REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Planning is all about Hope: The University of Hawai‘i as a Model of a Sustainable Future
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For an institution as large and complex as the University of Hawai‘i, achieving consensus on a vision of its overall future and deciding what steps to take to realize that vision is a huge and unwieldy undertaking. Nevertheless, when System President Evan Dobelle issued that charge recently, the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa campus stepped up to take the challenge and a surprising and wonderful thing happened.

The faculty, staff, students, and community shared their dreams of what might be possible here and the administration responded immediately with concrete action to create what they envisioned.

As many who have been part of the system for years will tell you, this is not the way planning and implementation usually have been handled. Traditionally, the administration has developed initiatives without much faculty or community input, has put policies in place, then has not followed through with tangible steps for their implementation.

It seemed time for a change.

On February 1, 2002, “Defining Our Destiny: A Mānoa Strategic Planning Event,” gave everyone interested the chance to have a hand in charting the campus’ course into the new millennium. During that day-long, innovative event, the assembled think tank of over 1,000 participants repeatedly expressed a desire for a more vibrant, engaged, and connected place to study, work, and interact, as represented by suggestions including:

- Initiate new learning centers that respond to societal needs such as public policy, environmental sustainability, and other interdisciplinary areas of inquiry
- Serve as an innovator and a conduit for new technologies and their applications in society
- Promote environmentally and culturally sensitive economic development in services, high technology, diversified agriculture, tourism, and emerging sectors
- Enhance human capital and knowledge infrastructure, technology, and the integration of Hawai‘i into the global economy
- Pursue an environmentally sustainable campus through the wise stewardship of resources and energy
- Make the campus bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly and encourage alternative modes of transportation
- Create a Hawaiian “sense of place” on campus through improved landscaping, architectural design, signage, and the creation of gathering spaces
- Promote artistic and cultural expression as a means of personal, communal, and ethnic expression and identity
- Develop performance venues and enhance campus life with popular entertainment including movies, concerts and plays
- Provide an attractive variety of dining opportunities

In a ground-breaking, grass-roots, “bottom up” process, these and other collective aspirations were integrated into the Mānoa’s 2002-2010 Strategic Plan, which introduces itself with the phrase, “Planning is all about hope.” Founded on these common values came a new and vital initiative on the Mānoa Campus that binds them together: our Office of Sustainability.

Why sustainability? What is sustainability and why is it especially critical for Hawai‘i?

Sustainability is an ages-old idea advocated by many cultures that only recently has come into the public spotlight. There are various definitions for the term, but perhaps the most commonly cited and accepted are these two: “Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (from the World Commission on Environment and Development), and “Allow(ing) all parts of nature to meet their own needs now and in the future” (from the Hannover Principles).

In Hawai‘i, putting the notion of sustainability into practice is particularly crucial because our state is almost completely dependent on outside sources for fuel and food, our supply of fresh water is threatened, and the demand by the resident population for those resources grows daily. There is little doubt that in the coming years, energy will become more costly, water supplies will continue to shrink and become contaminated, and food production may decline. Our governor and county mayors are acutely aware of the need for immediate education and action, and of the major leadership role Hawai‘i can take in guiding this part of the world toward a viable future. At the University of Hawai‘i, we have a tremendous opportunity to serve as a model for other universities, the state, the nation, and the Pacific region by showing how our applied research can help to mitigate resource depletion on the planet, and that sustainability is economically, environmentally, and socially desirable, necessary, and achievable.

Since the February 1 strategic planning event, our Office of Sustainability has tapped into existing resources such as facilities, grounds, and landscaping staff as well as faculty, student, private sector, and community volunteers to produce valuable results without much cost. Working with more than 200 people on a dozen committees, we have been targeting two primary goals: (1) to ensure a prominent place in the University’s Strategic Plan by creating a supplementary “Charter of Sustainability” that identifies sustainable principles and practices and (2) to plan and coordinate high-impact, visible projects on campus that demonstrate the benefits and wisdom of those principles and practices.

Three of the 14 sustainability projects that have been accepted and funded for development by the Mānoa Chancellor’s Office are:

- **The Courtyard Café.** Our Human Values/Campus Experience Committee, whose mission is to “create people-friendly campus environs characterized by sustainable design that supports human interaction, beauty, and environmental
quality,” has identified a centrally located but underdeveloped and underutilized area that has excellent potential for transformation into a model campus gathering place. The space, now surrounded by majestic trees but otherwise lacking in stimulating landscaping, and defined only by flat, cracking concrete and bare plots of soil, will become a cool, green oasis of tropical plants, winding pathways and a peaceful pond with water circulated by a solar pump, surrounded by vine-covered trellises sheltering tables and benches of recycled materials at which people can converse, work or study, relax, and enjoy a variety of healthful, tasty, international food sold from nearby kiosks, with interpretive signage for all features to maximize their educational value.

- **The Energy Benchmarking Project.** Our Energy Committee, whose mission is to “develop and implement a comprehensive energy policy that will reduce energy use through conservation and application of alternative-energy technologies” will be measuring electricity use in every building on the Mānoa Campus in order to establish baselines for evaluating future energy-saving activities and devices. This is a joint project with funding being contributed by HECO (Hawaiian Electric Company) and Hawai‘i Sea Grant (a program under the UH Mānoa School of Ocean and Earth Sciences and Technology).

- **The Sustainability Education and Research Database.** Our Education and Research Committee, whose mission is to “place sustainability concepts and practices at the core of all education, research, and extension efforts,” is developing a system-wide database of curricula and research related to sustainability in order to provide students and scientists throughout the state with a catalogue of current classes and projects, thus supporting the development of, and networking within, these academic and professional sectors.

By developing a UH Charter of Sustainability and a comprehensive array of projects that embody its principles, our office hopes to carry out the wishes of the participants in the strategic planning event by establishing a living stewardship ethic within—and partnership between—the academic and all other communities we touch. In addition, we hope to renew the faith of those communities in the ability of the University to listen to its constituents and follow through in a timely way with concrete, positive action. We are extremely grateful for the support the Mānoa Chancellor’s Office has shown for our efforts and honored for the opportunity to serve in this way.