Sustainability Indicators: At the Bottom Line of Institutional Relevance

Submitted by Niles Barnes on May 18, 2010 - 11:44am

The below article is an AASHE guest blog written by Kelly Cain, Director of the St. Croix Institute for Sustainable Community Development and Professor of Environmental Science & Management at the University of Wisconsin - River Falls. As Kelly says, "This article is a scratch the surface look at the controversy and the opportunity of sustainability indicators, an abbreviated expose' of one of the most volatile examples within such, and an unapologetic plug for STARS".

Part and parcel of an integrated planning approach to sustainable campus communities (see Society for College and University Planning), is a set of performance indicators addressing both single and multi-variant measures of success. There are literally thousands to choose from across environmental, social, and economic contexts. Many are now common to every campus, such as the percentages of fossil fuel dependent energy consumption for thermal, electrical, and transportation services.

These technical energy indicators represent not only the cost of BTUs consumed and tons of carbon emitted, but also a profound marketing opportunity. National ranking of green performance among institutional peers is increasingly appealing to green-minded students and their parents, as well as green-minded alumni and donor support, especially if a high level of green job placement is part of those performance metrics.

This point is at the heart of recent discussion in The Chronicle of Higher Education entitled, "Frustration With Green Rankings Pushes Colleges to Develop Their Own". ….. aka ….. "AASHE's STARS" versus "The Others".
What follows are some prime examples of how critical the select, sustainability performance indicators are in helping to drive campus awareness and culture evolution.

One of the most volatile discussions that has been bubbling to the surface among signatories of the American College & University Presidents' Climate Commitment (ACUPCC), are performance indicators of carbon and energy in relationship to various levels of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), certifications by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC).

It is ironic that we continue to herald with pride buildings that are Silver, Gold, or Platinum LEED certified, when those same buildings are designed from the beginning to consume more energy than they create,

much less contribute positively to a carbon negative systems agenda that is long overdue (assuming one takes James Hansen's target of 350 ppm CO2 seriously and with a sense of urgency). Leadership on such was established long ago with a small number of projects as David Orr and Oberlin College's Adam Joseph Lewis Center for Environmental Studies.

In light of the climate and energy cost projections, to continue to build buildings that are not Carbon Neutral / Net Zero Energy is scientifically and economically indefensible over the long haul. One might even consider it immoral, considering the projected consequences to future generations.

ACUPCC signatories pledge carbon neutrality. Yet, if a campus builds a new building or retrofits to less than net zero standards, it means that we continue to dig the hole deeper in meeting our carbon neutral pledges (though we are at least showing evidence of slowing the rate of digging and hole expansion).
Yep, it's an improvement, but it still ain't nothin' to brag about. With the speed at which incremental expectations for efficiency and associated costs are changing (recognizing that LEED Silver is now basically the industry standard for construction compared to five years ago), such buildings are well on their way to being obsolete before the ink is dry on the plans.

With institutional heads on the "financially solvent" block, continuing to design inefficient buildings and other systems that only keep up with the status quo, rather than focusing leadership on the race to the top, is to miss the single greatest entrepreneurial and financial leverage opportunity in this and generations to follow.

While it might seem pandering as an "AASHE Guest Blog", there is little doubt that the single best set of comprehensive performance metrics for colleges and universities, currently in existence, is the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System (STARS) developed in collaboration with dozens of campuses and managed by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE).

Besides being well integrated with the ACUPCC model, the STARS model is designed as a self-reporting, transparent model that covers the breadth and depth of environmental, social, and economic contexts likely to be of interest to all stakeholders, both internal and external. While just in its 1.0 version, it covers multiple variables across four categories: Education & Research; Operations; Planning, Administration, & Engagement; and Innovation.

Many of the STARS metrics are quite similar in scope and units of measure, to long held and traditional metrics tracked as critical institutional research, especially demographics. Many of these new metrics (e.g. carbon neutral energy), are obviously not part of "the old way" of measuring institutional relevance.

It is this tension line in a campus culture where those responsible for institutional research and archiving can be grease to the skid or rocks on the path to the quantum leap forward in sustainable campus community performance thinking. STARS is one more critical way to guarantee that our institutions, at the bottom line, remain relevant into a challenging future.