



# Institutional Fragility: Structures of Dominance in American Higher Educational Institutions Inhibiting Sustainable Education

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*It is only when the mind is free from the old that it meets everything anew, and in that there is joy.*  
-Jiddu Krishnamurti

## INTRODUCTION

Higher educational institutions (HEIs) have become a requisite place to educate future change agents towards solving urgent sustainability issues facing society, and HEIs have responded to this imperative. As Vincent et al. (2016) reports, environmental and sustainability baccalaureate degrees grew by 57% between 2008 and 2012, master's degrees by 68 %, and doctoral degrees by 35% (p. 419). While HEIs' response to the demand for sustainability programming is evident, these curriculum and program add-ons primarily support first and second order change. First order change is adding content knowledge about sustainability to the curriculum and second order change is integrating teaching methods or practices to achieve sustainability. While these are very promising, Sterling and Schumacher Society (2001) insists that the whole institution needs to shift to an ethos of participation, appreciation and self-organization better known as *third order change* or transformative sustainability education.

In order to make this necessary shift, we need to perturb the current dominant Western organizational structure that relies on fragmentation, control and manipulation (Sterling and Schumacher Society, 2001). Furthermore, territory, hierarchy, power dynamics, and structural and systemic inequity are some of the terms used to describe unsustainability and yet, these are the dynamics that occur time and time again in U.S. higher education. Congruent with the term, *white fragility* (DiAngelo, 2020), *institutional fragility* can be used to describe the defensive response by institutions when their power is challenged. DiAngelo (2011) explains *white fragility* through Bourdieu's conceptualization of *habitus*—"a set of dispositions that generates practices and perceptions." I draw from this conceptualization in describing *institutional fragility* as a response produced and reproduced by the socially and materially advantaged within the power structure of institutions (p. 58). In other words, fragility, used in this context, means the resistance to looking at and being truthful about the system and groups of people who work within the system who lack the power to change it.

The organizational structure within this current dominant paradigm is contributing to institutional fragility, and I believe is holding higher education back from reaching its full potential and its *response-ability*, in addressing sustainability. Sterling and Schumacher Society (2001) identifies response-ability as a core issue and insists that our cultural educational paradigm needs re-envisioning because it will determine

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“how far institutions and higher education as a whole are able to respond sufficiently to the wider context of the crisis of unsustainability and the opportunities of sustainability (p. 50). This is a dramatic and transformative shift that will require institutions to re-vision their very structure and the nature of relationships between institutional participants—an epistemological and ontological shift in *being sustainable* (Sterling and Schumacher Society, 2001; O'Neil, 2018). In order to weave “sustainable being” into the fabric of the institution, HEIs’ need to recognize that their responsibility is not only to practice campus greening efforts or teach curriculum in programs about and for sustainability, but they themselves need to function *as* sustainable institutions.

As a higher education careerist of 20 years in sustainability education and a scholar in the area of higher education and transformative change, I draw from my experiences and academic expertise to position this opinion paper. I have served in the capacity of a professor and program director at several institutions and have been involved in HEI governance and consulting in curriculum and program development with the purpose of reorienting curriculum and programs for a sustainable future. Along these lines, and at the time of this publication, I teach a graduate course in *Reorienting Curriculum and Programs for a Sustainable Future* and another course in *Transformative Sustainability Education*, so I am aware of a wide range of challenges that go beyond my personal experiences and are a part of a wide body in sustainability education and organizational change literature.

In sharing my perspective for this opinion article, I draw heavily from my recent experience of designing, developing and leading a graduate program in sustainability education at a public U.S. higher education institution. I realize that all institutions (2, 4-year, graduate, and private) have their own structures to navigate and when I refer to HEIs, I am specifically addressing U.S. 4-year public institutions. Because of my own understanding of third order change and the need for HEIs to function as sustainable institutions, I inaugurated a graduate program with a sustainable education lens in terms of how I administered it and how the program functioned—with faculty, staff and students. I drew from ecological principles in nature to implement a Living Learning System design (O'Neil, 2017, 2018). I also drew from a transformative relational ontology (O'Neil, 2018; Lange et al., 2021) and other sustainability principles to guide my decision-making and actions, such principles as, “...fluidity, integration, multidimensionality, intensity, ethical integrity, caring and synergy” (Sterling, 2004, p. 62). This experience of trying to enact third order change from the inside out brought me into direct contact with the barriers inherent in the current organizational structure of HEIs and convinced me that, without key structural changes, HEIs may have little to offer in terms of bringing about third order change.

I invite the reader to join me in putting aside the commonly applied modernist lens when examining higher education and taking a fresh look at the complexity of sustainability education and how we might revision our future. In doing this, I will look closely at three interconnected major structural and systemic issues contributing to my idea of *institutional fragility*. These areas include *economic structure*, *administrative structure*, and

*faculty structure* that all lead to one common denominator—power or lack thereof affecting human progress.

Due to the word count publisher restrictions of this opinion paper, the reader may go to the **Supplementary Material** to read my opinion about these three institutional structural issues. Below, I address the issues of these structures by giving offerings to institutional stakeholders. Lastly, I share my concluding thoughts about *institutional fragility*.

## SO NOW WHAT? MY OFFERINGS

Through sharing my own experiences leading a sustainability program and drawing from the literature, I have highlighted challenges for sustainability education due to existing economic, administrative and faculty structures. Hurdles created by these systemic arrangements are great and have led many organizational change and sustainability education thought leaders to propose that the entire higher education system needs a systemic overhaul. They advocate for a “higher calling for higher education” embracing a transformative vision for a sustainable future (Sterling and Schumacher Society, 2001; Vincent et al., 2015, 2016; Escrigas, 2016). These issues arise such as in Corcoran (2009) edited book, *Higher Education and the Challenge of Sustainability—problems, promise and practice* and its numerous illustrations and contributions of well-documented experiences of individuals on the front lines of these challenges. So, what am I offering to the reader besides an opinion piece re-stating what we already know?

My first offering is to ask if traditional HEIs are the location for transformative sustainability education or third order change? For anyone still up for the challenge, here are my offerings for HEI stakeholders.

### An Offering for Stakeholders Working Within HEIs

Move into the future with open eyes, open mind, and open heart. Embrace the possibilities for transformation that are inherent in educating sustainably, but understand that to do so requires more than offering sustainability curriculum or campus greening. Whether sustainability programs are housed within their own or other disciplinary units/colleges, successfully implementing third order change means rethinking current systems and practices.

- **Embrace the emergent properties** that come from the complexity and holism of sustainability
- **Trust** in all people including those outside of your “insular circle”
- **Be vulnerable** in sharing human flaws and shortcomings
- **Be courageous** in stepping out of the status quo
- **Be transparent** with the rationale behind decision making
- **Be authentic** in who you are even if you fear it falls outside of the dominant cultural norm
- **“Ungroove” yourself** from conformity.

First of all, the administrative structure needs to fully appreciate complexity, embrace holism and take a systemic perspective, “to understand and embrace the advantages of adopting a conceptual framework that privileges such features as integrated wholeness,

dynamic interconnectedness, embeddedness and emergent unpredictabilities” (Bawden and Allenby, 2017, p. 901). An emergent property does not belong to any one part of the system. It is created by accepting the unexpected phenomenon of a collaborative functioning of a system, such as the inclusive interactions within the institutional structures of the system that are allowed to organically create something new, exciting, and unexpected. When that happens, the power shifts, and great work can be accomplished, not out of fear but instead as a shared decision-making process.

In this process, “stakeholder engagement, for inclusion, and for critical reflexive and deliberative discourse remain central to the issues under review” (p. 901). In order to do this authentically and for the betterment of all stakeholders, we need to establish trust. Leaders need to trust in sustainability program leaders who bring a diversity of ideas in how to meet common goals. In turn, that trust will be reciprocated. To trust, Brown (2019) advocates, that it will take courage and to be courageous, leaders must be vulnerable. Vulnerability does not come from power and perceived strength. To be vulnerable, we need to accept that we are human and all have flaws and shortcomings. We also have various strengths. We need to create the conditions to allow one another to expose our vulnerabilities without being judged or leveraging those vulnerabilities against one another.

Next is courage. Courage means showing up and being seen when one is not sure of the intentions of others nor the outcome of sharing one’s vulnerabilities. Courage means stepping out of the status quo and advocating for change. It takes courage to be vulnerable. When leaders take the courageous step of being vulnerable, transparency and authenticity in messaging is critical. In other words, they must cut the bureaucracy; be transparent with the rationale behind their decision making. Leaders may be surprised by the overwhelming response these steps will build—they will find diverse allies that *want* to give support, not out of fear but out of true care. Authenticity means letting go of the fear that our ideas will fall outside of the dominant cultural norm and speaking out truths, feeling confident that they will be valued, included and accepted. Not to say that all ideas will be adopted, but that they will authentically be given a fair chance. Authenticity is to be a genuine and real human being.

Lastly, “ungroove” yourself from what Bawden and Allenby (2017) call, self-perpetuating ‘epistemic myopia.’ “Even more insidious—and blatantly anti-adaptive in its expression—is the submission that in subscribing to what might be termed the “official institutional or governance worldview” invariably results not just in a rejection of other perspectives, but with an outright denial of any alternative” (p. 5). As Krishnamurti (2021) so wisely states,

“Why does your mind conform? Have you ever asked? Are you aware that you are conforming to a pattern? It doesn’t matter what that pattern is, whether you have established a pattern for yourself or it has been established for you...a consistent thinker is a thoughtless person, because he conforms to a pattern; he repeats phrases and thinks in a groove.”

Ungroove yourself. Good leaders and good educators can create the transformative conditions for *third order change* and

they will find that others are inspired to support and to build into a systemically resilient institution of sustainability.

## DISCUSSION: RE-IMAGINING FROM INSTITUTIONAL FRAGILITY TO INSTITUTIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

In fragile higher education institutions, we function in a culture of fear—fear to speak out, fear of truth to power, fear of losing our livelihoods. The fear does not lie only within faculty and lower-level administration; there is a fear within upper administration, too—a fear of losing control, a fear of losing power, a fear of losing money. Sustainability asks us to flatten hierarchical structures, think systemically, collaborate, be authentic, be just, be equitable, be inclusive, build relationships, and enact a collective vision that requires collective decision making. It is challenging and will require a newer way of thinking—a systemic and ecological way of thinking and a relational way of being (O’Neil, 2018; Lange et al., 2021). I was once told by an upper administrative leader, faculty have way more power than they think, the hard part is getting them to care enough to build consensus. Perhaps it is up to faculty to lead these collective visioning efforts for sustainable education for meaningful change to take root, and then it is up to administrators to trust in this (re)visioning. As Escrigas (2016) states in, *A Higher Calling for Higher Education*, we will,

“... require transcending both the paradigm of the “ivory tower” dominant some decades ago and the “market-oriented university” prevalent today. We need a new proactive and innovative conception of the calling of higher education for a Great Transition to a more equitable and sustainable world.”

As we saw on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, U.S. democracy almost collapsed in its very fragility in the U.S. congress. Our democracy may be fragile, but it is very unlikely an entire collapse will occur. DiAngelo (2011) explains that *White Fragility* doesn’t always manifest in overt ways but is also expressed as silence and withdrawal in functions. As Bawden and Allenby (2017) explain about worldview transformation, “It is to attack the roots of individual identity, which is fraught: people can live through amazing material deprivation, but strip them of meaning and they are lost, angry, and fearful” (p. 4). Rather than operating out of fear, we need to accept this fragile moment as an entry point for change. The same goes for institutions of higher education. “It is through our worldviews that we adopt particular positions on truth and beauty and justice, on our considerations of what is right what is wrong, fair and unfair, and what is virtuous or otherwise” (Bawden and Allenby, 2017, p. 903). I believe we can learn from the framework of *White fragility* as an intervention for *institutional fragility* with the end result of building a sustainable future. We know where we need to go as a human species, and if HEIs are unwilling or unable to acknowledge their fragility and enact third order change, they should reconsider their role, focus on first and second order change, and look to individuals and organizations outside the institution that may be better equipped to transform or work around structures that impede sustainability.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frsus.2021.662527/full#supplementary-material>

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**Conflict of Interest:** JO'N is the Director of The Joy of Sustainability, an independent educational consulting firm.

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