The Sustainability Imperative and Emerging Opportunities for Unity College

Earlier in my career I was the kind of academic scholar who focused almost exclusively on the scientific meaning and value of my research. While I continue to value pure science for its intellectual merit, I now think that our planet’s environmental crisis trumps academic endeavors that do not have an immediate relevance to the sustainability of the fragile biosphere that supports human civilization. Like so many of you, I came to Unity College to be part of its mission to restore ecological integrity.

At the meeting of the Council of Independent Colleges held last week, I was struck by the utter lack of connection between the proceedings and our ongoing ecological crisis. Speakers were studiously concerned with issues related to declining enrollments, discount rates, the deepening global economic crisis, and the causes of rising tuition. While these items are arguably appropriate for such a conference of college presidents, to me the agenda was a jarring disconnect from the root causes of our ongoing economic and ecological crises. More than any other group, we are the stewards of the future for our students. Can you imagine the power of this group if we spoke with one voice?

Moreover, the academy, like any professional enterprise, must face the reality of our times if we are to be relevant and to be of service. As I recently commented at the December commencement, it is business as usual that is unrealistic and utopian. Human civilization faces a compelling and pragmatic need for a new consciousness.

Good news

We have much to be proud of at Unity College. Our students grow into an understanding of our complex ecological reality. Our students learn the theory and practice of sustainability. As I have learned about where we stand in the context of other private colleges, I am continually impressed with our advantages. Many of my impressions were confirmed by the recent Stamats analysis of our branding and tuition, which was delivered to us just before the holiday break. We have much good news to celebrate:

- We are financially solvent on an annual basis and our long-term prospects are good. Possibly a majority of small private colleges run an annual deficit in the current economy. Some of our peer institutions are running multimillion-dollar annual deficits. Several of them have maxed out their credit lines. Your careful financial stewardship and willingness to do more with less has given us some grace in the face of the national economic crisis.

- We have now an additional $10 million to contribute income to our students and programing.
Our students are truly unique. I have received confirmation of this from a number of sources, and the Stamats study noted this. As a population they are intensely loyal and down to earth. They are eager to engage ecological problems, and they expect to get their hands dirty and feet muddy. This is exactly the clientele that our mission is designed to serve and we are right on target to recruit this unique population.

The Stamats study showed that our students and their parents identify strongly with the mission of the College -- so much so, that they are generally willing to pay the extra expense to be a part of our learning community focused on sustainability.

The relevance of our mission is beyond question and its significance eclipses more typical points of institutional pride. We are not the Florida Gators, or even the Colby Mules, and we should not look at these such institutions with envy. Our students’ identity as part of the Unity community has greater depth than any loyalty to a sports icon or to an elite class. Our graduates do not emerge from the cocoon of college wielding the often-destructive tools of the status quo; they graduate and contribute to the sustainability of life on this planet by exercising their skills in conservation, sustainability, environmental science, and environmental studies. I know of no more essential or important focus. As noted by David Orr, “all education is environmental education….By what is included or excluded we teach students that they are part or apart from the natural world.” Unity College is a great institution because this connection to the ecology of the planet is our core mission.

Our faculty are mission driven and in the face of inadequate resources they continue to suit up and show up, often sacrificing personal advancement to make a difference in the lives of our students and the ecology of our planet. Their dedication is beyond question, and one of the top priorities of my job is find new resources necessary to support their work.

Unlike the staff at many (if not most) other institutions, our staff shares in this dedication to our mission. We must enhance staff inclusion in all aspects of the College by acknowledging their central role in sustainability and respecting their work in tangible and intangible ways.

My experience at Unity College since July has provided me with a number of firsts. This is the first time that I have been to a beach party in December, the first time I’ve heard the real Gary and the Pacemakers, the first time I have lived in a house that is considered most excellent and most ugly, the first time my dogs have been welcomed by the neighbors, the first time I have eaten cafeteria food that I actually liked, and the first time I have seen a vice president sleeping in a student dormitory. Speaking at the Schoodic conservation law graduation was the first time I have spoken to a room of students who appeared to be wearing side arms.

Over the last few months I have progressively fallen in love with Unity College and its people. This is by far the most demanding, compelling, and rewarding job of my career. Never have I been asked to play so many different roles. Never have I had the privilege to work with such a dedicated and talented faculty who are so congruent with my own worldview. It is a rare privilege to have the opportunity to enhance the integration of the staff with the mission of the
institution, a function that is usually ignored. The students at Unity are the most unique and engaging of my career. I speak for Michele too when I say that we wake up each morning grateful to have this opportunity to serve. Unity is a great place to be alive, and we’ve had a lifetime of places to compare.

While all of these positive aspects reflect the reality of Unity College, there are ecological, financial, and programmatic challenges that we must address. I would like to take a few minutes to talk about my response to these issues, beginning first with the reality of our global ecological dilemma and its implications for Unity College.

**The sustainability imperative of higher education**

I see evidence of a global change in consciousness. Increasing numbers of informed members of our global civilization are concluding that the present paradigm of continual economic growth and overexploitation of the Earth’s natural resources is unsustainable and inconsistent with happiness. The exponential growth of the Internet is part of a global explosion of democratic ideals that includes increasing awareness of our unsustainable global economy. Western cultures are showing evidence of a significant shift in consciousness through activities such as the Transition movement, which focuses on building functional resilience through localizing power production, economies and food production as fossil fuels become more expensive and increasingly rare over the coming decades.

Concomitant with the increasing dysfunction of the global growth economy is our rapidly destabilizing climate. Examples of extreme weather and record-breaking climate trends are manifold from every quarter of the planet. The rapid northward movement of growing zones in temperate North America and Eurasia will change ecosystems in ways that will fundamentally affect their delivery of ecosystem services and economic utility. These changes are expected to manifest over the coming three or four decades, and we in Maine can expect our region to be a refuge for plants, animals, and people from the south. Our climate-buffered maritime habitats will be especially attractive because of their relative stability. Maine’s fertile farmland is amendable to smaller scale agriculture that is consistent with re-localizing our food production. We have relatively abundant water and resources for renewable energy. Impacts of climate change on forestry and the maple sugar industries will be profound. Longer-term prospects for climate stability are unfavorable given that the tundra will likely become a net source of carbon emissions sometime before 2030. Thus, efforts at climate mitigation will need to be increasingly strenuous as natural feedbacks reinforce human driven climate destabilization.

With respect to the viability of Unity College, it does not matter if the public comes to a wholesale awareness of the need for sustainability. It only matters that increasing numbers of potential students and their parents achieve this awareness, and that they identify Unity College as a solution. There is little doubt that this trend in awareness of the need for sustainability is occurring. As I will develop later in this address, our near term strategy should focus on enhanced delivery and marketing of the tools for the 21st Century.

The competition for the sustainability higher education market is rapidly growing, and in recent years there has been no shortage of students entering the environmental sciences, in contrast to declining populations of students in many career fields. The National Science Foundation has developed a coordinated research and education framework for sustainability science and
engineering, and the National Academy of Science has identified sustainability science as an area of top priority for research and education. Virtually all big public institutions are increasing their marketing of the sustainability aspect of their programming, although this is only rarely matched by renewed investment in such programming. This is occurring simultaneously with continuation of the progressive defunding of the liberal arts.

Colleges such as Unity have faced increasing pressure to raise tuition because the real costs of institutional operations have exploded while productivity gains have been limited by the need for individualized instruction. Because of cutbacks in state funding, tuition increases at the publics are expected to proportionally outpace the already substantial growth of tuition at the privates. Only the elite privates have been able to sustain large increases in tuition while stabilizing or decreasing their discount rate. Thus, tuition increases especially at small private institutions have considerably outpaced inflation, and parents and students are appropriately asking for evidence of the return on their investment. I believe that Unity College is in an excellent position to demonstrate the value of our education.

**An unprecedented opportunity**

The twin crises of environmental degradation and economic dysfunction provide us with an opportunity for service on a greater scale than ever before in the history of the College. Unity College is well positioned to be the best small college in the U.S. to specialize in providing students with the scholarship and hands-on experiential learning for building a sustainable society. We have a growing national reputation for this type of programming, and all aspects of the institution are pre-adapted for expansion of this paradigm. Many institutions of similar size may have multiple contrasting programs, and in the majority of large institutions it is impossible to identify a signature program of merit in sustainability.

My strategy for development of our future can be simply stated as having two components. First, we must reinvest in the human resources necessary to provide unparalleled programming in pragmatic and scholarly sustainability. Secondly, we must aggressively market the advantages of our sustainability programming and the high value of this in the context of a liberal arts education. In short, we must take our sustainability paradigm to a level that distinguishes Unity College above the competition by providing real added value to our degree in comparison to degrees from other institutions.

Now is the time for us to embrace this specialization and proudly point to the unique character of our programming and students. Given the societal changes underway, we should not be in the least shy about aggressively occupying this niche. The defining characteristics of a Unity College degree should continue to be hands-on experiential and pragmatic knowledge, but we must also develop a strong reputation for training in the scholarship of sustainability. This will require emphasis in the field and classroom on environmental mitigation, adaptation to environmental change, and the emerging scholarship of social and ecological resilience. I believe that fully embracing the sustainability paradigm will provide a significant added value to degree tracks that are synergistic with our core sustainability programming, such as environmental education, environmental writing, and one of our signature programs, conservation law.

We should proudly defend and market the value of a liberal arts education to potential students and their parents. The liberal arts framework enhances any scientific or technical training
through the teaching of critical thinking, written and verbal communication, and the complex ethical context typical of tradeoffs in the 21st Century. A liberal arts degree will give our students a strong competitive advantage in a job market increasingly characterized by sole emphasis on technical skills. A liberal arts education makes our students better professionals and better-informed citizens. In addition to the traditional liberal arts mix of courses, I believe that we should emphasize training in progressive results-based management, thus distinguishing our students as having a skill set that is highly valued and exceedingly rare. Through focus on the intrinsic value of our education products, I envision a time when Unity College students will be among the most highly sought after participants in the green economy.

Needs

We cannot make such a significant step forward without investment in our human resources of faculty and staff. Over the last few years the College has developed in terms of showcase sustainable infrastructure and a much needed laboratory and teaching facility. I believe that now is the time to reinvest in our people through development of a strategic plan that has as a top priority the hiring of new faculty and staff. At the top of this list should be some of the positions that the faculty have identified as necessary to support the Academic Master Plan.

There is no single path to development of these human resources. Instead, we must carefully consider strategic tradeoffs that can allow enhancing our human capital to be the primary outcome of investment over the coming few years.

I am convinced that our niche in higher education is robust and that, besides building our educational programming, it is critically important that we do a better job of telling our story. The Stamats study confirmed that our market penetration is very shallow and that we leave large sections of our potential market untouched. More importantly, the higher education marketplace is very noisy, with unclear and competing voices. Given the importance of our niche to society, we have a beckoning opportunity be heard above the din. Thus, aggressive marketing is necessary to reap the benefits of embracing sustainability as the educational and operational paradigm of the College. The ranks of administration have professionalized and developed over the last few years, and I believe that this growth has been absolutely necessary. I ask for your forbearance and support while we finish the job and develop an office explicitly devoted to marketing.

Development to support our core mission

There are several opportunities and needs that must be considered in the strategic planning process. These items should be given due consideration and prioritized in terms of their ability to functionally or financially support our core mission. These include:

- **Distance or hybrid programming as adjunct to our core mission.** I have asked two outside firms to assess our potential within our unique niche in higher education.

- **Collaboration with sister environmental institutions.** Unity College should consider collaboration via online technology with institutions such as Green Mountain and Northland to provide joint programming in areas that are adjunct but supportive of our respective missions. Now that we are part of Internet II, we have the ability to make this
happen, thus achieving more of an economy of scale and allowing us to further reduce student to teacher ratio in our core programs.

- **Enhancement of infrastructure.** It is clear that in coming years we will need to renovate and to a limited extent expand our facilities. These projects must visibly employ sustainable practice and be prioritized as part of the strategic plan. These necessary enhancements should be a focus of our Development office.

- **Enhanced development of summer programs.** This could include development of certification programs and collaborations with groups such as the nearby AGRI project for disabled veterans. One hybrid distance program that we are exploring is training of business executives in the fundamentals of sustainability.

**Process for strategic planning**

Achieving the goals outlined here will require an action oriented yet flexible strategic plan. Over the first months of my administration, I have gathered opinions and data from all constituents on campus and individuals in the community. Now we must incorporate this information into a transparent and inclusive planning process. I have asked Bill Trumble to organize a team to develop the strategic plan based on extensive community input. I will coordinate collaboration with the Board of Trustees, and continue to seek your input as the plan develops. In addition to the special meetings that we will hold with various groups on campus, I encourage you to contact your representative on the Leadership Council and provide your input to the strategic plan.

In the next month Bill Trumble will ask the faculty and staff to identify representatives for the writing team. I strongly recommend that you limit your group’s representation to no more than two individuals with good collaborative and writing skills. The strategic plan must be completed expeditiously and be actionable. It must not be a laundry list of needs. Each item should be directly linked to the budgeting process. As a basis for development of the plan, I will provide a background whitepaper that describes in more detail many of the points that I have made today.

I believe that our future looks promising. We should not expect results from the changes that I have suggested to happen overnight or even within the next year. Investments in institutional processes such as programming and marketing require time to come to fruition. I am certain, however, that we are on the right track for delivery of urgently needed knowledge and services to our students and society. Even in these challenging times, Unity College will not only survive, but we will thrive. More importantly, so will our students.