

Toward a Green Wesleyan: A Proposal for an Office of Sustainability

Abstract

The state of the global environment is rapidly deteriorating. All institutions capable of making environmentally conscious changes to their facilities and operations *must* do so in order for the environmental crisis to be stopped in its tracks. It is time for Wesleyan to take responsibility and make a full commitment to an environmentally sustainable campus. Though Wesleyan currently has two staff members who work part-time on energy conservation, we must expand the program in order to combat global climate change and make environmental sustainability an integral part of daily life at Wesleyan.

Many of Wesleyan's peer institutions are working hard toward reducing their carbon footprints and educating their communities about environmental sustainability. To ensure a lasting commitment to sustainability, many schools have created sustainability departments with at least one full-time staff member dedicated to leading and overseeing environmental initiatives.

The Wesleyan Environmental Organizers' Network (EON) proposes the creation of an Office of Environmental Sustainability, which will consist of a director, paid student interns, and a Sustainability Committee. The director will oversee Wesleyan's ongoing environmental initiatives, guide the creation and implementation of new projects, coordinate voluntary efforts, design a master plan for college sustainability, and organize outreach to the larger Wesleyan Community.

I. Moving Toward Sustainability: Environmental Responsibilities and Duties

EON proposes the creation of a Director of Environmental Sustainability to direct, coordinate, and oversee environmental efforts on campus. Over the last several years, the need for greater environmental stewardship has become increasingly apparent. Consequently, the University now faces a greater responsibility to create a sustainable relationship with the environment. EON proposes an Office of Environmental Sustainability to fulfill these obligations. Such an office will consist of:

- **Director of Environmental Sustainability:** a full-time administrator (for responsibilities, see below)
- **Environmental Interns:** (paid/work-study position) students who will assist the director in environmental initiatives, while ensuring the active role of the student body.
- **Sustainability Committee:** a group of faculty, students, staff, and administrators who will serve in an advisory role to the director. The members will also serve as representatives of the Office to their respective departments, or to the student body.

► **Director of Environmental Sustainability and Environmental Interns**

The Director of Environmental Sustainability, either individually or through the office's interns, will be charged with:

- Leading current environmental initiatives, such as campus recycling (including the annual “Recyclemania” contest), composting (due to be expanded in the new campus center), and orientation/summer collection drives (e.g. the “Freecycle” initiative in 2006, “Dump-and-Run” in 2007).
- Coordinating and supporting voluntary efforts relating to environmental sustainability on campus. This will include providing resources and support for student-run organizations like EON, Community Gardens, and Long Lane Farm. It will also involve coordinating voluntary efforts for the larger Wesleyan community. The director shall also serve as the administration’s point person for groups or individuals who propose sustainability-related projects.
- Creating and implementing new initiatives, and suggesting initiatives for other departments. The director, when necessary, will also be responsible for working to secure outside funding for such initiatives.
- Creating a master plan for college sustainability with specific benchmarks to its implementation. This will include:
 - running annual audits of campus food waste, energy consumption, and general waste
 - crafting standards for purchases of materials and services according to their environmental and financial impact, and
 - initiating efforts to bring Wesleyan toward compliances with international sustainability standards (such as the ISO 14000 Series¹).
- Performing outreach to the larger Wesleyan Community, by disseminating information regarding Wesleyan’s sustainability programs and achievements to faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, and the community at large. This will include the creation and maintenance of a website to provide information about campus sustainability efforts, report achievements, and field questions and suggestions.

► Sustainability Committee

The Sustainability Committee will play a critical role as a liaison between the office and the greater Wesleyan community. The committee was created in May of 2007 thanks to the work of Bill Nelligan, Associate Director of Environmental Health and Safety. While it is still in the process of being structured, EON looks forward to finally having a place where a variety of decision-makers can discuss a broad range of environmental issues that affect the Wesleyan community.

In its future capacity, the Sustainability Committee will continue to generate ideas and discuss environmental efforts on campus. The Director of Environmental Sustainability will serve as chair to the Sustainability Committee and set its agenda. The committee members will report back decisions and initiatives to their respective departments and constituencies. They will also complete committee projects such as research and investigation, outreach, and individual tasks. The committee’s role in implementing environmental initiatives cannot be understated: A greener Wesleyan is only possible with a commitment from the entire community.

It is EON’s hope that the Sustainability Committee will be an even more effective body than its predecessor, the Wesleyan Recycling Committee. However, this will require great devotion and time commitments from its members, which cannot always be assured. It is for this reason that the

¹ The ISO14000 Series is a collection of environmental management standards and guidelines put forth by the International Organization for Standardization. The 14000 family is primarily concerned with how the organization: 1) minimizes harmful effects on the environment caused by its activities, and to 2) achieve continual improvement of its environmental performance. See www.iso.org for more information.

Director of Environmental Sustainability will chair the committee and act as a permanent figure to implement the committee's ideas and initiatives, even when other committee members are relatively inactive.

II. It Isn't Easy Being Green: The Rationale for an Office of Sustainability

The members of EON readily acknowledge and greatly appreciate the environmental initiatives that Wesleyan has undertaken over the past several years. There are several members of our faculty, staff, and administration who have demonstrated a genuine devotion to environmental sustainability, and we have seen the fruits of their labors. However, the problems of climate change and overall environmental degradation due to human activities are growing graver every day². It is therefore morally imperative for Wesleyan University to work even harder to develop initiatives and curb our impact on the environment. The only feasible way that the University can make the fundamental changes that are incumbent upon us is to permanently institutionalize and coordinate the campus's environmental initiatives under one office, and one staff member, dedicated to sustainability.

The following are some of the reasons an Office of Environmental Sustainability is necessary at Wesleyan University:

► **Existing institutions for promoting environmental sustainability are fragmented and insufficient.**

There are currently three institutions working to promote environmental sustainability on campus: Project Save; the Associate Director of Environmental Health and Safety; and the Recycling Committee. While all of these institutions are valuable, none of them is sufficient to fulfill the environmental needs of the university.

- **Project Save:** Project Save has proved to both cut the University's expenses and, in most cases, make current practices at Wesleyan more environmentally sustainable. The initiatives carried out by Project Save have been impressive, but in the larger picture of Wesleyan's impact on the environment, they are not sufficient. First, Project Save has the power to coordinate and sometimes implement several small tasks, but anything larger is beyond its reach. Second, while in practice Project Save has had an environmental bent (the three headlines on the website all advertise environmental initiatives, and of the twenty-one projects accomplished during the '05-'06 year, seventeen of them were more environmentally-friendly practices), the stated mission of Project Save—to collect, review and implement new ideas for sustained cost savings and improved efficiencies³—misses the point. It fails to strive for what Wesleyan needs: sustainability and better environmental stewardship.

The Wesleyan community has shown its willingness and enthusiasm concerning environmental sustainability. The Director of Environmental Sustainability would absorb the responsibilities of Project Save—continuing to field suggestions on Wesleyan's sustainability website—while also undertaking much greater initiatives that will make Wesleyan substantially more sustainable.

² IPCC Reports, 2007: The UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has issued two reports this year that project a bleak future assuming greenhouse gas emissions continue at their current rate. Global temperatures could increase as much as 6 degrees Celsius (11 degrees Fahrenheit) by 2100. Professor Gary Yohe of Wesleyan's Economics Department contributed to the report's findings, available at <http://www.ipcc.ch/>

³ See the mission statement and current work at <http://www.wesleyan.edu/projectsave/>

- **Associate Director of Environmental Health and Safety as De Facto Sustainability Director:** According to Vice President for Finance and Administration John Meerts, it is currently the responsibility of Associate Director of Environmental Health and Safety Bill Nelligan to head environmental initiatives on campus. Indeed, Mr. Nelligan has made vast contributions to environmental sustainability at Wesleyan. He has improved the University's recycling program, created the Recycling Committee, launched the "Freecycle" program, and worked with Wesleyan Dining Services and Long Lane Farm to support EON's compost projects. EON has worked closely with Mr. Nelligan over the past few years, and we appreciate his efforts to fulfill his many job descriptions.

However, the fact that Mr. Nelligan has so many significant job components does not do justice to the importance of environmental sustainability on campus. The University must show that it values environmentalism by creating a position dedicated strictly to conservation and environmental sustainability. Environmental sustainability at Wesleyan is itself worthy of at least one full-time position, and cannot be tacked on to the job description of an already hard-working staff member.

Wesleyan Recycling Committee and Wesleyan Sustainability Committee: The Wesleyan Recycling Committee has done great work over the past two years to enhance Wesleyan's recycling program. The progress that the committee has made should not be understated. However, even these achievements have their limits. Bins throughout campus are losing their labels, causing all recyclables within to be contaminated and rendering the bins ineffective. Wesleyan community members still throw away recyclables on a regular basis because no recycling bin is nearby. Large amounts of valuable recyclables are still thrown into dumpsters as locations for recycling cardboard, printer cartridge, and electronics—among other commodities—are few and far between. The Recycling Committee meets at most once per month, and since the installation of new bins on campus, little seems to have been accomplished during or between committee meetings. Subcommittees have been all but completely disbanded due to a lack of will and interest of committee members. EON commends the volunteer faculty, students, and staff members who devote time to be on the Recycling Committee, but we also acknowledge that without any responsibilities to the committee expressly written into members' job descriptions, it is often hard to garner enough motivation to make necessary recycling improvement and maintenance efforts on campus. Part of the Director of Environmental Sustainability's job will be to oversee and keep up—with the help of the environmental interns—the recycling initiatives on campus, coordinate efforts with Middletown Recycling, respond to student and other community member concerns about recycling, and continue to improve recycling efforts across campus.

► **A centralized structure will overcome the current challenges of coordination and communication.**

There is currently a lack of environmental initiative coordination between administrative departments; between administrators, faculty members, and students; and between students from year to year. Without such coordination, the University will continue to needlessly waste both our planet's environmental resources and its own endowment. Up until last year, for example, different academic departments purchased Poland Spring water from different delivery companies, wasting both money and energy (in the form of delivery trucks). A Director of Environmental Sustainability would be the best practical solution to these communication gaps, providing a single channel for all

campus sustainability efforts and acting as a liaison between all members of the Wesleyan community. The director will facilitate communication between faculty, students, and administrators, as well as provide a comprehensive memory of previous initiatives, including student initiatives. The hiring of a Director of Environmental Sustainability will enhance Wesleyan's environmental initiatives and integrate them more fully into student, staff, and faculty life in a holistic manner.

► **Wesleyan University is lagging behind our peer institutions when it comes to sustainability efforts.**

The addition of a Director of Environmental Sustainability is in Wesleyan's best interest in order to remain a competitive force among other institutions of higher education. At this point, Wesleyan is severely behind when it comes to sustainable initiatives and infrastructures on its campus.

- **Bowdoin College** has a full-time staff person devoted to environmentally sustainable activities on campus, and a part-time staff person who works in the winter. They also have ten paid student interns who assist with various projects on campus. This full-time staff member is in charge of managing energy and food waste audits, picking up compost from dining locations, coordinating the student interns, running energy competitions between campus dorms and houses, and distributing information about campus recycling.
- **Oberlin College, Middlebury, Macalester College, Colby College, Yale University, and Brown University** all have similar positions. The five college consortium of UMass – Amherst, Smith College, Amherst College, Holyoke College and Hampshire College all share a sustainability coordinator.

This is just a small sampling of peer schools that have full-time staff members who devote their energies to the promotion of campus and worldwide environmental sustainability, but there are many more. All of these schools have active programs that have exploded since the instatement of this staff position. To be true to the spirit of Wesleyan and uphold its place at the forefront of the national community of higher education, Wesleyan needs to take the next step and hire an employee to help us lead a path towards a sustainable future.

► **Embracing environmental sustainability is essential to Wesleyan's ability to live up to its mission of teaching leadership and social responsibility.**

According to Wesleyan's Strategic Plan, we have committed to being a "socially responsible" institution. In the 21st century, global climate change and countless environmental problems demand immediate action. There is simply no way to be socially responsible without thinking about our environmental impact – as individuals and as an institution. The most effective way for Wesleyan to take a firm stand for the environment and to ensure that our environmental impact is considered in all University decisions is to create an oversight position/department for environmental sustainability.

Furthermore, environmental sustainability is inextricably connected to education in the 21st century, and thus should be a primary concern at Wesleyan. In 1831, at Wesleyan's founding, President Wilbur Fisk called for education that would work towards both "the good of the individual educated and the good of the world." In order to be truly "engaged with the world," as our current strategic plan calls for, we cannot ignore the major environmental problems in the world and fail to play our role in trying to fix them. In keeping with Wesleyan's mission to train leaders for the 21st century it is the institution's responsibility to ensure that our future leaders are trained to be environmentally literate. Just as a Dean of Diversity creates a learning culture of tolerance and

respect for difference, an established Office of Environmental Sustainability will help Wesleyan to create a culture of environmental awareness.

► **Wesleyan has a clear economic interest in hiring a Director of Environmental Sustainability.**

The work of the director will lead to positive results such as:

- **Increased efficiency:** As Project Save has demonstrated, sustainability-related projects tend to promote efficiency, which cuts costs. New, efficient alternatives can only be augmented by the mandate of the new director, who will be tasked with managing audits of waste and energy use, and with implementing solutions to perceived inefficiencies. Bowdoin College's Environmental Management System, initiated by its Sustainability Coordinator, is a recent example of such a mandate's implementation. The director will also be charged with managing and expanding the campus recycling and composting programs, which will continue to diminish waste removal costs and, in the case of some materials, provide a direct financial reward. The director will also act on improving the efficiency of the transportation system by promoting better fuel economy standards and car alternatives, ultimately cutting transportation costs.
- **Increased participation:** Students on campus are deeply concerned about the environment, as shown by the amount of non-science major participation in the planning of the new science center. An office dedicated to environmental sustainability can potentially attract much more student participation than an organization dedicated primarily to financial efficiency, as is Project Save. The new Office of Environmental Sustainability will enhance Wesleyan's off-campus image as an institution committed to social responsibility, which may inspire more prospective students to enroll and more environmentally conscious alumni to invest in the University's future.
- **Long-term savings:** The investment of environmental sustainability (which will be insured by the implementation of a Director of Environmental Sustainability) in the University's building strategy will, in the long run, be returned in the form of reduced maintenance and reduced energy costs. In addition, as the political climate drifts toward combating global climate change, Wesleyan will be better positioned to take advantage of any future government or private incentives and avoid any penalties relating to the sustainability of the University's practices.

Conclusion

In order to truly achieve campus-wide sustainability, Wesleyan University requires a formal structure consisting of a Director of Environmental Sustainability, a set of environmental interns, and a sustainability committee. The value of such a formal organization is evident in the success of those colleges and universities that employ one.

Sustainability is about more than just efficient buildings, recycling, renewable energy, and reduced consumption. At its heart, it is a matter of coordination; of making sure that each individual piece of our community communicates and works efficiently within the whole. This important function can only be filled by a position like Director of Environmental Sustainability.

Beyond our stake in the future of our planet's environment, Wesleyan stands to reap a significant financial benefit from a formally structured sustainability office. Many of our peer schools have already implemented such a program, and still more intend to do so over the next

few years. Our vision not only fulfills the University's obligation to protect the environment, but is also a key component in helping Wesleyan remain competitive with its peer schools. Our institution is faced with a unique opportunity to make environmental sustainability not just a word heard in classrooms and textbooks, but to instill it as an integral part of a campus culture of environmental stewardship.