



Sustainability Policies if Necessary but Not Necessarily Sustainability Policies

Roger Auguste Petry
Luther College at the University of Regina

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the appropriateness and limitations of campus sustainability policies as a tool for advancing campus sustainability. It begins by exploring the case of a mid-sized university in the prairie region of Canada, the University of Regina, along with the co-evolution of the Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development in Saskatchewan (RCE Saskatchewan), of which the University of Regina is a founding partner. It highlights the challenges implementing sustainability policies in both contexts yet, despite this absence of policy, the respective advances in campus sustainability initiatives through each. To account for this seeming paradox, the paper explores how, while on the surface, sustainability policies might be viewed as central to advancing specific social and political sustainability objectives within an organization along with greater efficiency and effectiveness in resource allocation towards sustainability goals, the nature of policy within an increasingly corporatized university structure and professionalized sustainability management system may potentially impede these objectives. The paper concludes by highlighting the value of a decentralized approach that respects and integrates the traditional scholarly accountability of universities that promote academic freedom along with a current need to create sustainable scholarly livelihoods that advance this freedom in an increasingly restrictive organizational environment.



INTRODUCTION

It is commonly assumed in many organizations that the development of policy at the board level to govern an entire organization (and operational policies developed within specific organizational units by senior administrators) is central to implementing the vision and mission of that organization on behalf of its owners. Such a model, often referred to as the Policy Governance® or Carver model—after the work of John Carver (Carver & Carver, 2016)—reflects a standard division of labour. On the one hand, the board of directors has an overall accountability for the resource allocation of the organization to its basic owner members to ensure alignment of resources with an organization's overarching purposes and strategic longterm goals; on the other hand, management and other employees of an organization have the experience and technical training to practically implement these goals through various programs. As Higher Education (HE) organizations are typically incorporated as some form of corporation, whether a state university, not-for-profit or for-profit organization, it is not surprising that these norms pioneered in other sectors have entered into university and college settings. This is referred to (often disparagingly) as the corporatization of the university and has received considerable scholarly reflection (for early works in Canada see Newson, 1993, Newson, 1997, and Newson & Polster 2001). With global collective commitments of Higher Education organizations to advance sustainable development (SD) and individual universities and colleges committing to sustainability in their strategic plans, if not overarching purposes, it is again unsurprising that developing *sustainability policies* would seem a reasonable approach in light of the Policy Governance® model.

The title of this paper, however, is meant to question the necessity and centrality of policy in achieving campus sustainability. It evokes Canadian Prime Minister, Mackenzie King's, famous World War II statement: "not necessarily conscription, but conscription if necessary" (*Dictionary of Canadian Politics* 2016). Mackenzie King sought to appease French Canadians—who were strongly opposed to mandatory military service at the time—that if Canadians voted in favour of military conscription as part of his 1942 plebiscite (which, incidentally, they did), it still *need not imply* conscription would be enacted by the Canadian Government. Campus sustainability policies, it will be argued, are *not necessarily* the optimal path to achieving sustainability in HE where paths also include knowledge production, teaching, and community service—the traditional core elements of the scholarly identity—reoriented towards advancing SD. To help develop this claim, two case studies will be examined: the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, Canada, where a variety of sustainability activities have evolved with minimal policy support and, more briefly, the Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Saskatchewan. RCE Saskatchewan was developed by initial work at the U of R and is a regional scholarly collaboration acknowledged by the UN University (UNU) to promote ESD. It has had a number of successes, again in the absence of sustainability policies. To explain how this might be the case, the concept of corporate organizational policy will be explored more closely. This will include not only ways it might prove valuable but also ways it acts potentially as a barrier to sustainability work. Given the traditional role of collegial governance in HE, the

paper will advance how “Scholar Policy” analogous to “Public Policy” might be used in *lieu* of more traditional corporate policy. The concept of *sustainable livelihoods* (SL) will be introduced as a key concept in understanding this notion of “Scholar Policy” and how it might be used to assess proposed campus policies for sustainability.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF REGINA

I will begin by reviewing briefly the informal evolution of sustainability activities at the University of Regina (U of R) in Saskatchewan, Canada (University of Regina, 2015). The U of R is made up of 4 academically federated partners that are separately incorporated, namely, the University of Regina as a provincial university, Luther College and Campion College (two religiously affiliated colleges), and First Nations University of Canada. While individual faculty have pursued sustainability research and initiatives as part of their work going back to the 1990s, it was in the early 2000's that a group of students, faculty, administrators, and staff from across the University—including its federated partners—created the *Sustainable Campus Advisory Council* (SCAC). This body emerged from within the university itself without direction from the University's senior administration, Board of Governors, or Senate. The efforts of SCAC focused extensively on the development of a *Sustainable Campus Policy* for the U of R. On the basis of broad based consultation, a policy was finalized in 2006. This policy, however, was adopted not by the University as a whole but by the *Centre for Sustainable Communities* (CSC), a research centre of the U of R. Because of this, the policy was not viewed as applying to the entire campus and not implemented. However, the U of R did as an institution eventually adopt a modified version of the policy in 2011. Yet the essence of both this and the earlier policy was not principally to direct resourcing towards SD initiatives and set targets related to sustainability outcomes that one might normally expect of Board Policy. Rather it created an *advisory committee* for the President of the U of R on matters related to campus sustainability (U of R, 2011). In 2011 the *President's Advisory Committee on Sustainability* or PACS was formed with its first meeting held in June of that year. The composition of the committee included the University Provost/Vice-President Academic as Chairperson, representation of the administration including facilities management, faculty representatives, representatives of sustainability related research centres on campus, students appointed by the U of R Students' Union, and a representative appointed by RCE Saskatchewan. The advisory committee has recommended resource expenditures to the President's Office and various administrative units on campus based on the expertise of its members and presentations made to it from time to time. However it is a reasonably lightweight administrative structure with no power to enforce (nor resources to finance) its recommendations.

The University has during this time adopted two strategic plans: the 2009-2014 plan entitled *māmawohkamâtowin: Our Work, Our People, Our Communities* had sustainability as an overarching theme (U of R, 2009 p. 2); its 2015-2020 strategic plan *peyak aski kikawinaw: Together We Are Stronger* also had sustainability as one of two overarching areas of emphasis (U of R 2015b, p. 9). While elements of

the strategic plan have been resourced, no overarching sustainability policies have been adopted by the University's Board of Governors. In 2013 the U of R President approved a proposal from PACS to create the University's first *Strategic Plan for Sustainability* which it subsequently released in 2015. Noteworthy from a policy perspective is the “guiding principles” for the plan's development that emphasized the importance of a shift in university culture with a decentralized approach that encouraged each individual to take ownership of sustainability objectives in areas of SD emphasis rather than specific centrally determined and mandated goals. The plan states that:

...'[a]reas of focus' are just as powerful as specific goals...This approach encourages all individuals and units to consider how to accomplish a broad goal without specifying a limited number of options. This strategy will enable multiple benefits including increased community cohesion across campus units (i.e., students, staff, faculty, and administration), development of creative solutions, and make action-oriented sustainability changes on a schedule endorsed by the University community without mandating specific actions. The University must work on influencing individual behaviours as well as structures. 'What can I do?' and 'What can the University do?' (University of Regina, 2015c p. 4).

In addition to the sustainability plan are a range of campus-wide initiatives that promote sustainability that are relatively independent of the central administrative structure of the U of R as a corporate entity. The *Sustainability and Community Engagement Fund* is a fund made up of contributions of \$2000 or greater from various “founding partners” that included two of the University's federated colleges along with the Students' Union and separate institutes of the U of R. This funding was subsequently matched by the U of R President's Office enabling a disbursement of approximately \$26,000 in 2014 and \$16,000 in 2015 (University of Regina, 2016b). A further independent fund has financed campus sustainability projects: the “Edible Campus” initiative and the “Green Patch” project are both funded by the *Regina Public Interest Research Group* (RPIRG), a student funded resource centre at the University (RPIRG 2016). These campus sustainable developments to date involve multiple organizational agents and self-directed initiatives towards creating a sustainable campus in the absence of significant centrally adopted Board or senior administrative policies directed at particular, determinative and measured goals.

The ability to advance sustainability at the U of R in the absence of significant binding sustainability policies is mirrored by *RCE Saskatchewan*. It was acknowledged by the United Nations University (UNU) in 2007 and has the U of R as one of its founding partners (RCE Saskatchewan, 2016). In this case, the RCE mobilizes multiple HE partners including the three largest in Saskatchewan (the U of R, University of Saskatchewan (U of S), and Saskatchewan Polytechnic (Sask Polytech) along with community partners towards advancing sustainability in nine areas. This mobilization is based on the voluntary contributions of partner organizations and individuals. The administration of specific projects is housed typically in one or more of the respective partners based on organizational interest

and resource commitments of that partner. The RCE itself is structurally made up of the RCE Facilitation Group (that provides general coordination for the RCE), specific working groups in sustainability theme areas, and local networks or living laboratories acting as flagship projects of the RCE. These do not use a model of governance based on policy. Instead, general *governing principles* in the original formative documents of the RCE (approved by the UN University in 2007) along with specific structures sanctioned within these documents define the models of association that can be constructed in relation to the overarching ESD goals deemed important by the region (RCE Saskatchewan, 2007 Section 5 & Appendices C, D, and E). The RCE mobilizes its membership in response to specific opportunities emerging beyond any one partner organization's ability or interest to address them. Yet the absence of specific resources owned or controlled by the RCE means that policies governing resource use are not appropriate. The RCE is unable to determine nor compel actions of specific RCE partners (or individual members) and the allocation of resources belonging to each. Targeted resources are set aside for specific projects with funds administered and projects evaluated, as needed, by partners. The absence of legal incorporation of RCE Saskatchewan makes it further difficult for the kind of policy governance model employed by a legally incorporated corporation. Evaluation and outcome assessment of the RCE is typically tied to specific projects. As contributions are voluntary, it is up to the individual or organization making the contributions to determine whether the contribution has achieved the individual or organization's goals. Evaluation is built into specific projects at a modular level as agreed by the communities collaborating to bring it forward. The overarching goals of the RCE serve as the conditions for initial meetings in which collaborative possibilities are explored and decided upon. This means that the projects, as a consequence, reflect the ESD goals of the RCE without the RCE directing or compelling these outcomes. At the same time, projects that do not reflect the general guiding principles of sustainability and ESD found in the RCE's formative documents are not designated as RCE projects (whether local living laboratories or other flagship projects). Yet despite this absence of policy, the RCE since its formation in 2007 has had many accomplishments. These include having hosted 8 ESD Recognition Events, maintaining 3 websites, co-sponsoring multiple conferences on various themes, participating in 9 Global RCE Conferences and 5 RCE Conferences of the Americas, and facilitating visiting speakers from various RCEs (see Dahms, McMartin, & Petry, 2008 & 2010; UNU, 2016).

THE VALUE OF POLICY IN ADVANCING HIGHER EDUCATION CONTRIBUTIONS TO SUSTAINABILITY

The previous analysis has been meant to illustrate through two real world examples how sustainability on campuses can be advanced in the relative absence of policy. This reasonably leads to the question “how is this possible?” and “what role should policy play if it is not a necessary element in advancing sustainability and ESD in HE?”. To begin we can ask the general question: “What is *policy*?”. Victor Baldridge contends that policy is “those decisions that *bind the organization to important courses of action*” (1971, 21; emphasis added). Richard Van Loon and Michael Whittington argue that policy is “*a course of action* that the

authorities of the system have decided should become a *legislative output*” (1971, 337). Jerome McKinney and Lawrence Howard see policy as “decisions of *the widest possible* ramifications and the *longest time perspectives* in the life of the organization” (1998, 90). While it is not the purpose here to express (nor defend) a formal definition of *policy*, each of these definitions point to key elements that should make *sustainability policy* in HE organizations a desirable feature. Doesn't the “development” portion of *sustainable development* (SD) commit us to *courses of action*? Isn't sustainability an *important* (if not *the most important*) course of action for our times? Shouldn't we be *binding* universities to this action given their potential (if not central role) in generating knowledge and education needed for SD? Who should do this binding if not the authorities having the *power to legislate* within an organization—the Board of Directors? Lastly, doesn't sustainability have the *widest possible ramifications* and isn't it characterized by its *longterm time perspective* given the concern for future generations embedded in the earliest definitions of sustainable development (WCED, 1987 p.43)?

I would like to examine the strength of policy in achieving sustainability goals and its limitations within a HE setting. Clearly *policy* that involves codified formal rules at a high level helps solidify an organization's structure, providing *transparent governance* and connecting the organization to its overall *accountability* (expressed in its bylaws, constituting documents, and governing legislation). Yet we can also imagine, particularly in a university setting, how the private spaces allowed to individuals in the organization (available especially—but not restricted to—scholars) along with their individual choices in allocating resources (for example, in advancing key research questions for sustainability) might prove at least as important, if not more important, in innovating for sustainability. This is especially the case when one considers their local, specialized contexts—whether geographic or disciplinary. In terms of a university's overall accountability, this too points to a scholarly accountability (whether to faculty, students, and/or graduates) traditionally reflected in collegial (versus corporate) governance. Where a private corporation would have a Board of Directors accountable for maintaining or increasing the value of its owned assets (typically physical forms of capital—buildings, equipment, and vehicles), a university board ensures (ideally) that financial resources are available for conducting the university's academic mission which involves increasing investments primarily in *human capital*. Such a model supports accountability to (and takes direction from) the general scholarly community. To see the potential tension between Collegial Governance and Corporate Governance, consider John and Miriam Carver's statement about *Corporate Governance*: “Simply put, the board exists (usually on someone else's behalf) to be accountable that its organization works. The board is where all authority resides until some is given away (delegated) to others. This simple total authority—total accountability (within the law or other external authorities) is true of all boards that truly have governing authority” (2001, 2). *Collegial Governance* entails a very different governing authority and much tension results from a failure to understand this line of accountability. A state sponsored, industry sponsored, or faith sponsored university—if it is to be appropriately called a university—while having board appointments likely determined by these sponsoring entities is still accountable to the scholarly community being sponsored. Otherwise it is more properly

understood as a Research and Development corporation or a technical training institute. Collegial Governance implies robust concepts of academic freedom be in place that, in turn, are tied to supporting curious individuals engaged in investigator-driven pursuit of knowledge.

Policies allow for *fair and non-arbitrary treatment* given the codification of rules. Again, however, it might be that centralized policy making fails due to a lack of institutional self-knowledge to evaluate fairness or the nature of the concept of sustainability itself that points to the need for differential treatment of units, groups, or individuals on campus. This need for differential treatment is reflected in the concept of “common but differentiated responsibilities” found in traditional definitions of sustainability; it recognizes different capacities to contribute to sustainability and differing degrees of need. Sustainable development also focuses on cultivating neglected forms of capital: specifically *natural capital*, *human capital*, and (non-market) forms of *social capital*. This would, on the surface, suggest a university should preferentially invest in the biological sciences, social sciences and humanities. These would seem crucial to generating both the general and grounded theories (see Charmaz 2004) needed to shift from unsustainable practices informed by inadequate or erroneous theorization in these areas (grounded theoretical methods and case studies, on the other hand, can make an important contribution to determining sustainable patterns of activity as they are sensitive to and make use of local ecological and livelihood contexts). Yet current policies allocating resources based on student demand for specific degrees or traditional STEM subjects (that is, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) overlook the need to potentially over-invest in the humanities, social and biological sciences in achieving sustainability.

Codified policies also allow for *organizational resilience* to the extent there is not as much dependence, once codified, on the knowledge of any one particular individual, whether at the board level, senior management level, or other levels of an organization. Yet this concern for codification of rules and processes (enabling—in market terms—the “inter-substitutability of labour”) may overlook the potential derived by cultivating knowledge of specific knowledge keepers within an organization. These investments in human capital, advance both know-how (tacit knowledge) and know-who (the knowledge of “who knows what”) within an organization. The desire for codification might also undervalue other knowledge systems such as indigenous ways of knowing and alternative conditions under which individuals might choose to share their knowledge privately; these might be especially important to cultivate as Universities seek to connect to local communities as “living laboratories” for sustainability.

Part of the value of policies has to do with the *efficiency* that occurs with the demarcation of policy areas and the ability to implement systematic patterns of resource allocation and subordinated decision making. This allows for *clear lines of accountability* and *avoidance of conflicting actions*. It also allows for *decisive actions* taken in specified circumstances by authorized individuals, who, in turn dictate resource allocation. In theory, resource allocations could be “*fully aligned*” with the organization's goals as set by a centralized board and management team to ensure their effective use. These resources would be *fully budgeted* on an annual

basis to ensure efficient allocation (vs. underutilized surplus or redundant resources). In terms of efficiency and effectiveness for sustainability in HE, we can question this model. It is frequently unclear who has what responsibility for specific dimensions of sustainability. The most effective way to advance an initiative may involve the capacities of multiple, disparate, and frequently unknown individuals or units. If advancing sustainability relies too heavily on centralized administrative policies, this may make an institution highly vulnerable to *regime change*, especially where a new board is opposed to sustainability or simply chooses to pursue other objectives. It may also lead to the over-professionalization of sustainability work within the institution with a lack of (or under-reliance on) faculty, students and/or staff not deemed to be sustainability professionals or specialists. A lack of conflicting actions may actually reduce creative friction that leads to more optimal solutions or win-win SD scenarios. Overly decisive implementation of budgeted resources by the end of a budget year might also undermine a more cautious, deliberative use of resources on a case by case basis (that might, in fact, use fewer resources overall). This would suggest a precautionary approach (a concept central to sustainable development) to any resource use. This would include taking into account emerging local knowledge that suggests the resource application is inappropriate or could be used in a better way (that is, identifying an *opportunity cost* to its initial budgeted use given new information). Having unallocated or non-budgeted resources might be essential to taking advantage of unanticipated sustainability opportunities that emerge during the course of a budget year.

A policy governance model typically seeks efficiency through a *division of labour*. As already mentioned, policy makers are appointed from constituency bodies to boards and have a good sense of the overarching goals, outcomes, or ends the organization is meant to achieve along with limitations (ethical and legal) on how they are to be achieved. On the other hand, administrators and other employees are hired with the training to design and implement the programs and maintain day to day operations that achieve those goals. However, sustainability frequently blurs the policy and operations boundary given the shared information and decentralized authority needed for gradual sustainability experimentation and needed feedback loops. In this scenario “principle based” governance, where sustainability/SD principles are developed and shared by all parties provide important touchstones for decisions by the board, administrators, faculty, and staff. Board members may desperately need the expertise of students and faculty to appropriately develop overarching policy goals for the organization while a University's Board and Senate may have vital information on the practical how-to of community engagement for sustainability. At the policy level, sustainability principles are more appropriately used as a lens to amend existing policies in all areas (versus having a “stand alone” sustainability policy). Programmatically cross unit collaborative initiatives achieving multiple sustainable development goals simultaneously are frequently more efficient in their resource allocation, and often the only effective way to achieve some goals.

Lastly, a policy board is able to create *powerful chains of command from a centralized agent*, in this case the board—analogous to a traditional monarch or a democratic legislative assembly. Activities are monitored and evaluated with

specific agents held accountable for what is done and rewarded or punished appropriately. However, sustainability frequently requires gentle, non-coercive leadership, and leadership by example, especially where one seeks to mobilize independent student and faculty to pursue sustainability goals and harness the full power of the university. In the long run, the use of power non-coercively and inspirationally requires less energy to maintain while respecting the deeper accountability of a university that pursues knowledge in response to important curiosity-driven questions, many of which are questions of sustainable development. To reward or punish individual employees or units for sustainability achievements (or failures) often is not fair given the complexity of sustainability problems and the need to experiment (and fail!). Similarly individual rewards are also difficult as tasks are frequently shared and the benefits quite diffuse.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In advancing new rules and processes for sustainability in universities and colleges, the core scholarly mission of Higher Education cannot be forgotten. Rules need to be congruent with this mission. We can usefully compare HE with Governments in this regard. Governments have “*public policy*” which can be understood using Richard Hofferbert’s definition as “purposeful action taken for the public” (McKinney and Howard, 1998 p. 91). Such a definition aligns with a democratic government’s citizen accountabilities. Similarly, “*scholar policy*” should align with the goals of free scholarship, namely, policies that enhance the ability to do investigator-driven pursuit of knowledge that fulfills the curiosity of a researcher and a scholarly community. This entails not only academic freedom (that prevents the direct and unwarranted intervention in one’s scholarly pursuits by others), but also presupposes the material and other pre-conditions required to advance research and other scholarly pursuits for an individual scholar within a given discipline. Maintaining these conditions is a central task as it is these scholarly freedoms that have given universities and colleges the wealth and depth of knowledge now needed for addressing sustainability issues and unrivaled by other organizations.

Interestingly, there *is* a sustainability concept that has been well-pioneered in the scholarly discourse and applied over 25 years in international development work that advances this needed individual freedom and its material pre-conditions, namely, the concept of a *sustainable livelihood*. An important early definition of sustainable livelihood was developed by Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway who stated “[a] livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain and enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contribute net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long term” (1992, 6; a good summary of the extensive work done in this area since the concept’s early development is outlined by Ian Scoones (2015)). In using a *sustainable livelihood framework* we can ask pointed questions about campus policies: (1) How does a particular policy *help reduce the risk* of scholarly livelihoods, especially of the most vulnerable (including sessional faculty and students)? (2) How does it help *increase the (scholarly) assets and (scholarly)*

capabilities of individual scholars? (3) How does it affect the ability of scholars to *achieve their individual scholarly goals* and *other livelihood goals*? (4) How does it affect the *overall stocks of capital* upon which all livelihoods (including scholars and their universities) depend? Lastly, (5) how does it *enhance the equity* among scholars and between scholars and other livelihoods in relation to these 4 criteria? When phrased in this way a number of issues in the Academy related to precarious scholarly labour and student vulnerabilities (including student debt levels) become clear sustainability issues. The agenda of privatization and corporatization of a university is also seen to undermine many of these five livelihood goals. The ability to restructure Higher Education policy and governance to embrace these sustainable livelihood imperatives in the interest of free scholarship and inquiry can pave the way for 21st Century Higher Education.

So what might “scholar policy” for sustainability look like? Rather than developing policies that direct scholar activities to pursue particular research agendas or research questions or provides resourcing only to those disciplines deemed important by a centralized administration or government agendas, *scholar policies* would seek to build up the capacities of students and faculty (and also University staff and administrators!) to become curious about pressing sustainability issues on campus or in the communities the University serves. This means providing policies that support building social networks on campus, between disciplines, and with the community where people get to know each other in spaces of trust. Here *all* are scholars and practitioners that learn about sustainability issues and work on sustainability projects tied to the shared interests of all participants. Knowledge and educational methods pioneered in these spaces can then be introduced into traditional curriculum or disciplinary endeavors. Policies governing faculty in their performance reviews and students in their coursework need to provide rewards and resources for non-conventional scholarly activities that differ from ordinary disciplinary pursuits. This involves recognizing new forms of publications (including open access and online publications), the value of interdisciplinary efforts, and activities that advance teaching, research, and service simultaneously (as occurs, for example, with ESD research). This could involve working with students in established courses to develop local living laboratories for sustainability with nearby communities that, in turn, generate and disseminate various forms of sustainability knowledge and innovation. Such a project is at the heart of a course at Luther College at the U of R that works with communities during a regular course to create living laboratories with small towns and rural areas using an “eco-museum” model and tied to a community's sustainability issues.

Policy, in this model is then, not so much directive but creatively supportive—much like the way a wire cage can be used to support the growth of a tomato plant while allowing the plant freedom to grow in unpredictable ways. As the patterns of growth emerge, further supportive policies can be created that follow (rather than direct) the University's activities in ways that are most productive to the cause of SD. These policies can steer further financial and other resources; yet with all such efforts the resources should start small and respond to the needs of this organic system as expressed over time. A gradual resourcing over longer time periods allows for the continuity of programs and research that can span and be sustained

over such time periods. This also requires gentle leadership and a model of administration that is one principally of listening, service, and support. Yet, in a university setting committed to traditional collegial governance, this, of course, is as it should be.

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