

Assessing the State of Sustainability Education: A Case Study of Faculty Efforts at the University of Nevada, Reno

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The University of Nevada, Reno established a Sustainability Committee in 2008, one goal of which is to strengthen the focus of the undergraduate curriculum on sustainability. In the process of implementing this goal, a faculty working group has discussed and come to agreement on several critical issues, including definitions, participation, methods, and culture. Defining sustainability required acknowledgment of the variety of meanings in use and coming to agreement on a broad definition that integrates the social, economic and environmental aspects (the “triple bottom line”). Discussion also led to a recognition of a spatial component of sustainable development in addition to the often referred to temporal component and addressed the implicit ethical obligations that arise in considering these aspects of sustainability. Participation in the working group has been guided by the desire to be as cross-disciplinary as possible, explicitly including faculty from every college, on the understanding that sustainability naturally concerns almost all disciplines and areas of study. The initial method chosen by the committee to collect data is a survey of both faculty and undergraduate students, to develop a baseline on which to assess the current coverage of sustainability issues by the undergraduate curriculum. Distributing related surveys to both faculty and students provides for a comparison in perceptions between the two groups. A secondary goal is to assess and compare the strength and direction of personal attitudes about sustainability issues. The results of the survey will be used to educate faculty and administrators about the adequacy of the curriculum with respect to sustainability issues and to develop concrete steps for improvement. Discussions have also stressed the need for developing a culture on campus that values sustainability as a practice and subject of inquiry. Efforts to address cultural, administrative, attitudinal, and practical barriers to improved teaching on these issues will also be discussed.