

Higher Education for a Post-Growth World



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PREMIUM

President Trump's repudiation of the Paris climate accords has not gone unchallenged by leaders of U.S. higher education. In the seven days following

Trump's decision, more than 200 college and university presidents and chancellors joined

hundreds of cities, states, and businesses in **promising** to meet the Paris emissions targets. More colleges and universities will surely follow.

The roots of such broad resistance to the White House lie in a campus environmental revolution some 20 years in the making. Sustainability offices that track resource use and promote eco-efficiency are becoming the norm. The number of academic programs in sustainability science and environmental studies has increased, as have enrollments. New academic journals devoted to sustainability have flourished. More than 500 institutions have committed to eventual carbon neutrality. Anthony Cortese, an early advocate of environmental stewardship within higher education, got it right when he recently described all this activity as "a beacon of hope in a sea of turbulence."

Cortese's beacon shines as an affirming rejoinder to the President's imprudence. And yet, as successful as they have been, college sustainability programs must now evolve, along with their institutions. The reason is both straightforward and stark: Contrary to the promise of eye-popping economic growth that Trump used to justify his decision, we are getting our first real experience of a post-growth world. Rapid and sustained economic growth is becoming a thing of the past, and it looks to be a bumpy ride.

Higher education is uniquely positioned to help us move beyond the environmentally destructive imperative of ever-continuing economic growth. But higher education is also a creature of the high-growth world from which we must exit. Colleges and universities depend upon economic growth and often promote it. As a result, their sustainability efforts are often tailored to it. If how we school our children is an important part of the puzzle of human prosperity, few tasks are more important than reorienting higher education toward a post-growth future.

Ever since the 1972 publication of *The Limits to Growth*, a sliver of the environmental movement has struggled to frame unending economic growth as a core driver of environmental harm. From the depletion of forests and fisheries, to climate change and the oceans' plastic pollution, the staggering growth in the volume of materials extracted, products consumed, and waste produced has brought us to the doorstep of an environmental unraveling. Emergent "green" technologies — renewable energy, polyculture agriculture, decarbonized transportation systems, reduced product packaging — can blunt these impacts, but not for long, since their ameliorative effects are quickly swamped by the environmental penalty of additional growth. To reap lasting benefits from these technological innovations, we need a suite of parallel social innovations to release us from political and economic systems addicted to growth.

These arguments have largely been ignored. Most analysts and policy makers see economic growth as essential to sustainability. To them, an ever-expanding economy drives technological innovation while lifting billions of people out of environmentally destructive poverty. From this vantage point, the job of higher education is to train students to conduct research that produces the technologies that fuel this growth and turns it from "brown" to "green."

For the past few years, this pro-growth logic has been under fierce assault by scholars and activists. One is the Boston College sociologist Juliet Schor, who calls for a "slow consumption" movement inspired by the push toward "slow food." She writes persuasively about a "plentitude economy" divorced from the growth imperative. Another is the economist Richard Norgaard, a professor emeritus of energy and resources at the University of California at Berkeley, who likens the obsession with

growth to a religion built around a disastrous faith. "The economy," he suggests, "really is the world's greatest faith-based organization." And James Gustave Speth, a former dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, recently wrote that "it is time for Americans to move to a post-growth society, where our communities and families are no longer sacrificed for the sake of mere GDP growth."

The rough outline of social innovation for this post-growth society is clear. As Speth explains, there is "a long list of public policies that would slow GDP growth, thus sparing the environment, while simultaneously improving social and individual well-being." His list, which draws on work by numerous scholars, includes shorter workweeks, longer vacations, and more investment in local, small-scale economic enterprises that prosper by staying small. A shift to worker cooperatives and community banking with a strong commitment to social equity and environmental limits also makes the list. So, too, do progressive taxation policies, seed grants to promote community entrepreneurship, and good, stable jobs for part-time workers.

Speth's recommendations could easily be dismissed by skeptics of the post-growth argument, except for one glaring reality: For more than a decade, we have been living in the very low-growth world that many shrug off as impossible, hopelessly dismal, or a retreat to some dark age. Since 2001, U.S. economic growth per capita has risen just 0.9 percent a year, a decline of almost 60 percent from the 2.2-percent annual increase between 1947 and 2000. Economic growth in Western Europe and Japan has been even lower. Because of several unclear factors — aging populations, slowing population growth, and the intermittence of economically transformative technologies, among others — there is good reason to expect this tepid growth to continue, with some ups and downs, for the foreseeable future. These will be challenging times, which call for a particular kind of education across colleges and universities.

It is tempting to double down on the economic-growth machine by mobilizing multiple forces in society, including higher education, to return us to a time of 2-percent-plus annual growth. In the short run, this might work, but it eventually would heighten the conflict between rapid economic growth and the integrity of environmental systems upon which human prosperity rests.

More important, pining for the "good old days" of robust growth diverts us from the crucial task of adjusting, now, to a low-growth world in ways that are just, equitable, democratic, and environmentally restorative. Even if we believed that a return to muscular growth was just a few years away, wouldn't we want to explore how to gracefully adapt to our current conditions, if only as an insurance policy against the possibility that the days of high growth are behind us? Few, if any, of the social innovations described by Speth and others are inherently antigrowth, so there is little to lose by assessing and spreading them as we are able.

Rather than treating sluggish growth as a problem to be solved ("How do we get the economy growing again?"), higher education can reclaim its beacon of sustainability by attacking an altogether different but immediately relevant question: How do complex human societies thrive — environmentally, equitably, and justly — in a post-growth world?

Under normal circumstances, it would be foolhardy to expect colleges and universities to tackle this question. After all, higher education has long been understood as an engine of economic growth. When Anna Valero, at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and John Van Reenen, at MIT, show that universities around the world drive economic growth, their results are publicized by higher-education leaders as evidence that the university is doing its job. History explains much. In the United States, public colleges were created in the 19th century to advance agricultural and engineering practices in service of economic growth. The contemporary incarnation of European universities follows a similar path. It is by design, not by happenstance, that higher education in its modern form is a core component of "the great acceleration" — the rapid increase in production, consumption, and environmental assault since 1950.

Higher education's reading of sustainability reflects this marriage to growth. Despite lofty and often genuine commitments to planetary health, most colleges' sustainability initiatives center on four practical goals: increasing efficiency, reducing waste, decarbonizing energy use where affordable, and improving the institution's image. Programs that trim energy use, water consumption, and waste production typically take

center stage, and for good reason: They generate positive publicity and cultivate student good will while producing financial savings. All three then can be redirected to support the overall growth of the institution.

This pattern surfaces in the work of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (Aashe), which by July 2016 had analyzed information from almost 400 colleges and universities in nine countries. For the association, the best colleges and universities are becoming smarter in their resource use and are rewarding faculty members for helping their students and the larger world do the same. They are good green consumers at an all-campus level, much like individual households that try to "save the planet" by buying recycled products or use renewable energy and share their experiences with their neighbors.

These accomplishments are not trivial. Twenty years ago, most observers would have dismissed them as impossible. But with few exceptions, these initiatives accept and often facilitate a social logic of unrestrained economic growth. Campus recycling initiatives marginalize questions about the growth of disposables in industrial society; instead, recycling is often experienced as a reward for consumption. Composting of food waste is admirable, but it may sideline questions about the drivers of waste or the ecological affordability of meat. Savings from increased efficiency in using energy and water are redirected toward facilitating growth in other areas of campus operations. A much-needed shift to decarbonized energy sources skirts fundamental questions of how much energy is enough. And divestment from fossil-fuel providers, a new and important feature of campus sustainability, nevertheless normalizes a broader logic of growth-driven investments in private firms that themselves are wellsprings of growth.

By accepting growth as given, higher education undercuts its considerable power to drive lasting sustainability. Consider the common scenario in which funds generated by energy-efficiency improvements in academic buildings are redirected to faculty research. Professors are delighted, as is the admissions office, which can trumpet the greening of the university. But the overall carbon footprint of the campus grows as faculty members fly to more international conferences to share their research with colleagues. Expand this example, and it becomes apparent that when growth is king, the

environmental benefits of sustainability initiatives in one sector of the economy can be swamped by growth in another. This is not an argument against energy efficiency or other smart technological innovations — it is a plea to combine the familiar focus on eco-efficiency and decarbonization with searching initiatives for a post-growth world.

It will not be easy. Colleges and universities are not just agents of economic growth; they also depend upon it, which makes it doubly hard for them to envision a post-growth world. Bigger budgets, new buildings, better-paid faculty, an expanding student body — all are markers of institutional success, and all become difficult to achieve amid tepid economic growth and pinched public funding.

It is rarely clear, moreover, just how much institutional growth is enough to avoid losing ground in the battle for good ratings, strong students, and top faculty. The Cornell University economist Robert Frank captures it perfectly when he notes that "universities face increased pressure to pay higher salaries to star faculty; to spend more on marketing, student services, and amenities; and to offer ever more generous financial aid to top-ranked students from high-income families. It is little wonder, then, that their financial situations have grown more precarious."

Happily, we do not live under normal circumstances. Our current bout of low growth creates opportunities to reorient the ivory tower. Smart institutions will not bet on a low-growth future — that would run counter to the DNA of higher education. But with prodding, colleges and universities will become increasingly receptive to initiatives that offer a Plan B for their own financial struggles, and for society as a whole, should low growth become the norm. If successful, these initiatives will make human prosperity in a post-growth world more realistic, more tangible, and — one hopes — more desirable. And that can drive momentum for change.

Seeds of this momentum are now sprouting as colleges and universities become more comfortable with resilience as a guiding strategic concept. Originally focused, in the wake of 9/11, on how to recover from terrorist attacks, disruptions of information-technology services, or natural disasters, resilience thinking among campus administrators has gradually expanded to include disruptions from climate change. In May 2014, Second Nature — a Boston-based nonprofit

organization that collaborates with colleges on climate issues — sharpened this focus by starting the Alliance for Resilient Campuses (ARC). Still in its infancy, ARC helps colleges formulate programs that respond proactively to the effects of climate change on their own operations and the surrounding community. Some of these efforts highlight community groups that are most vulnerable to extreme weather events; others experiment with campus-facilitated processes for socially inclusive planning.

Focusing on resilience means zeroing in on noneconomic foundations of human prosperity: social capital, mutual trust, strong community, loving and respectful relationships, local knowledge, community self-reliance, and limited inequality. As colleges and universities cultivate these elements in their own operations and within their communities, they are laying the groundwork for human flourishing in a post-growth world.

Students, staff and faculty members, alumni, administrators, and funders would thus do well to encourage colleges to infuse resilience thinking into existing environmental initiatives. Together they can steer the sustainability conversation away from asking "How can we be more efficient (so that, perhaps, we can keep growing)?" and toward "How can we enrich human connections and a strong sense of collective self-reliance to reduce our impact on the planet?"

One place to begin is with campus-sponsored experiments in economic reorganization, especially around locally based worker and community cooperatives. In the future, these enterprises will need to be the norm, not the exception. They deliver human prosperity and environmental sustainability without an intrinsic need to grow, and they enjoy citizen support across the political spectrum — an important quality in these politically fractured times. Higher education commands the expertise, capital, and experience to assess and disseminate several variations of these business models.

Inspiration abounds. Take the Evergreen Cooperatives, in Cleveland, which enjoys support from Case Western Reserve University. Modeled after the 74,000-member Mondragon Corporation, in Spain, Evergreen includes a greenhouse, a large-scale, environmentally advanced laundry, and a solar-panel-and-weatherization company. It is cooperatively governed, hews to core notions of sustainability, and provides good jobs

in some of the city's most challenged neighborhoods. Despite some teething pains, community interventions like these look to be on the rise: The Democracy Collaborative and the Responsible Endowments Coalition report that 16 percent of American colleges and universities invest locally, and more are considering doing so, although few with the ambition and effect demonstrated by Case Western. However, far more must be done in the domain of community investment.

Colleges should also aggressively model necessary changes in work life. Scholars agree that workweek reductions are central to any transition to a post-growth society. The standard 40-hour workweek adopted in the United States in 1940 is not etched in stone, just as the 100-hour workweek in 1890 was not sacred. At rates of low or no economic growth, we will all need to work less — to spread the work around to ensure an acceptable degree of income distribution — while finding satisfying ways of swapping consumption for leisure.

Corporations already are experimenting with workweek modifications. Amazon.com, for instance, is piloting a 30-hour workweek for some employees, who will receive full benefits and a 75-percent salary. Given the positive influence of shorter workweeks on employee productivity, retention, and absenteeism, this makes good business sense. But we cannot rely solely on organizations guided by profit to create and disseminate workplace arrangements for the future. Higher education must pitch in, too, with innovative workweek programs of its own that look beyond the next quarter's balance sheet. These programs would push the frontiers of campus sustainability far more than another campus community garden or solar-panel array.

Colleges also can continue to pioneer and spread consumption-reducing "choice edits" that are critical to a post-growth future. Chatham University, in Pittsburgh, has banned the sale of bottled water on its campus, installed filtered-water dispensers, and distributed reusable water bottles, helping students save money and modeling a needed shift from recycling to reuse. Like many institutions, Yale-NUS College, in Singapore, has done away with trays in its campus dining rooms and is preparing a shift to smaller plate sizes, moves that can cut food waste by as much as 30 percent. An electricity meter in every dorm room means that students receive individual bills for their air-

conditioning use, which prompts them to cool their rooms during only the hottest hours of the day, or not at all. Suddenly it is not so cool to use air conditioning. At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, bicycles are the primary mode of transportation for almost one-quarter of students, in part because of the university's support of the city's bike-sharing program. This helps make biking feel like the natural thing to do in Madison, which can lead to falling demand for economically and environmentally costlier transportation options.

If such efforts are to thrive, they must resonate with the core research and teaching missions of the university. That will be difficult if the measures are understood as fundamentally oppositional to growth, corporate capitalism, or material acquisition. Not only does higher education identify as an engine of growth, but the deep insinuation of corporate interests in the modern university is well documented.

Fortunately for academic researchers, the reality of today's lukewarm economic growth offers safe haven. Inquiry into post-growth alternative work and business models, and other post-growth policies, can be structured as applied research motivated by our current economic doldrums; it is all about searching for solutions to today's problems rather than arguing for low growth later. Characterizing research as solution-driven also could free up needed funding, which is key, since less money exists for post-growth research than for studying how to address pollutants from an expanding economy. One notion, attractive for its symmetry, is to commit all savings accrued from campus eco-efficiency projects to faculty research on the transition to a post-growth world.

It is more difficult to resolve conflicts with the teaching mission of programs in environmental studies and sustainability science. Do they recruit students, generate research money, confer prestige on the institution (by impressing business and government elites), and situate students for good, well-paying corporate jobs and entry into prestigious graduate programs? If so, then presidents and provosts are happy. But what the planet really needs are educational efforts that challenge the underlying rationale of growth-centered economies. Those kinds of programs, vital to any transition to a post-growth world, are typically at odds with the imperatives of higher education and the sensibilities of economic elites. They are especially vulnerable to being labeled

as "anticorporate," "insufficiently scientific," or "too ideological," and then marginalized, as if faith in the perpetual growth of industrial economies is somehow objective or reasonable.

One piece of a solution is to connect those programs to external networks of credibility and prestige. A new project sponsored by the Land Institute is collaborating with faculty members at 11 colleges and universities to develop a radical curriculum in "ecosphere studies," designed to reorient higher education away from propping up extractive economies. When respected academics develop hard-hitting curricula and build networks around their delivery, it is easier to view similar curricula as state of the art. That creates the space that innovative programs need to work and thrive.

Groups like Aashe, as well as organizations like the Sierra Club that publish environmental rankings, can help by highlighting colleges that rigorously explore post-growth options for the future. Colleges no longer should be lauded for making cost-effective investments in water, energy, and waste efficiencies. Nor should they receive high praise for moving to renewable energy when it is increasingly affordable to do so. That is just good business. The highest marks and the best publicity must be reserved for those colleges and universities at the edge of social innovation for the planet.

The next frontier of sustainability in higher education involves charting paths to a post-growth future in which we all would want to live. Higher education is finally starting to move in this direction, despite its affections for a high-growth world. Now all it needs is a good, strong push.

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