Mapping UR’s Sustainability Future

Mapping The University of Richmond’s Sustainability Future

Executive Summary
Envisioning the Future of Sustainability Education

On May 7, 2015, campus stakeholders from across the University of Richmond came together to discuss a vision and strategy for sustainability education and research activities at the University. 75 people from 37 separate departments and offices, including senior members of the administrative staff, attended “Mapping UR’s Sustainability Future: Crafting a Vision for Sustainability Teaching, Learning, and Research.”

Two national leaders in sustainability in higher education joined the conference as panelists, facilitators, and advisors. Angela Halfacre from Furman University and Neil Leary from Dickinson College offered their expertise and experience as directors of academic centers focused on sustainability. The day’s conversation was guided by the following three questions:

Creating a Shared Understanding of Sustainability

For the first workshop of the day, participants engaged in an activity designed to create a shared understanding of sustainability. Sustainability is an essentially contested concept without a fixed, universally agreed-upon definition; therefore, the exercise did not require an exact definition or a correct answer. Instead, workshop participants were asked to stand next to one of twelve images that best answered the question, “What comes to mind when you think of sustainability?” Participants were then invited to share the reasoning behind their image choice. The activity allowed for collective interpretation of this complex term.

Although dozens of distinct interpretations were voiced, some common themes emerged from the conversation. Sustainability was described as **what you need to live a healthy life, the embodiment of active**
citizenry, and a balance of economy, society, and environment. The idea of a multi-generational perspective that accounts for our actions today as well as into the future came up many times. Likewise, the notion that sustainability included different cultures and different perspectives was met with much agreement. Sustainability was described as inherently complex, a web of interrelationships, and both a personal and shared responsibility.

Conversation following the report-out of the descriptors above stated a need to communicate a more holistic interpretation of sustainability to the larger campus community. By simply sharing a diversity of perspectives, some participants noted that their interpretation of sustainability shifted. The group recommended that UR work to increase the visibility and understanding of sustainability through proactive communications.

Mapping Our Assets
The second exercise used crowd sourcing to map the University of Richmond’s sustainability assets. Each table of participants received a list of UR sustainability resources—including educational initiatives, physical spaces, operational initiatives, programs, groups, and commitments—which had been previously identified by a small collection of stakeholders. Participants then identified missing assets, brainstormed potential new assets, and noted existing or potential connections between assets. At the conclusion of a thirty-minute mapping period, participants reported on their progress. The new sustainability asset map represents items from the source document, written on collected worksheets, and shared during group discussion.

Much like the previous activity, participants recommended publicizing this information and making it accessible to the campus community. To that end, the Office for Sustainability is working with University Communications on two key initiatives:

1. Updating the website to move from a vehicle for the Office for Sustainability toward a representation of sustainability across UR. This transition is underway and can be seen at sustainability.richmond.edu.
2. Creating a Sustainability Fact Sheet, which can be shared with stakeholders. The Sustainability Fact Sheet will be available by September 2015.

Other recommendations included identifying all sustainability-related courses and highlighting sustainability research. This directive will be undertaken through the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System (STARS) reporting process this fall. STARS is an enterprise-wide assessment that will give us an opportunity to evaluate UR’s sustainability practices, look for opportunities for improvement, and plan for a more robust effort. Please email sustainability@richmond.edu if you want to participate in STARS reporting.
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You can find a document listing the assets identified at the workshop on the University of Richmond’s sustainability webpage.

Looking to the Future

The cornerstone activity of the workshop was a World Café-style conversation that invited all workshop participants to share ideas for the future of sustainability education and research at UR. Participants considered the following question: “In ten years time, what do you want University of Richmond graduates to know, value and be able to do within a context of sustainability?”

Markers, pens, flip chart paper, and multi-colored Post-its were distributed to each table. Workshop attendees shared their answers to the question posed and used the materials to visually represent their ideas. After 20 minutes, participants were asked to move to a new table to begin the conversation anew.

You will find a synthesis of the ideas expressed in response to the vision of sustainability learning at UR during the first two rounds of conversations below.

![Image 2. What UR graduates should know, value and be able to do.](image-url)

- **What Graduates Should Know**
  - Consequences of their individual behavior
  - Systems thinking & complexity
  - Liberal arts competencies
  - Sustainability concepts

- **What UR Graduates Should Value**
  - Personal responsibility
  - Care for the commons
  - Human dignity
  - Sustainability as an opportunity
  - Diversity of perspectives
  - Nature and the outdoors

- **What UR Graduates Should Be Able to Do**
  - Communicate the value of sustainability
  - Practice sustainable living
  - Engage in multi-year, project-based efforts
  - Co-Create a culture of sustainability
  - Take sustainability courses throughout the curriculum
  - Establish relationships with UR stakeholders

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*MAPPING THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND’S SUSTAINABILITY FUTURE*

*Thursday, May 7, 2015*
For the final 20-minutes of this session, workshop participants discussed the following question: “In what ways are the curriculum, research, co-curricular programs, residential life, civic engagement and campus operations working together in ten years to support students in reaching desired sustainability outcomes?” The particulars of the 10-year vision varied greatly, but some key themes emerged from the discussion. These are collected below.

A large group-discussion at the end of the World Café allowed participants to explain their ideas more broadly. There was a general feeling in the room that the students who attend the University of Richmond and the knowledge created by our scholars represent our greatest potential for change. The idea that every student should graduate with literacy in sustainability was met with great energy. To do so means incorporating sustainability into our curriculum across all disciplines and using the challenges of becoming a sustainable university as a laboratory for engaged scholarship. Achieving this will require unprecedented communication and collaboration among our faculty, students and staff. It was clear that the education needed to accomplish this task did not begin nor end with the student body. We all have a lot to learn.
Moving Forward

The final session of the day, entitled, “Moving Forward,” invited attendees to discuss what makes the University of Richmond unique, to identify our greatest opportunities for collaboration, and to discuss what is needed to create this envisioned future.

Areas of Distinction
Participants had no trouble coming up with ideas related to what makes UR a distinctive place to be. Items in gray to the right were mentioned at least twice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What makes UR special?</th>
<th>Capital City</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>James River</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International Education</td>
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<td></td>
<td>All Five Schools</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Community Engagement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Richmond Promise</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Richmond Guarantee</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Campus beauty</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ease of working together</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Image 5. University of Richmond’s areas of distinction.
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Opportunities for Collaboration
The next step identified was to focus on collaboration to strengthen UR’s distinctive efforts and avoid silos. Many people expressed a willingness and desire to work together to foster sustainability utilizing these distinctive attributes.

A concept that gained some traction was discussion of the James River as living metaphor, running throughout the curriculum, breaking down silos, reworking the landscape, and preparing students for a changing society. Likewise, a long-term project that brings together new partnerships was met with excitement. The “Living Lake Project,” a community effort to rehabilitate Westhampton Lake, was offered as one possibility.

There was general agreement that partnerships are relatively easy and common at UR. There are natural partners (e.g., Geography and Environmental Studies) that have a track record of working together. Faculty members in International Business stated that working across disciplines was expected. The Parking Lot Project, part of the Tucker-Boatwright Festival, provided another example of partnering. This culture of partnerships was seen as a building block to integration of sustainability across the curriculum.

Creating the Future
Two key ideas emerged from the discussion on how to enact the vision for the future: communications and governance.

Communication
Communicating sustainability as a strategic priority was seen as essential in its long-term success. This included communications about sustainability, such as newsletters, websites, and partnership efforts, as well as signals from the University indicating support for sustainability (i.e., incorporating sustainability as a layer or stated goal in the next strategic plan). This recommendation spurred a redesign of sustainability.richmond.edu, which began in July 2015, as well as a newsletter, which launched in August 2015. Other efforts are ongoing.

Governance
Support for sustainability at UR has taken many forms. The Environmental Awareness Group, Sustainability Working Group, and Office for Sustainability have all provided important and effective guidance. Participants expressed a need to create a group that could facilitate cooperation among various stakeholders to achieve sustainability goals aligned with University priorities. Creation of a Sustainability Council or President’s Committee, alongside potential working groups (e.g., policy, operations, curriculum, etc.), was seen as essential to realizing the day’s vision.
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Conclusion

At the end of the day, it was hard not to feel hopeful. A flurry of creativity amid a spirit of collaboration yielded a valuable result: a roadmap for a better future. Notes from this day will be invaluable as we move toward the strategic planning and goal-setting phase.

Finally, it is clear that we have the right people at UR to create significant change. Workshop attendees not only gave a significant amount of their time, but also shared personal concerns alongside their ideas during the day. They brought heart and mind to the table, both of which are needed to create solutions to the sustainability challenges before us.

Image 6. UR has the right mix of people to move forward to make substantial change. Photo credit: Mary Finley-Brook.