

Oberlin College's Environmental Policy and the Social Fabric of the College.

The present Environmental Policy document is well conceived, but is still basically a prescriptive program to make the college's ecological footprint benign. From a technical viewpoint, management of building and plant to foster energy and resource efficiency and reduced ecological footprint is one of the easiest technical tasks in environmental work. Hundreds of years of practical experience with passive solar and other more recent ecologically-based technologies are at our disposal.

The wheel has been invented. For example, the US General Services Administration which manages the bulk of the federal buildings, has required integrated pest management for many years. The US Navy – hardly a liberal bastion – will no longer employ any architectural firm that is not qualified in the LEED design method. The Navy requires that all new buildings meet at least a silver standard.

The more difficult problem is the management of the program and its integration into the social fabric. There are many advantages to taking this next more difficult step, as will be briefly outlined.

Daylighting: Pacific Gas & Electric and an architectural firm from North Carolina have commissioned studies that document that “daylighting” of elementary and high schools will raise student test scores by 15 to 25 percent, while reducing energy use by 30 to 60 percent even after meeting the newest standards for natural air ventilation.

Daylighting is one aspect of the LEED program that is especially critical for Oberlin. The Daylighting Collaborative of Madison, Wisconsin has called for daylighting of every building, and documented increased productivity and energy savings even in office buildings. Carnegie Mellon University has a substantial research program on the returns in employee productivity from green design. WalMart now requires daylighting of all its new stores, because it sells more product per square foot.

Integrating the Environmental Policy Into the Social Fabric Can Pay Large Dividends

The dormitory contests to save energy are successful Oberlin initiatives that begin an integration of environmental policy into the social fabric. But, the fact that the science building does not apparently meet a LEED standard and appears to be relatively energy inefficient, without adequate daylighting and possibly even without adequate ventilation, means that an environmental policy has still to be integrated into the social fabric of Oberlin College.

There is a need for multi-party discussions to determine how to integrate the Oberlin College Environmental Policy into the social fabric of the College. Some considerations are the following:

1. Celebration: The American Institute of Architects every year issues awards for the best LEED buildings and programs. The US Navy has received such an award recently.
2. Creation of a Green Building Council: By Executive Order, the White House created the Federal Green Building Council. Nine federal agencies now follow the LEED principles in all new projects. The College should establish a similar council.
3. Visioning: The College might consider establishing a visioning program, similar to that of Chattanooga or other regions, to develop proposals for integration of the environmental policy into the social fabric.
4. Visioning with Alumni and Funders: The Kresge Foundation offers challenge grants to non-profits including colleges for planning green buildings. But the College should also consider reaching out to alumni to consider additional funding of green programs that could have good investment and educational returns. A bold program by Oberlin has every potential of attracting funds, but a weak program does not.
5. Sister Institution Relationships: Exchange programs of students, faculty and administration with colleges and universities from the Netherlands, Germany and other countries, where integration of environmental policy into the social fabric is considerably advanced, could bring substantial returns in the quality of Oberlin's program and also offer substantial educational opportunities.
6. Environmental Policy Can Be Viewed As an Educational Experience: As an example of how different attitudes and practices can be, one out of seven Danish students receives an architectural degree. While most of these graduates don't practice architecture as a profession, they do get a good education on applied design.
7. Alumni Education: Alumni trips and continuing education could be also integrated with these European or other programs, leading eventually to better finance of Oberlin programs. Enthusiasm attracts money and reinforces loyalty to Oberlin. Weak programs do just the opposite.
8. Better Analysis of Financial Returns: Hunkering down for lack of immediate funds, and refusal to invest in green building and good environmental practices is not a good strategy to improve the financial basis of Oberlin College. Green buildings pay for themselves generally in relatively short time periods. They can also attract investment money as well as provide a better education. This type of analysis is a legitimate project for an economics class or a departmental seminar series.

9. The federal government finds that green building saves money – indeed “the primary driver behind this growing trend is cost. For as little as 2-7% more in front-end costs, owners save more than 10 times the initial capital investment over the building’s life time through lower utility bills and operations and maintenance costs... Other benefits include reduced environmental emissions and enhanced occupant productivity and health as a result of improved indoor air quality and ‘daylighting’ techniques that use natural sunlight to illuminate building during the daytime...’ The biggest hurdle we had to overcome was the notion that building green costs a whole lot more and fighting the tendency to do things the way they’ve always been done’...” (Source, K. Christen, Federal buildings increasingly going green, Environ Sci Technol, July 15, 2004, p. 222A)

This short paper presents several possibilities. A visioning program that includes not only the students, faculty and administration of the College, but also the alumni and major funders, could generate many other practical ideas and approaches that are economical and educational and which attract a substantial amount of money.

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