Table 1: Supplemental Material to Accompany the Opinion Paper, Institutional Fragility: Structures of Dominance in American Higher Educational Institutions Inhibiting Sustainable Education

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Systemic Issues within Economic Structures

University funding cuts, restructuring, and new economic budget models dominate popular American educational news journals such as *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*. State funding issues have resulted in substantial restructuring and even college closures (Whitford, 2020). Readings' (1999) book title speaks for itself, *The University in Ruins*, and this is a reality now more than when his book was published 20 years ago. U.S. higher education has become a mission of neoliberalism - pushing it to become a commodity with a culture of managerialism that has come to prevail (Deem, 2000). In addition to HEIs being pushed to embrace a business operating model, many HEIs have been experiencing tuition freezes, declines in state funding, budget cuts and, in some cases, due to demographic shifts, decreasing enrollments. All of these challenges have now been exasperated by COVID-19. Rather than building long-term solutions to these problems, HEIs have maintained their fragility by serving short-term goals and metrics to support economic performance, competitiveness and instrumental knowledge for the pursuit of economic growth (Escrigas, 2016). In a nutshell, Escrigas explains that issues such as this have transformed traditional academic values, producing an economic mindset in which money sets priorities (Escrigas, 2021, p. 4).

HEIs are undoubtedly caught in a bind balancing financial solvency with their commitments to provide a meaningful, well-rounded liberal education, but how they negotiate this tension matters greatly, especially if their goal is third order change or transformative sustainability education. One solution for these economic challenges that some HEIs have adopted is to develop alternative economic recovery models for generating revenue. These models run independently from the state or other traditional allocation of funds and therefore are intended to allow programs to be independent and prioritize allocations based on the needs and priorities of students, faculty and administrators within that specific program. The benefit to the institution is that it can operate new and innovate programming and the revenue generated is shared with the institution as a whole – potentially a win-win if executed sustainably.

A cost-recovery model was utilized for the sustainability education graduate program for which I was director, and at first seemed very promising. Program enrollment was sufficient for generating revenue to support reasonably sized cohorts/learning communities of students; decision-making was shared between students, faculty, and program administrators; and independence in allocating funds made it easier to create innovative educational nature experiences and fund residency research projects with affiliate global community members beyond the four walls of the college classroom. While this seems a perfect funding model for an authentic sustainability program striving for third order change, there were drawbacks.

Because a cost recovery model is generally still situated within a traditional top-down economic system of the institution, upper administrative leadership have the purview and authority to reallocate funding from a program's hard-earned money into new pet programs or initiatives or can be used to pay off existing debt elsewhere. Without transparency of budgetary allocations to ensure sufficient program support, programing teeters on the brink of collapse or is at best, unsustainable. When the mid-level administrators are also faculty members, it puts them in a fragile position of power/lessness. As American historian and political scientist, Alexander Motyl (2019) makes clear in his report, *Bureaucracy and Power in American Higher Education*, upper administration's customary handling of the economic structure is to,

> determine the budgets for all divisions of a university -- often with only perfunctory participation by lower levels of the bureaucracy or the faculty … [they] also determine which departments or programs will or will not exist or thrive; they control and distribute space and all other scarce resources, thereby being able to play off units of the universities against one another.

This approach runs contrary to what is recommended by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) on the website titled, *Responding to a Financial Crisis*, "The faculty should participate both in the preparation of the total institutional budget...in decisions relevant to the further apportioning of its specific fiscal divisions (salaries, academic programs, tuition, physical plant and grounds, and so on)."

In my own case, when our institution went into a budgetary crisis, the budgets of other programs across campus became strained, financial and administrative decision-making for the educational sustainability program were shifted out of the hands of those directly involved with the program such as the director, faculty and students; target enrollments for learning cohorts were doubled; and course curriculum was compacted and/or eliminated. Reallocating financial resources and shifting decision-making power away from those most impacted by the decisions can have a devastating impact on faculty and staff morale. These systemic economic issues lead to increased competition inside the institution and disgruntled faculty who are teaching increased class sizes and increased FTE with little support, or worse yet, positions are cut altogether, making it increasingly difficult to conduct sustainability programming (Vincent, et.at, 2016). These impacts are painful for any program, but for one trying to embody education **as** sustainability they are disastrous. How can a program model equity and power-sharing when the program administrator, faculty, and students have no power over financial or administrative decisions? How can a program be organically and innovatively developed to promote sustainability when the primary driver for its existence is generating tuition dollars to plug holes in "competing"

program budgets? Sustainability education is all about enacting change outside of the walls of the institution. But, how can a program teach students to collaborate with fellow community members on change agency projects when program revenue that could be used to support partnerships and experiential internships is skimmed off to feed traditional academic programs elsewhere in the institution? Clearly, economic systemic issues including short-sighted alternative budget models that do not equitably share power or involve stakeholders in decision making ultimately deem HEIs unstable or fragile in their ability to enact third order change. I am convinced that it is not so much that a cost recovery model can't be effective, as a matter of a fact, I think this may be a way for sustainability programming to innovate and exist in higher education, but there must be transparency and program stakeholders must be authentically involved in the long-term visioning and economic decision making.

Systemic Issues within Administrative Structures

Most American HEIs operate with a similar administrative top-down structure of power: board of regents, presidents, chancellor, provost, vice chancellors, deans, chairs, directors, coordinators, and support staff. Within this administrative structure, there are two main issues in U.S. higher education that need to be addressed when focusing on sustainable education: over centralized power and the lack or misalignment of leaders' qualifications.

It is easy to misconceive the centralization of functions as a positive, and institutional leadership sells faculty on the notion that centralization is cost saving and that it makes sense to concentrate control with one central authority. In fact, centralization often results in less support for day-to-day operations and gives power to a central authority without consensus building. While it would be wrong to say that all top-down structures exclude consensus building, if a leader is inadequately trained or supervised, their approach to consensus building might more closely resemble riding roughshod over the wishes of faculty working "under" them. Motyl (2019), in a very straight forward way, explains that over-centralization leads to lack of accountability. "Presidents, chancellors, provosts, and their inner circles [such as deans and chairs] can do just about anything they want, while lower levels of the bureaucracy, in the fashion of all over-centralized administrative apparatuses, invariably justify their inefficiency by passing on the buck [or blame] to higher authorities" (Motyl, 2019).

The traditional administrative structure relies on archaic thinking and centralized power to determine the rules and mechanisms within the system. This over-centralization of power leads to a range of pathologies such as the rare letting go of higher-level officials and additional administrative intervention being viewed as the go-to answer to solve all problems (Motyl, 2019). Within this subversive system, lower-level administrators are given a "working title" to make them believe that there is shared power in decision making. In my own case, the title I was given was "director" of the educational sustainability program. This sounds like it should involve a degree of power and decision-making, but, in reality, when it came to impactful decisions about administering the program and appropriating funds, these decisions were made at "higher" levels of centralized power. It was made explicitly clear to me that my director position was at the level of a faculty member, not at the level of a "real" administrator. This meant I was not executing the sustainable education vision I was hired for but rather asked to unquestioningly

carry out the decisions of those above me, "administrate" at a lower paid faculty salary, and run an equitable and socially just program within the traditional power structure of the institution.

Another issue with administrative structures is the qualifications of administrative leadership staffing at all levels. Upper-level administrators are often not hired for their formal training in higher educational leadership, but more for having survived the system to make it to full professor and then move into positions of leadership. For example, vice chancellor and provost leadership roles tend to be repurposed, tenured faculty members who know the system and are hired to perpetuate its fragile functions. Likewise, deans are usually made up of disciplinary faculty members in the liminal position to protect and grow the college they have spent a career serving. For example, a dean of a college might hold that position because they started as a professor with expertise in physics and then worked their way up from chair of the physics department to dean of the college. Without background in higher education leadership, nor in many of the disciplines for which they must make decisions, these leaders may perpetuate the status quo rather than supporting sustainable change. In a research report by Hoover & Harder (2014) to discover what lies beneath the surface of HEIs and sustainable change, they suggest that administrative structures need to be developed and led in a way that allow flexibility, "…where they support (not govern) processes of change and value different types of leadership." This would move us beyond traditional reactive structures of authority to a place where we collectively question assumptions, values and barriers to redesign and re-form administrative structures. This redirects an insular, self-serving mission to an outward focused, dynamic system that can adjust and respond to the changing needs and problems of the larger society like climate change and social injustice.

Systemic Issues within Faculty Structures

There are two main issues within faculty structures stymying sustainable education within U.S. HEIs: the tenure structure and the nature of faculty work. Typically, new faculty are hired as subject matter experts in their field and are required to build a record deemed tenure-worthy by their department/college/university. Before achieving tenure, new faculty members must concentrate on establishing their credentials in teaching, service, and scholarship, focus their efforts on activities that are sanctioned by their tenure granting department, and avoid conflicts that might put them at odds with tenured faculty who decide their fate. If they are able to navigate this process successfully, they achieve tenure, which provides them with academic freedom, the attainment of job security and the ability to hold higher positions. But, what about new faculty members who are hired to lead and teach in sustainability programs? Bringing about third order change frequently requires flattening power structures, innovatively structuring and funding programs, and offering curriculum that doesn't fit neatly within traditional courses and programs. These are all challenges to the system that untenured faculty might be reluctant to make for fear of being non-retained, even when given a mid-level leadership title along with the responsibility of leading a program. How can advocates for sustainability bring about third order change when they are fearing for their livelihoods?

A response to the problem above might be to assign only tenured faculty to lead sustainability programs, in other words, tenured faculty who have "earned their right" to speak freely, contribute to administrative functions such as serving as a chair for the department and having a

voice in governance without being concerned that they will not be retained. This is problematic for two reasons. The first is that, according to Motyl (2019), "Contrary to their own self-image as fearless speakers of truth to power, tenured professors rarely dissent—especially as conformity with administrative designs can bring extensive material benefits and usually harms faculty competitors with whom one feels little solidarity anyway." This suggests that even after earning tenure, faculty may still be reluctant to upend institutional norms to push for third order change. It is not without fault, academics themselves have "killed the spirit of higher education" (Page and Wells, 1990). This has created a cultural shift to protect their time and capacity and allow administration to handle the rest. According to Leach (2008) even if tenured faculty did speak up, it is doubtful whether campus decision makers would consider their input seriously, anyway. The other problem with looking to tenured faculty, is that the area of sustainability is a dynamic and rapidly changing field that relies on participation from those who have recently worked outside of the institution, come from cultural backgrounds that are un- or under-represented in academia, and bring fresh perspectives on learning and solving social, economic and environmental problems. These are traits that are difficult to find in faculty who gone through a 7-year "molding process" in the current system. Along these lines, way before the early voice of Milbrath (1989), and his optimistic book, *Envisioning Sustainability: Learning a Way Out*, faculty have failed to re-imagine themselves with respect to what they should and could become in enacting change to the pressing issues of the day and into the future (Barnett, 2004).

This brings me to the second issue within faculty structures, which is the nature of faculty work. Faculty hold a full time, (typically 12 credit hour) teaching load on top of their scholarship and service duties making it very difficult to venture into new areas beyond their primary disciplinary fields. Since sustainability is a relatively new field and one in which few faculty have degrees, staffing sustainability programs requires that current faculty expand their professional knowledge to integrate sustainability concepts and worldviews. Vincent et. al. (2015) report that 46 % of unit-spanning environmental and sustainability programs have no full-time faculty appointed within the program and those that do have one or two who typically serve as the program administrators. These program leaders often have only a part-time appointment with a significant number of duties assigned. Faculty who are not hired for sustainability programming already have an existing heavy disciplinary load of non-sustainability courses to teach making it difficult to build capacity in sustainability and do the kind of re-imagining necessary for third order change.

To illustrate this issue, for the first three years, I was the only dedicated faculty member for a graduate program in sustainability and half my load was assigned to leading the program. Other departmental faculty in the teacher education program within which my program was situated, had full loads and the cost recovery model was not set up for paying faculty to teach on overload. Concerns grew over the time, capacity and interest to learn about sustainability and teacher education faculty started to decline requests to teach outside their perceived disciplinary boundaries and became disengaged with sustainability. This is consistent with a program satisfaction survey conducted in 2015, Vincent et al. reported 32 factors on the success of environmental and sustainability programs as well as the level of satisfaction with how their own program addressed or utilized each factor. "The results of the ratings indicate that a location within a traditional department is least desirable…" (p. 421). In other words, it is preferred that

sustainability programing not be solely "owned" by one department for which the nature of faculty of work constrains the time and capacity to learn new curriculum in sustainability.

Based on the literature and my own experience, one might conclude that sustainability programs should be housed within their own sustainability unit or college. This is consistent with the conclusions of Vincent et al. (p. 421-422) that state that the highest levels of satisfaction were experienced by faculty/administrators in sustainability designated units/colleges where they were able to design their own curriculum, enhance faculty participation, effectively manage funding, prepare students for local and regional employment and cultivate institutional administrative support. The problem with housing sustainability programs separately from other units/colleges is that is it a patch stitch solution that leads to further siloing of sustainability and limiting it to first and second order change. Third order change requires (re)visioning the very structure of the whole institution, an endeavor difficult for a unit/college to lead if it is viewed as existing outside the mainstream university structure. In other words, HEIs are far too fragile within the modernist, traditional structure to be open to this kind of restructuring.

According to Vincent et al. (2016), the location of sustainability programming matters, and solely within one school or one department within a college is the least desirable, while unit-spanning programs are most desirable. I tried to work from the inside of an existing department to embody transformative sustainability education as put forth by Sterling and to practice the unit spanning recommended by Vincent et al. The best I could do is reach outside of the school/department/university to partner with program affiliates. This worked successfully for a while, however, I ran into institutional structural roadblocks such as territorial concerns overpaying affiliates outside of the university, the high cost of buying out faculty for overloads and sharing revenue. Involving affiliates and outside-of-unit faculty indeed can be an excellent way to build capacity, expertise and energy into innovative sustainability projects, but this cannot overcome institutional fragility.

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