“With Grumbling and Critique”

The Opinions of the Williams College Faculty on Sustainability

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Introduction

The importance of energy is rarely far from the American psyche. Gasoline runs our cars, oil heats our homes, and electricity runs the appliances that define modern life. However, the reckless use of energy has severe and costly environmental impacts. In addition, many current sources of energy are unsustainable, and put the United States in the awkward position of being supplied by the same region that we current engage in war. In this context, many governmental task-forces, citizens’ groups, and other institutions are engaged with the subject of energy and sustainability. Interestingly, new national fuel efficiency standards are to be proposed by the President on this paper’s due date.

One of the institutional groups engaged with energy are the nation’s colleges, among them Williams. Engagement happens for a few reasons, among them that colleges are already huge energy users. Some institutional energy use per student is higher than the average for an American household, making energy savings a high cost priority (Watts 2007). Other times, colleges are pushed to action by students, such as Thursday Night Group at Williams and Louise Gava at St. Lawrence University (Wiedeman 2009). Finally, colleges are often concerned with public image, especially as other schools add sustainability programs and staff (Carlson 2009).

Any institutional engagement with a particular issue must have successful stakeholder buy-in in order to be successful. Student buy-in allows for programs such as trayless dining to be successful; administrative buy-in allows programs to move forward. Because these groups are both central to sustainability efforts, they tend to be the subjects of focus. Though less central, the faculty of an institution also have an important role. Regulated by the administration, but in charge of students, they occupy a unique position within an institutional sustainability framework. Although they do not decide policy and use fewer campus spaces than students (primarily offices and classrooms), they can help institutions to be more sustainable and encourage student engagement with efficiency and sustainability in the classroom. Additionally, lab researchers can help to save energy when doing research, and all faculty can help to save paper when constructing a syllabus of primarily online materials, or by printing handout double-sided (Nelson 2008).

With more Williams faculty support, sustainability will be more achievable and more innovating policies will be possible as professional thinking minds pay attention to these issues, and point students in the same direction. This project paper examines the opinions and knowledge of the Williams College faculty on these issues and uses that data to make policy recommendations so that more faculty buy-in and institutional success can be achieved in this area.
National Context

Many colleges and universities now place high priority on sustainability programs and staff (Carlson 2009).

College Sustainability Practices (Carlson 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sustainability Patterns in Higher Education</th>
<th>Written Commitment to Sustainability 2001 (% of institutions)</th>
<th>Hired/Planned to Hire Conservation Manager 2001</th>
<th>Hired/Planned to Hire Green-Purchasing Coordinator 2008 (% of institutions)</th>
<th>Majors or Minors in Sustainability Fields 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>About 2/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>About 1/2</td>
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</table>

Additionally, the survey represented in table form above showed that students received fewer overall sustainability courses and faculty members had less professional development on sustainability topics.

However, some with fewer resources are unable to pay attention to long term goals in the current economic crisis (Carlson 2009). 18% of students recently reported access to online course materials, and anecdotal evidence from college bookstores suggests that 10-20% of students are getting entire electronic textbooks (Nelson 2008).

At Williams

Williams has had a dedicated center for Sustainability since September 2007 with a full-time staff director, along with an assistant funded by the Luce Foundation. The Center has conducted a variety of surveys, and helped to track energy use on campus. The Center's website provides information on all of these projects. Relevant to this survey, the Zilkha Center was involved in retroactively LEED certifying the North and South Academic Buildings as built in an environmentally conscious way, and helped to implement a partial shutdown of college buildings.
over the winter break, allowing emissions to radically decrease during this time. The college also has a variety of other policies and programs examined in the study below.

Method

After deciding that personal interviews would be the best method of data collection, I visited a series of buildings at a variety of hours, seeking open office doors that signaled faculty members with time to discuss these matters. The buildings I visited were: Bronfman Science Center, Thompson Biology Lab, Thompson Chemistry Lab, Thompson Physical Lab, Clark Hall, the South Academic Building (now officially named Schapiro Hall), and the North Academic Building. I met with 4 members of the Division I faculty, 12 members of the Division II faculty, and 10 members of the Division III faculty, for a total of 26 interviews. All notes were taken by hand, filling 14 pages of wide-ruled notebook paper. Notes were primarily paraphrased, though I occasionally took down a specific quote when pertinent or illuminating.

Interview Timeline

My process was to knock on the door, say I was doing a class research project, and ask if they had time for five questions. I was refused at this point by two DI and one DII faculty members who indicated they did not have time. Next, I would introduce myself and the class. Sometimes, the faculty member would have a comment to make about either professor, or ask an unrelated question. After initial pleasantries, I would begin the interview. My questions always followed this progression:

- When considering sustainability and related subjects, what policies and practices are you aware of?
- How do you feel about these policies and practices?
  - How do you think your fellow faculty feel?
- Does the College ever over prioritize green issues, or energy efficiency?
- How do you pay attention to these issues in the content of your instruction, the methods of your instruction, or your research?
How do you pay attention to these issues in your personal life?

On occasion, I would append follow-ups to get additional information. The only follow-up I regularly used was, “Do you endorse them?” after the second question, in cases when my answer did not indicate any personal feelings or opinions. I then thanked the faculty member for their time and left, sometimes with a promise to send them this final paper.

**Results**

This survey was statistically invalid, but there are a wide range of conclusions that can be pulled from the data. While specific confidence intervals are impossible, I can identify various trends.

**Knowledge of Institutional Practices**

Off the top of his or her head, each faculty member was able to identify a mean of 3.5 action steps of the college regarding sustainability. This does not represent the extent of the average faculty member’s knowledge, as other items (particularly the Winter Shutdown) came up repeatedly in subsequent questions. However, it is useful when considering how many policies easily came to mind. Here are the identified items, with numbers of parenthesis representing when multiple faculty identified that item or area:

- LEED Buildings (11)
- Recycling (8)
- Temperature control (7)
- Dining policies (6)
- The Zilhka Center (5)
- Lights (5)
- Asking faculty to conserve (5)
- Solar Panels (4)
- Do it in the Dark (3)
- Asking for feedback for ways to be energy efficient (3)
- Paper towels (2)
- Reducing consumption (2)
- Composting (2)
- Compostable cups (2)
- Sources of college energy
- Paper policies
- Where we buy goods
- Lab policies
- Rainwater capture
- Airflow regulation
- Efficient college vehicle fleet
“Cool Committee”
Efficient deliveries
Energy use targets
Carbon use targets
Plants on building roofs

Carbon credits
Energy use monitoring
Waterless urinals
College housing policies
Scan-to-E-mail machines

Feelings/Endorsements

Faculty were universally supportive of the goals and ideals behind college policies, but only to the extent that they not interfere with the “educational mission” of the college, or in other words, their ability to work uninterrupted. Faculty members were generally willing to undergo minor hardship, but became immensely frustrated whenever they perceived a lack of power, such as when they could no longer control the temperature in a too warm classroom, causing them to open the windows in the dead of Winter, or a cold office, causing them to bring in a space heater during the winter shutdown. A significant percentage of those I talked to felt that the college was doing much too little, sometimes laughing off current policies as either “inconsequential” or “window dressing.” Others felt threatened by policies, such as lab scientists performing precise operations whose lights might not sense their presence.

Faculty members are open to more work from the college, and even “an experimentalist approach,” but desire “dialog” with the college. There was also support for a college windmill by multiple faculty members. Faculty members sometimes judged the college’s work without much knowledge of actual practice. Many were open about their ignorance, and two professors outright said that they were completely clueless on current policy. Most notably, a faculty member who could only identify two areas of college policy in regards to sustainability still felt that the college was doing a “s****y job.”

Faculty members decried seeming inconsistency, such as hug buildings in comparison with a few solar panels. They hope that the college will think more in the long term, and judge some current policies to be “ineffective” and “redundant.” Except when their own research demands it, faculty members rarely talk to each other about the college’s sustainability practices. There may be an impression that because the college pays someone full time to think about these issues, faculty members are free from any expectation as to their own responsibilities for efficiency.
Judgments of Fellow Faculty Opinion

Opinions on this issue were universal enough for me to judge them as a valid conclusion—faculty members perceive their fellow faculty to be on a range from “extremely interested” to “completely indifferent,” though a few faculty dispute that anyone is completely without care for these issues. Within divisions, Division III faculty perceived themselves (and the Biology department in particular) as most aware of these issues, even sometimes going so far as to label other divisions as “illiterate.” Division I and II faculty often noted that their work demanded less use of resources; sometimes stating that their only tool was a computer. I did not speak to Studio Art Faculty.

Opinions on over-prioritization

Faculty members nearly universally felt that the college does not over-prioritize, but often changed their tune when it came to personal needs and impediments from sustainability policies. Faculty members perceived three separate areas of conflict:

- Conflict Between Institutional and Faculty Interests
- Conflict Between Educational Needs and Sustainability Principles
- Conflict Between Environmental Consciousness and Environmental Responsibility

The only times when faculty members perceived these issues as over-prioritized was when their own work was threatened, most notably when considering the Winter Shutdown. This concern was sometimes for themselves, especially people who needed to plan a Winter Study course, and for others, such as a chemistry professor who couldn't receive a delivery, and staff paid by the hour, who might have been effectively furloughed by the decision.

Professional Practice

Except for the areas of Biology and Developmental Economics, teaching about sustainability was generally negligible. Faculty members often print double sided (though I wonder if they have an option), and some are exploring ways to teach in labs with less waste, which might mean doing different experiments than the usual. Some faculty members no longer require separate cover pages because of paper use concerns. Regarding going paper-less, some faculty have tried it unsuccessfully, others are happy with being paper-less, and some are planning to try it next year. Only one faculty member has taken a substantial step beyond going paper less—she unplugged 40 things in her lab.
Personal Practice

Faculty members do a large variety of things in their personal life, some of which are:

- Insulating
- Cars/Hybrids
- Composting
- CFLs/Lights
- Green Architecture
- Local buying
- Energy Star
- CSA
- No pesticide use
- Solar heating
- Training kids
- Organic clothes
- Recycling
- Walking to work
- Bike to work
- Heating room by room in apt
- Solar Panel exploration
- Thermostats

This is only a partial list: the most important takeaway is that faculty members universally give this more thought and time as it pertains to their personal life, and that many lead extremely green lifestyles.

Discussion

There is still a substantial amount of work to be done in allowing for clear communication and awareness regarding sustainability. The high awareness of trayless use suggests that faculty members may pick up their knowledge from either personal experience or talking with students, instead of from contact with the administration. These results suggest some possible new policies or practices to be put in place:

Reaching Out

- Faculty should have open invitation to sustainability roundtables with information on how they might be able to save energy.
- A regular communication to faculty, such as a report from the Dean of the Faculty, should have a link to report ways to save energy, or areas of resource waste on campus
- Faculty/Staff should receive information on the energy use per person in their particular building, to get an idea of how much their own practices cost.
The mailbox areas should have a suggestions box for methods of energy savings. This is important in both providing a vehicle for anonymous feedback, but also a way for faculty to feel engaged.

The College should attempt to identify “problem spaces” on campus that are either too hot or too cold. Areas that are too warm are going through energy too fast, and may suffer faculty opening the windows to get rid of excess heat, as was described to me. Areas that are too cold are not getting enough energy, and might cause faculty to get their own heater.

Opportunities for Faculty to Engage

- Faculty members might be encouraged to list the ways they save energy at home, and leave that brainstorm sheet on the wall in their office so that both they and students can see.

- Faculty members might be encouraged to assign books available for free on Google Books or similar services.

- Faculty Members might be invited to share or give up their office space during shutdown times in one building, so that everyone who comes to campus has a place to work without large energy losses.

- Faculty Members should be able to submit jobs that might save energy (such as turning off a lab machine at 2 am) to the Zilkha Center, which can assign and pay a student for that task.

Conclusion

The list above is partial. Ultimately, actions should be taken after looking at a wide variety of data, of which this can be a part. Though statistically invalid, I still feel that these opinions will be useful in forming policy, and remembering that while faculty may be wrong and judgmental, they are often willing to give more than the benefit of the doubt, and may lead each other to more cooperation and collaboration with the Zilkha Center and Sustainability at Williams.
References


