

Sustainability Thinking and Entrepreneurship:

A Case Study

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Academic entrepreneurship, in its narrowest sense, involves the creation of new business ventures by university and college faculty, administrators, and students. More broadly, academic entrepreneurship seeks to establish connections across disciplines, between student and academic affairs, and between the campus and community. It draws on the spirit of innovation, creativity, and opportunity that animates entrepreneurial activity in the business world to provide the richest learning experience possible for students.

Academic entrepreneurship has been part of Ithaca College's institutional DNA since its founding in 1892 as a music conservatory. Ithaca, an independent, predominantly undergraduate college of 6,400 students in the Finger Lakes region of New York, offers a diverse curriculum in more than one hundred degree programs in business, communications, health sciences and human performance, humanities and sciences, music, and interdisciplinary studies. The music program's original emphasis on performance and hands-on learning spread throughout the curriculum as the college grew, influencing other programs in theater arts, physical education, physical therapy, radio, and television.

As a founding member of Associated New American Colleges, a national consortium of about twenty small and mid-sized institutions, Ithaca is

committed to Ernest Boyer's vision of an undergraduate education that combines liberal and professional learning with a strong emphasis on experiential learning and civic engagement. This marriage of pragmatism and idealism equips Ithaca students with the ability to solve real-world problems in ways that advance the college's core values: intellect, character, creativity, community, and global citizenship. The recent campus-wide sustainability initiative is but the latest manifestation of Ithaca's distinctive brand of undergraduate education.

What is sustainability? In 1987 the United Nation's Brundtland Report defined sustainability as development that meets the "needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Sustainability acknowledges the interdependence of society, the economy, and the environment, and it encourages long-term, strategic thinking that promotes effective stewardship of our natural, social, and economic resources. The growing global crisis in sustainability has led the United Nations to declare 2005–2014 the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. This initiative seeks to raise awareness about future challenges and how individual and collective choices regarding the allocation of resources affect the quality of life of people around the world.

Ithaca College has been exploring and applying the concept of sustainability for several years. Our sustainability initiative involves three dimensions: the curriculum, college operations, and community outreach. The framework supplied by sustainability thinking—with its emphasis on interconnectedness, the dynamic nature of complex systems, and the importance of taking the long view—has much in common with the strategic approach adopted by the college’s institutional plan. Indeed, the move towards sustainability has emerged organically out of the priorities established by the institutional plan.

One of the priorities, for example, is to expand “field-based, experiential, and performance-based learning.” Specifically, the plan seeks to promote “student engagement in and out of the classroom and . . . student commitment to service and community involvement.” In pursuit of these goals, the environmental studies faculty forged a unique collaboration in 2002 with EcoVillage of Ithaca, an intentional community dedicated to modeling innovative approaches to ecological, economic, and social sustainability. The one-hundred-and-seventy-six acre EcoVillage encompasses not only co-housing and an education center but also habitat for land conservation and restoration as well as organic agriculture.

Funded in part by the National Science Foundation (NSF), the partnership between Ithaca and EcoVillage seeks to advance undergraduate learning

in sustainability and encourage students to become involved in science-based community ecological projects. In particular, it has led to the development of four new interdisciplinary courses in environmental studies. The NSF grant also supported the incorporation of sustainability principles across the curriculum, in such disciplines as recreation management, philosophy, business administration, history, health policy, and physics.

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buy socially responsible program” in the college’s purchasing department, and the addition of a hybrid car to the campus fleet.

The Natural Areas Stewardship Committee, made up of faculty and operational managers, also plays an important role in encouraging sustainable management. The committee is developing a plan that will appropriately balance the use of the college’s land for academic research and teaching with the need to generate revenue. An Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grant recently awarded to Ithaca undergraduates supports part of this

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fronts to manage its campus in an environmentally sensitive manner. The Resources and Environmental Management Program, comprised of faculty, staff, and students, has provided significant leadership, resulting in the adoption of recycled paper for office copier and printer use, a nationally recognized recycling and composting program, collection and redistribution of reusable office supplies, a “buy green,

effort. The grant is facilitating research on ways to enhance the biodiversity of South Hill, where the campus is located, and the development of an interactive Web-based biodiversity mapping program. In addition, students are working with faculty to assess the feasibility of installing wind-power generators on the hill overlooking the campus.

Perhaps the most dramatic symbol of Ithaca’s commitment to sustainable

management is the decision to build a new high-performance business school facility. The building, when completed in 2008, will house not just a school, but a way of thinking and being that exemplifies ethical business practices, an understanding of organizations as citizens in their communities, and the responsible use of natural resources. As the fundraising, planning, and design for the new facility proceeds, a group of business faculty is exploring how to integrate sustainability into the

Other outreach efforts have resulted in the creation of Sustainable Tompkins, a regional development initiative. Funded by Ithaca College, the Park Foundation, Cornell University, and several area businesses, Sustainable Tompkins launched a series of study circles last spring on such topics as renewable energy, sustainable design, and community well-being. More informal gatherings, known as “Sustainability Salons,” also occurred weekly in five coffeehouse locations around the

technology showcase. Geared to the local business community, this event highlighted the benefits of sustainable operating practices and environmentally friendly products through presentations and product exhibitions by two dozen firms.

Another important vehicle for outreach on sustainability issues has been the Finger Lakes Environmental Film Festival (FLEFF). Originally sponsored by Cornell, FLEFF began in 1998. Ithaca College became a major venue for FLEFF over the past few years, and has provided increasingly significant funding. This past fall, for the first time, Ithaca took on primary sponsorship. The opening night of FLEFF at the Park School of Communications attracted several hundred people from the campus and community, and the festival was an unqualified hit.

Sustainability thinking and entrepreneurship, then, have become inextricably linked at Ithaca College. The institution’s long history of innovation and pragmatism has furnished a fertile seedbed for the growth of the sustainability initiative, which in turn has helped to facilitate the integration of liberal education and professional studies, with a strong emphasis on civic engagement. As a result, Ithaca is helping to forge a unique approach to undergraduate learning, an approach that represents the cutting edge of U.S. higher education in the twenty-first century. ■

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school’s curriculum. Under the umbrella of the Ithaca College Business Forum, faculty are also developing collaborations with corporations such as Bristol-Myers Squibb and Ernest & Julio Gallo Wineries to study and facilitate the transfer of knowledge both within and between organizations, and to offer students and faculty opportunities for internships and access to business leaders who have adopted sustainability practices and policies.

county. Students from Ithaca and Tompkins Cortland Community College helped to organize and facilitate both series.

Sustainable Tompkins project teams are now working on a green-building resource hub, sustainable land use and planning, alternative fuels and public transit, and sustainable landscape design. Most recently, in partnership with the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce, Sustainable Tompkins mounted a very successful sustainable