

## Pluralism Lost: Sustainability's Unfortunate Fall

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to know  
That which before us lies in daily life,  
Is the prime wisdom  
—Milton, *Paradise Lost*

### Introduction

*Paradise Lost* explores the themes of human frailty, failure, and redemption following humanity's "original sin," eating of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden. This original sin resulted in human beings being banished from an earthly paradise and compelled to wander eternally a world fraught with danger, despair, desolation, and death. *Paradise Lost* is Milton's attempt to understand humanity's predicament and to suggest how redemption might be realized.

Milton's theme remains relevant to the relationship of human beings to the environment in the modern world. Concerned environmentalists assert that the earth's pristine resources are being destroyed by human culture and portray their own version of the ecological "hell" that will follow. Nowhere is their clarion call more strident than when warning about the global threat

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posed by climate change. According to these ecological alarmists, the apocalyptic outcome of human interaction with the planet can be avoided only by making dramatic changes in our attitudes, behavior, cultures, and economies.

Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) in Fort Myers, Florida—the state's tenth public university—was born in 1995, during an era in which climate change and the earth's ecological future were dramatically moving to the forefront as important public policy issues statewide, nationally, and globally. Although the founding faculty and administrators involved worked to realize a relatively smooth transition of the Fort Myers campus of the University of South Florida into an independent and autonomous institution of higher education, events and environmental issues conspired to complicate FGCU's birth.

As A. James Wohlpart, Joseph Shepard, and Peter Blaze Corcoran report, FGCU “was born in controversy” as a contentious debate arose in southwest Florida over the geographical location of the new university and its impact upon the region's natural wetland environment.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, this controversy pitted those committed to the region's economic development against those principally concerned with protecting natural resources and environs from exploitation and degradation. In my capacity as a founding dean at FGCU, I can affirm that despite our best efforts to envision and plan for its future we failed to appreciate the influence that community environmental concerns would ultimately impose upon FGCU and its curriculum.

### **The Birth of the “Environmental University”**

When the original team of faculty and administrators conferred in 1995 to begin designing curriculum, hiring faculty and staff, and building facilities, we devoted little thought to creating an “environmental university.” Prescient as we were determined to be, we failed to grasp the degree to which environmental concerns would shape our new university. Our initial approach emanated from the experiences of founders of Florida's newest

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<sup>1</sup>A. James A. Wohlpart, Joseph Shepard, and Peter Blaze Corcoran, “Born in Hope and Controversy: The Challenges of Infusing Sustainability in the Campus Operations and Curriculum at Florida Gulf Coast University,” *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development* 3, no. 2 (2009): 213–15.

universities. Early leadership was drawn from the University of North Florida (UNF) in Jacksonville—the most recent higher education institution to have opened in Florida prior to FCGU. It was generally assumed that FCGU would resemble UNF, or perhaps the University of West Florida in Pensacola or Florida International University in Fort Lauderdale. We also expected FCGU to distinguish itself by utilizing faculty contracts instead of tenure and by committing to implement distance learning technology. In fact, FCGU's founding president Roy McTarnaghan touted Florida's tenth public university as “the distance learning university.”

However, the uproar raised throughout the region over plans to build a university on the fragile wetlands east of U.S. Interstate Highway 75 soon threatened to derail the project to bring higher education to southwest Florida. Administrators, faculty, and staff alike were compelled to address the ecological sensibilities of the region's residents and design a university curriculum with a distinct environmental orientation.

### **The Colloquium**

Emblematic of FCGU's efforts was a core undergraduate curriculum requirement, “The University Colloquium: A Sustainable Future,” commonly referred to as the Colloquium. Initially, this course was not conceptualized as a dedicated environmental course, but rather as a university-wide undergraduate requirement designed to foster pluralism and civic engagement across the region.

Modeled closely after “The Sagan National Colloquium,” instituted by David Warren at Ohio Wesleyan University, the Colloquium format I introduced to the FCGU founding deans' council allowed Colloquium coordinators to select an annual theme involving a significant public concern or issue. Coordinators would integrate classroom lectures and projects into as much of the university curriculum as possible and augment discussion with a series of lectures and presentations germane to the annual theme.

However, as the controversy over the proposed location of the university continued and escalated, so did demand for a curriculum acknowledging that FCGU's existence would impact a fragile watershed. Not only did the physical plant have to be built accordingly, but the school needed to inculcate an ecological sensibility among students, faculty, staff, and administration. Since the Colloquium was designed to serve as the signature course for the

new institution, the FCGU founding deans eventually embraced the Colloquium as a dedicated environmentally-oriented course.

### **The Gospel of Sustainability According to Orr**

Responsibility for planning the course and hiring a curriculum designer fell to Jack Crocker, the founding dean of the college of arts and sciences. A poet and musician, Crocker envisioned creating an integrated, interdisciplinary college environment dedicated to instilling an ecological sensibility in all FCGU constituents. To that end, he sought a philosophical muse to guide his efforts, and found his inspiration in David W. Orr's *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect*.<sup>2</sup>

Orr's philosophical approach to environmental sustainability begins with a review of what he believes to be unsustainable in human culture. Orr considers a number of human practices to be unsustainable, including:

- the ongoing militarization of the planet
- a world with a large number of desperately poor
- the perpetual enlargement of the human estate
- the unrestrained development of any and all technology
- a world of ever increasing economic, financial, and technological complexity
- a world divided by narrow, exclusive, and intense allegiances to ideology or ethnicity
- unrestrained auto-mobility, hedonism, individualism, and conspicuous consumption
- a spiritually impoverished world<sup>3</sup>

Given this set of unsustainable human practices and characteristics, Orr advocates for human restraint in the face of tangible ecological limitations. Accordingly, he observes that "genuine sustainability" mandates significant changes in values and morality rather than superficial attitudinal or behavioral changes. Moreover, he resists relying upon human ingenuity and technology to solve ecological problems by asserting that "the barriers to a

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<sup>2</sup>David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup>Culled from David W. Orr, "Four Challenges of Sustainability," *Conservation Biology* 16, no. 6 (2002): 1457–60, a version of which is available at [http://www.davidworr.com/files/Four\\_Challenges.pdf](http://www.davidworr.com/files/Four_Challenges.pdf).

graceful transition to sustainability, whatever forms it may take, are not so much technological as they are social, political, and psychological.”<sup>4</sup>

What Orr has in mind is profound social change tantamount to an ecological cultural revolution. Such cultural reorientation, according to Orr, requires that society deal with four distinct sustainability challenges:

1. Creating models, metaphors, and measures to enable humanity to reorient itself in the direction of an economically and culturally devolved society that is neither ecologically demanding or exploitative.
2. Improving upon the creativity and effectiveness with which humans exercise their citizenship and engage in self-governance, to include (a) the comprehensive redistribution of wealth and resources among peoples and across generations, (b) the development of a “cradle to cradle” materials policy, (c) licensing and controlling corporations and industries for the public’s long-term benefit; (d) amassing the financial resources to rebuild ecologically sound communities and dependable public transportation; (e) establishing standards for the use of shared natural resources such as air, water, wildlife, and soils; (f) contributing to the ecological vigor of social and environmental ecological resources rendering them resilient to unexpected perturbations.
3. Influencing public sensibilities regarding environmental sustainability through the exercise of public education.
4. Solving “divergent problems” inherent to the process of transitioning to a sustainable society—problems born out of the interactions of competing perspectives that are inherently resistant to “solutions” but amenable to being “managed.”<sup>5</sup>

Radically veering from the status quo, Orr’s approach calls for the dramatic devolution of Western lifestyles and culture, a socialist-styled redistribution of wealth to emerging nations and economies, the dismantling of modern capitalism, and the emergence of a powerful central international governing, taxing, and regulatory body that would reduce the independence of virtually every nation and economy.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 1467.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 1459.

## Pluralism Loses to Sustainability

Orr's philosophy of sustainability resonated with Crocker's vision, and sustainability became one of the foundational values of FGCU. The council of founding deans adopted a set of institutional values accordingly:

Informed and engaged citizens are essential to the creation of a civil and sustainable society. The university values the development of the responsible self, grounded in honesty, courage, and compassion, and committed to the advancement of democratic ideals...Integral to the university's philosophy is instilling in students an environmental consciousness that balances economic and social aspirations with the imperative for ecological sustainability.<sup>6</sup>

The seminal philosophical tenets of FGCU revolved around a shared commitment to civic engagement/responsibility, sustainability, and the advancement of democratic ideas as reflected in a pluralistic approach to intellectual inquiry among students and faculty. Little did we realize that once the Colloquium was implemented, our institutional commitment to pluralism would falter because of the philosophical approach we adopted to achieve environmental sustainability.

Once Orr's sustainability values were incorporated into the Colloquium *any* attempt on behalf of faculty and students to critique this approach or consider alternative philosophies and methodologies was generally ignored, discouraged, or thwarted. Despite the concerted efforts of numerous FGCU faculty in the ensuing years, the Orr ideological hegemony held fast.

The Colloquium's original coordinator, Peter Blaze Corcoran—a trusted colleague and ideological devotee of Orr's work—has maintained Orr's philosophical influence over the diversely constituted curriculum committee that oversees the course. The Colloquium is principally taught by master's-trained adjunct faculty drawn from local school systems, which only reinforces the course's ideological bent, since full-time faculty with more extensive teaching and research credentials are largely assigned to teach core courses within their disciplines. Consequently, the Colloquium curriculum has remained largely static over the last decade.

As the university approaches its fifteenth year, Orr's unique brand of sustainability remains a driving force not only behind the Colloquium—

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<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Wohlpart et al., "Born of Hope and Controversy," 214.

which has steadily employed his *Ecological Literacy* (State University of New York Press, 1992) since FGCU's inception—but also within the FGCU Center for Environmental and Sustainability Education, where Orr serves as an advisory board member. In fact, Orr has lectured on environmental issues at FGCU more frequently than any other invited guest speaker. In every way, David Orr's vision of sustainability has become “gospel” at FGCU. This gospel has in turn become an article of faith among many of the faculty and administration and therefore is not considered subject to reasoned analysis and debate.

This pervasive influence has been borne at the expense of institutional pluralism and freedom of thought. The ideological hegemony that informs the Colloquium's content has also contributed to decreased quality of instruction and willingness to measure course outcomes objectively. Moreover, its intellectual rigidity has diminished its value and reputation among students and faculty. While touted by administrators and some of the Colloquium faculty as an innovative educational experience, a significant proportion of those who teach or have taught the course consider it to be of inferior quality, principally because it serves as a tool for environmental indoctrination rather than substantive environmental education.

### **Sustainability: Pluralism or Hegemony**

Reinvigorating the Colloquium requires a much broader and pluralistic understanding of what “sustainability” entails. As David Woods, chairman of the Foundation for Water Research in the UK, correctly observed, sustainability is a term “that can have different and even opposing meanings when applied to economic, social and environmental situations.”<sup>7</sup> For instance, both Simon Dresner and Eric Neumayer differentiate “weak” and “strong” sustainability.<sup>8</sup> Weak sustainability allows that man-made inputs can, through technological innovation, be substituted for natural resources, while “strong” sustainability maintains that such substitution is unrealistic

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<sup>7</sup>David Woods, “Sustainable Development: A Contested Paradigm,” Economics Forum of the Foundation for Water Research, Birmingham, UK, October 30, 2002, 1, <http://www.fwr.org/sustdev.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup>Simon Dresner, *The Principles of Sustainability* (London: Earthscan, 2002). Eric Neumayer, *Weak Versus Strong Sustainability: Exploring the Limits of Two Opposing Paradigms*, 3rd ed. (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2010).

and underestimates the unique nature of natural resources.<sup>9</sup> David Pearce construes sustainability as occurring across a continuum ranging from weak to strong forms, as if applying a sliding scale to measure a comparatively stable variable.<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, Pearce feels comfortable embracing a strong approach to sustainability in principle while recognizing the inevitability of adopting weaker approaches to solve practical problems.

David Orr espouses a strong approach that mandates the kinds of changes discussed above in his “four challenges of sustainability” that require nothing less than an ecological cultural revolution. Moreover, this ideological commitment to strong sustainability has been reinforced by the introduction into the Colloquium of the Earth Charter, with its vision of a centralized worldwide environmental governance and regulatory body.<sup>11</sup> Since the Colloquium is dedicated to instilling the “strong” sustainability value within students, no effort is made to introduce competing visions. This philosophical hegemony has been achieved at the expense of the pluralistic exploration of alternative approaches.

Sustainability is an infinitely more complex concept than is often acknowledged. Consider the foundational 1987 Brundtland Commission definition of sustainability: to meet “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>12</sup> For many, Brundtland sustainability suggests a relatively simple and straightforward process. In actuality, “the devil is in the details,” for realizing sustainable outcomes pits economic, social, and ecological considerations against one another.

I suspect that the overwhelming majority of Colloquium instructors are completely unaware that contrarian voices even exist, let alone would introduce these alternate conceptions of sustainability into the classroom.

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<sup>9</sup>See Aidan Davison “Contesting Sustainability in Theory–Practice: In Praise of Ambivalence,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2008): 193.

<sup>10</sup>David Pearce, *Blueprint 3: Measuring Sustainable Development* (London: Earthscan, 1993), [http://books.google.com/books?id=eOEaYkXbTIwC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Blueprint+3:+Measuring+Sustainable+Development&source=bl&ots=XXzpzJkTRi&sig=xZqFfCCMBINfyG5mm1SVOUe-Nhw&hl=en&ei=FXBYS8eSD8im8QaylszIAw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CAoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=eOEaYkXbTIwC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Blueprint+3:+Measuring+Sustainable+Development&source=bl&ots=XXzpzJkTRi&sig=xZqFfCCMBINfyG5mm1SVOUe-Nhw&hl=en&ei=FXBYS8eSD8im8QaylszIAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CAoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=&f=false).

<sup>11</sup>The text of the Earth Charter, <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html>, is available at The Earth Charter Initiative website (<http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/>), and can be downloaded in forty-nine languages, including Esperanto and Pidgin English.

<sup>12</sup>See Gro Harlem Brundtland et al., *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). A full version of the report is also available at Center for a World in Balance (<http://worldinbalance.net/home.php>), <http://worldinbalance.net/intagreements/1987-brundtland.php>.



Over the years, all faculty attempts to invigorate the Colloquium curriculum with a more diverse set of readings reflecting a variety of perspectives have proved fruitless. That these voices and points of view have been consistently excluded is not accidental. Those controlling the form and content of the Colloquium have dedicated themselves to marketing their uniquely Orwellian ideological variant of “environmental sustainability.”

### **Ecological Education Versus Religious Indoctrination**

Many FGCU faculty who have remained most closely affiliated with the Colloquium consider themselves ecological missionaries dedicated to converting as many undergraduates as possible to the “gospel of sustainability.” Among these most devoted and fervent instructors, the Colloquium has become the sanctuary within which they exercise their spiritually ecological vocation upon captive parishioners. Within the walls of their classrooms they function more like high priests and prophets than dispassionate academics, and treat their students like acolytes and disciples.

### **Pluralism Lost—Sustainability Gained**

Unfortunately, when faculty functioning as scholars and educators cross the line and become ideological priests and prophets our students and the Academy lose. Ideological pluralism is particularly harmed, and the loss is not inconsequential. Commitment to ideological pluralism is tantamount to commitment to democracy within the Academy—vouchsafing an environment in which all ideas, even those most disagreeable and offensive, are fair game for discussion, debate, and analysis.

By comparison, commitment to the reformist-oriented, antiestablishment philosophy of sustainability that David Orr espouses, and which Colloquium affiliates have generally introduced throughout its curriculum, are comparably autocratic and antidemocratic. By excluding contrarian perspectives, this philosophy is likewise anti-educational, anti-intellectual, anti-scientific, and potentially despotic.

I believe that the triumph of sustainability over pluralism at FGCU reflects the basic ecological illiteracy of the faculty and administration and a lack of appreciation for the uniquely important role of pluralism in higher education. I think that these faculty and administrators sincerely believe that

sustainability, like the American flag and apple pie, is by definition inarguably “good and wholesome.” This well-intended though misguided loyalty to what for them is a central ecological value has unfortunately served to jaundice their ecological perspectives, blunting their willingness and capacity to engage in critical thought, open dialogue, and real instruction.

While this fate has befallen one of America's youngest higher education institutions, the sacrifice of pluralism to sustainability is occurring on countless other campuses nationwide, to the same effect as we've experienced at Florida Gulf Coast University, I am sure.

If we—and by “we” I mean college and university faculty—continue to follow this road we unavoidably risk transforming our academies of higher learning into glorified indoctrination centers for the ideology du jour. Such is the inherent danger of embracing any particular ideology. If education is to remain a liberating force within society it is imperative that we disallow any one value or philosophy from taking other competing values and philosophies hostage. Where ideas are held hostage, no one can be free.

Milton observed in *Paradise Lost* that “to know / that which before us lies in daily life, / is the prime wisdom.” If we persist in substituting indoctrination and ideology for education and pluralism, that which before us lies is the total devolution of the Academy as we have known it. Wisdom requires us to consider the certain hazards that await. What remains unclear is whether the hubris and evangelical environmental fervor of some within the Academy will destroy the credibility of all academics—including those among us who value reasoned inquiry and a climate of pluralism and democratic thought and inquiry.

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