accelerating as a growing human population continues to become more urban and more resource intensive. If the present trajectory continues unabated, many have argued, we will need 3 to 5 planets to sustain it. In short, we must leave behind an age of "domination and exploitation" and enter a new, rapidly developing age of sustainability.²

Reading the signs of the times and effectively answering the Vincentian question demands that we re-think our common calling to higher education. As Albert Einstein

¹ Rev. Edward R. Udovic, C.M., Ph.D., "Our good will and honest efforts." Vincentian perspectives on Poverty Reduction efforts in *What Would Vincent Do? Vincentian Higher Education And Poverty Reduction*, a special edition of *Vincentian Heritage*, vol 28 number 2, 2008.

² See, for example, Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It*. New York: Melcher Media, 2006; Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into The Future*. New York: Bell Tower, 1999; Stuart Hart, *Capitalism at the CrossRoads: The Unlimited Business Opportunities in Solving the World's Most Difficult Problems*. New Jersey: Wharton School Publishing, 2007.

cautioned, “we can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” In light of the challenges we face as human beings on a planet that is increasingly *hot, flat, and crowded*, we must revisit what it means to be an institution of higher education. Students exposed from a young age to concerns about social issues and the environment are looking for educational opportunities that will enable them to pursue meaningful careers to address them. As a leading educational institution in Chicago, DePaul has the opportunity to further implement its mission to educate members of all sectors of society in sustainable practices for our changing times. Living up to the motto it adopted in 1954, *viam sapientiae monstrabo tibi*, DePaul can truly be the way to wisdom that so many are seeking. It is with these pressing challenges in mind that we offer this white paper.

Sustainability as mission-based pragmatism

As we move further into an era of increasing environmental and social consequences, we see the challenge of building a *sustainable learning community* as an opportunity to show the way of wisdom that comes from our Catholic, Vincentian, and Urban mission. In response to the signs of the times, the sustainable learning community inculcates habits of mind and practice that help realize the common good through an ecologically viable community. Furthermore, it establishes patterns of collective life that sustain the whole person, the whole human family, and the non-human world now and into the future. Inculcating such habits of mind and establishing such patterns of collective life requires a recognition that the economy exists within a finite ecology and, therefore, must honor ecological limits while also ensuring the well-being of its members.

The sustainable learning community requires a shared vision of integral human development that is achieved through dialogue and is marked by justice, the common good, and stewardship. This shared vision demands a heightened moral awareness and sense of social responsibility because the “bracketing out” of ethical questions is part of the bias that has created many of our current problems. Our Vincentian charism requires a “bracketing in” of moral concern. In the age of sustainability, any effective and systemic approach to serve the poor necessarily includes a heightened moral sensitivity to the global impact of resource consumption and environmental degradation.

The sustainable learning community does not require DePaul University to establish a new set of values to replace or to be layered on top of older ones. Rather, the values of the sustainable learning community are the *logical extension* of goals DePaul has already identified and pursued in its strategic plan, **VISION twenty12**. More specifically, Goals 1, 2, 4, and 6 all have the principles of a sustainable learning community implicit within them, albeit inchoately. By making the good under construction more explicit and intentional with respect to sustainability, our aim is to identify some key areas for strategic growth during this time of celebration and reflection.

VISION twenty12 ... and beyond

Goal 1, multiple objectives. Academic excellence in today's higher education market is largely defined by the discipline's relevance to today's challenges. As such, academic programs focusing on sustainability will strategically enhance the curricula (objective 1a). The global challenges we face, and the kind of innovative discovery required to address them successfully, are radically visionary and multi-disciplinary. Effective responses to the challenge of sustainability will provide opportunities for students to learn ethical systems and demonstrate ethical practice (objective 1e). Rooted in the City of Chicago (objective 1g), yet prepared for leadership in an increasingly globalized world (objective 1c), today's students must understand the radically interdependent nature of the challenges we face as a human family. Academic excellence, therefore, must be measured by its capacity to engage multiple perspectives and multiple disciplines. We propose additions to the curriculum that facilitate the kind of multi-disciplinary engagement and broad stakeholder dialogue that is an increasingly important skill for graduates (objective 1k). In a diverse learning community, such additions are likely to position DePaul as the dominant provider of sustainability education in the region (objective 1j).

Goal 2, objective 2a. Preparing students to be socially responsible future leaders requires a communal vision of social responsibility, that is, the model of a sustainable learning community that broadly demonstrates such commitments. Numerous opportunities to participate in meaningful projects of social change, especially within the sustainable learning community will provide students practical wisdom necessary to effect change beyond the DePaul community.

Goal 4, objective 4d. Only DePaul's academic programs can combine the practical skills, Vincentian mission of service to the poor, and a focus on the urban Chicago environment to successfully implement an educational experience that prepares students to effectively respond to the challenges of sustainability.

Goal 6, Objective 6a. The board, faculty and staff will assume responsibility for the institution's Vincentian and Catholic identity when it forms a sustainable learning community by articulating "the good under construction" as a collective endeavor. In doing so, the sustainable learning community becomes *kata holos* - a movement toward wholeness - that expresses the most basic wisdom and aspirations of a Catholic University that is of service to the world. The Catholic, Vincentian mission of DePaul is a vital and vibrant resource for effectively addressing many aspects of the sustainability challenge.

Toward an Operational Definition of Sustainability

The sustainable learning community would be formed by asking “what is it that sustains us, our community, and the environment?” As a learning community, community partner, and global citizen, DePaul University is aptly situated to carry out a major sustainable learning initiative with a series of actionable steps geared toward enhancing curriculum, operations, and community involvement. We realize that any and all recommendations require broad stakeholder input, which is why we offer the following strategic recommendations as a tentative starting point for a broad-ranging and long-lasting dialogue on sustainability at DePaul.

Vision 2018

Sustainability is likely to be an increasingly important aspect of how DePaul moves toward its next set of strategic objectives; therefore, we suggest making sustainability an explicit goal or a named objective in a number of goals in the next strategic plan.

Director of Sustainability

While many institutions respond to the challenge of sustainability in terms of operations exclusively, we believe the sustainable learning community requires institutional leadership by a person experienced in the breadth of this urgent challenge, one that is both *educational* and *operational*. A director of sustainability will serve both as an advocate within the learning community to establish new curricula and as a leader in the larger community demonstrating DePaul’s commitment to sustainability, which is an increasingly important dimension for furthering DePaul’s unique mission.

Curriculum

- Promote sustainability across the curriculum, in the same way we have included ethics across the curriculum. In fact, we see sustainability as an important development in our ethics across the curriculum program;
- Educate students to be leaders in the growth of the rapidly emerging green economy;
- Develop an interdisciplinary minor in environmental and sustainability studies;
- Develop an integrative sustainable management specialization in the MBA program;
- Create a masters program in sustainable development.

Research and Community Engagement

- Provide institutional support for interdisciplinary, community based sustainability research through grants and fellowships;
- Host symposia that highlight sustainability research and practice;
- Encourage faculty to include a sustainability component in their research agendas, if applicable;
- Broaden discussions on community service to include environmental justice because environmental degradation has a disproportionate effect on poor communities and communities of color.

Operations and Procurement

- Develop a Sustainability Master Plan for operations and procurement;
- Promote sustainable business practices, in part, by creating (a) a preferred vendor classification system indicating environmental impact, social impact, and serving underrepresented groups and (b) “green teams” that assist in the promotion of preferred vendors;
- Develop a food procurement plan that promotes a healthy, sustainable diet (e.g. local, organic, and with minimal packaging);
- Incorporate sustainability, greenhouse-gas emissions, and energy audits and reporting into the operational management of the university;
- Reduce paper dependence in key areas for efficiency and sustainable effectiveness.

Communication and Marketing

- Develop a marketing and public relations campaign that addresses our current perception as an unsustainable campus (e.g. Sierra Club ranking);
- Promote DePaul’s dedication to becoming a sustainable learning community with sustainability as a core aspect of DePaul’s mission and strategic planning;
- Where appropriate, joining local and regional climate action plans or developing new ones appropriate for DePaul.