

# Defining Sustainability

By Stephen Nason, NASPA Region 1 Sustainability KC

“Oh, and make it green, make it **sustainable** (‘please’ optional)...” More and more, Student Affairs professionals are hearing this phrase when planning projects and activities with senior administration. Sustainability is definitely something more than the latest fad. Sustainability is here to stay and the good news is that many in the know say it is something generally positive, but what is it?

The NASPA Region 1 Sustainability KC leadership team is currently conducting an energetic debate about how to define *sustainability*. This question came up while the leadership team was looking over the design of the new web page for the KC and noticed that the word, “sustainability” was used eight times on a single web page without a single, clear definition to underpin its value. Perhaps we should define it? This should be a simple task for knowledgeable sustainability people right? *Wrong!*

We all believe we know what sustainability is when we hear it mentioned in our day to day work and nowadays, sustainability or being green, is being mentioned more and more. But I don’t think we all think that sustainability means the same thing - rather, I think, we all put our own spin on its definition based on our own experiences. Therefore, the need to define “sustainability” is important so that we can all be on the same page when we say we need to be “sustainable”.

So the leadership team turned to the National Sustainability KC and after a bit of digging came up with the following definition:

*Sustainability is defined in an inclusive way: encompassing human and ecological health, social justice, secure livelihoods, and a better world for all generations.<sup>1</sup>*

Great! Now we should be all set and can finish up that web page. However a member of our leadership team pointed out that while it’s a pretty all-encompassing definition, it doesn’t give Region 1-ers enough to grab onto. This member was even having a hard time thinking of things the member was working on that didn’t fit into that definition. The member suggested that our definition of sustainability needed to be something that is more targeted and more specific to our region.

Another member of our leadership team commented: “I agree. Like the definition of ‘learning’ as “a change in behavior”, the definition of sustainability given includes more than what we mean by sustainability. Consider the learning example as an illustration: sleep is a change in behavior which is a not a change we would call ‘learning’. The definition of ‘learning’ as “a change in behavior” is thus too broad or inclusive (it is also too narrow in that it excludes things we would call learning). In terms of sustainability, the concern seems to be how to **balance the needs of our current generations in an equitable manner with the needs of future generations and other life on the planet...**”

I agreed with my leadership team that our region one definition of sustainability needs to be more focused on Region 1. My first crack at making the definition of sustainability something more that Region 1 could sink its’ teeth in:

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<sup>1</sup> Definition from the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, AASHE, [www.aashe.org](http://www.aashe.org)

*The Region 1 sustainability KC defines sustainability as actions (including human and ecological health, social justice, and secure livelihoods) by student affairs practitioners that ensure a better world for all generations.*

Bah! I didn't like it. It didn't seem like it captured what Region 1 is currently doing in the field of sustainability. It needed work, so I turned to my leadership team again. One of them made the following suggestion. "Perhaps we should consider how Tony Corese, president of Second Nature, defines 'sustainability' in the context of how we frame the problem:

*"The term sustainability was created to define how the world would meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The concept of sustainable development has proven a credible answer to early critics of the environmental movement who tried to frame the issue as one of "jobs versus the environment," Cortese said.*

I liked Corese's way of looking at sustainability and I think it could be readily applied to the day to day issues facing student affairs. To be sustainable in student affairs we need to make sure that while we continue to meet the needs of the present, we make sure that what we are doing now will not prevent us from meeting future needs of our profession. As a housing person, when I am planning a new residence hall, not only do I need to plan to meet the need of residents moving into it next year but also try to foresee the needs of residents ten and twenty years down the road.

So to get back to defining sustainability for Region 1 I gave it another try:

*The Region 1 sustainability KC defines sustainability as a process in which the world would meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.*

Is it perfect? No. Does it need more work? Absolutely! But as one member of my leadership team remarked it seems to more accurately capture the meaning of the sustainability movement with minimal ideological baggage. I am sure the debate of what defines sustainability will continue but as long as we work to make sure that the actions that we are making today will not hamper future generations' work, we will be making the world and student affairs a better place today and tomorrow.

Now, I just need to finish that web page...