

So...What?

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How and when do words and concepts develop currency? What floating factors catalytically combine to capture the current values of our communities? Does any single person hold the power of the word? Or is it created and owned by the community? And how long will the currency last?

Sustainability is one of the “words” that has emerged in higher education over the past few years. Once a word breaks through the surface and becomes part of daily conversation, weekly headlines, and conference themes, then meaning becomes a bit diffuse. There is value in stopping to reflect on these diffuse concepts to re-clarify their true meaning.

Throughout the planning and construction phases of the University of Vermont’s new 186,000 square foot student center, the Davis Center, we discussed a variety of environmentally-based terms and goals. We are striving for the Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification at the silver or gold level. The local media has featured our “sustainable” building. We proudly fly a whole Earth flag on one of our flagpoles. But what does it all really mean? And how did we get here?

The leadership of the Six Nations, known by many as the Iroquois Confederacy (or “The League of Power and Peace”), followed a written constitution that was heavily borrowed from by the writers of the United States Constitution. The Six Nations are called the *Hau de no sau nee*, meaning “People Building a Long House.” The six tribes that formed this powerful alliance of native people (Cayuga, Mohawk, Onondagas, Oneida, Seneca, and Tuscaroras) held many important and personal beliefs, one of which ties directly into how we relate to our surroundings and how we prepare for the future. The Great Law, as the constitution was called, asked a current generation of people to be mindful of, and work towards, the well being of their children seven generations in the future. The translation reads something like this: “In every deliberation we must consider the impact on the seventh generation, even if it requires having skin as thick as the bark of a pine.”

In planning for the Davis Center we often talked about the building being a

100 year building. We got it wrong. If we apply the seven generations concept to our building and sustainability, then we need to be thinking out 175 years—2182. We designed many great initiatives into this project, and are working hard to use the building as a community teaching tool, but 175 years is a really long time. How many of our daily decisions consider seven generations?

I really don't like the word sustainability. I applaud the concept, but the word is way too passive for my personal ideals. It reminds me of the difference between tolerance and acceptance in our discussions on the dynamics of social justice. Sustainability only goes far enough to maintain the status quo, when, environmentally we need to actively work to restore what once was. Reduce, reuse, recycle only go so far. We need to add a fourth R to the oft chanted set of Rs that capture environmental actions to restore our ecosystems.

Walking into the bathrooms of the Davis Center, with their waterless urinals, automatic flushing toilets, motion sensor sinks and faucets, and supersonic hand dryers I wonder what word or words best captures the values that are really behind sustainability. Thinking, somewhat egotistically, that I can coin the ultimate word (while I'd rather pose provocative questions to make us all think and discuss at a deeper level) is a risky proposition. Today, drafting this piece, I am leaning towards the word stewardship.

Social stewardship. Social begins to capture the evolving interplay between humans, other members of the animal and plant world, and the broader physical environment. Stewardship places personal responsibility with each of us to take action within that social and environmental interplay. Whereas sustainability can be a call to action, stewardship requires it. I would like to posit that social stewardship includes a wide collection of words that have currency today: social justice, environmental stewardship, environmental education, and civility. It requires attention to the dominant and subordinate relationships that exist between people and those relationships that exist between people and the land.

The new Davis Center, with one of its core values being stewardship, is attempting to serve as a role model for the campus and community. From the overall architectural design to a sophisticated heating and ventilation system that senses the number of people in a room, to a glycol heating system in the loading dock floor to a wide variety of active and passive programming, the building is trying to at least look ahead a few generations of college students. As much as a building can provide an appropriate stage, the success of the production relies upon people.

So...what?

I believe that as a student affairs educator it is critical for me to model behavior that is in concert with an ongoing process of change. I must learn to

stop, look, and listen to what is around me. Then I must think about and feel the realities before I move towards action that fulfills a stewardship mission.

What I believe is that each of us needs to think and act locally and globally. The nexus of these two geographic playgrounds is the individual. To only work in one arena limits one's inherent power and downplays the intersection. Local action starts in its purest form with one's self and moves towards what we typically call our local community. Global actions stretch into national and international issues and concerns. They are all important.

What I believe is that each of us needs to consider what and who will teach on a daily basis. Education is far more than what happens in the classroom, and we are charged with being dream-makers not gatekeepers. Our conversations must focus on the possible.

What I believe is that when using the word stewardship, it is important to keep in mind that it requires each of us to take responsibility for our own actions, and begin to use our ability to respond (responsibility) to change the actions of others.

What I believe is that we all need to question our actions on a daily basis. I also believe that we need to question, albeit carefully, the actions of others. We are in this together. Partnerships and collaborations will move us further along more successfully.

What I believe is that dialogue and action are necessary partners in our future. We need to learn how to listen and learn from others—daily.

What I believe is that we need to challenge ourselves to define our personal comfort zones, and take the risks that are inherent in taking action. And within these actions we must be genuine and authentic.

I believe that we need to listen to the poet inside, and work towards a more beautiful world.

I believe that we need to challenge our associations, institutions, divisions, departments, and colleagues to fulfill their stated missions and be the leaders of society. Leadership requires risks and setting standards that embrace stewardship principals.

I believe that peace is a noble cause and that, in spite of the numerous discourses on how to define a just war, the conversation needs more depth as I remain unconvinced. We need to engage each other and our students in these discussions. If we cannot figure out how to manage the human tragedies all around us, then how are we going to address the multitude of other needs?

I believe that it is grossly wrong to drop tons of depleted uranium tipped arms

in Iraq and Afghanistan. The half-life of depleted uranium is four billion years. Our current “war” effort in Iraq and Afghanistan is using sixteen times more fuel per soldier than in the Second World War. Beyond the explicit human toll, why are we not talking on our campuses about the environmental impact of war? Who needs to initiate this conversation? You? Me? Our faculty? Our buildings?

I believe each individual contributes to our world on a daily basis, and I know I can always do more. I also need to ask for help. I need to speak the truth. I also need to say thanks more often.

I know that I am always learning. Always learning. Working to restore.

So...what are you going to do today?