

To Green and Beyond: Excellence through Sustainability at UIC

Sustainability is commonly associated with a broad spectrum of ideas focused on energy and environmental sustainability. These include personal habits such as recycling, conserving energy, and eating locally-grown foods; institutional practices such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing renewable electricity use, and identifying our environmental impacts on essential resources such as air and water; and research programs such as investigating materials and physical phenomena for the development of next generation sustainable energy technologies. Creating a sustainable community, whether a campus or a neighborhood, requires thoughtful analysis and strategic planning that links these ideas together, within a broader sustainability

framework that goes beyond these energy and environmental sustainability goals.

In 2012, Provost Lon Kaufman and Vice-Chancellor for Administrative Services Mark Donovan initiated a *Sustainability Strategic Thinking Process* aimed at setting the stage for making sustainability the lens through which all of the university's activities—including teaching, research, processes, operations, and community work—will eventually operate. This process has approached sustainability as a holistic concept that resonates with the definition put forth by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), which includes “human and ecological health, social justice, secure livelihoods, and a better world for all generations.”

Below are key “thoughts” that have emerged to date.

Key Thoughts about Sustainability at UIC

- 1. *Energy sustainability:* Energy is central to every aspect of society including transportation, the electricity grid, heating and air conditioning of buildings, agricultural food production and preparation, medical diagnosis and treatment, and urban planning for sustainable living. Advances are needed in:**
 - Implementing established sustainable energy practices, including energy efficient power generation, transportation, buildings and lighting.
 - Innovating next generation sustainable energy technologies and practices through frontier research.
 - Preparing an inventory of UIC's energy science and technology research base and producing a strategic plan to strengthen and grow its capability and reach.
 - Re-examining UIC's energy curriculum to bring a modern, interdisciplinary approach to its design and execution.
- 2. *Environmental Sustainability:* Although this strategic thinking process has taken us “beyond green,” it is still critical to address environmental sustainability challenges and provide campus support to reach our climate and waste reduction commitments, enhance our efficiency, model environmental stewardship, and strengthen current academic programs in environmental science and engineering. We need significantly increased investments in a number of areas:**
 - A central energy management function to coordinate and track all energy programs on campus.
 - Integrated design at construction project scoping stage.
 - Creation of equitable transportation infrastructure and incentive program that balances the needs of pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users with those of vehicles.
 - Expansion of STEM education so that UIC students will be globally competitive in the development of sustainable solutions to energy and environmental challenges.
 - Incorporation of sustainability language in courses and research campus-wide.

- Establishment and strengthening of programs in subjects such as the economics of sustainability, environmental and energy sciences, environmental and energy engineering, environmental justice, health care and sustainability, and business practices in sustainability.
 - Support for environmental compliance programs through campus directives and financial resources.
 - Better communication of UIC's "green" success stories across campus.
3. ***Justice and Diversity:*** UIC is strongly committed to promoting social justice, fostering a diverse campus and valuing cultural diversity as an asset that generates innovative solutions to our most pressing challenges. Justice and diversity are also key to creating a sustainable university. As such, sustainability planning should be undertaken in close collaboration with offices leading justice and diversity initiatives. Planning should pay special attention to:
- Developing qualitative and quantitative metrics that assess the justice and diversity outcomes of sustainability initiatives.
 - Community partnerships that draw on assets such as research, facilities, students and community knowledge to foster social justice off campus, in Chicago communities and beyond.
 - Efforts to promote justice and equity on campus, among staff, faculty, and students, for example, through pay and benefits structures, staff recognition, student retention resources, and support of grassroots initiatives for campus improvement.
4. ***Health and Wellness:*** Promoting evidence-based healthcare, training health science professionals, and being a major healthcare provider to underserved communities are integral to UIC's mission. From a sustainability perspective:
- Health-related initiatives that serve underserved communities are critical.
 - Bolster research, teaching, and engagement efforts that encourage and support sustainable lifestyles such as walking, biking and healthy eating.
 - Enhance the safety, health and wellness of our campus community by supporting and expanding services such as recreation and counseling, and ensuring that best practices in health sciences research and green labs are implemented on campus and ensuring that equitable salaries and compensation are provided at all levels.
5. ***Collaboration and Deliberation:*** Developing collaborative and deliberative communities across diverse populations is an essential aspect of good governance , manifested in UIC's commitment to fostering "many approaches to knowing," and key to identifying sustainability solutions. Sustainability planning should:
- Streamline policies to permit, encourage, and incentivize collaboration and deliberation.
 - Create awareness of the university's responses to ideas that emerge from these processes.
 - Support and create spaces that intentionally foster these processes across diverse populations.
 - Facilitate the development of planning protocols that require broad stakeholder engagement from stage one to implementation.
6. ***Creating an Engaged Sustainability Culture:*** Sustainability must be integrated into UIC's culture to effect meaningful change in both daily operations and university systems. Planning should focus on:
- Supporting and incentivizing grassroots sustainability efforts.
 - Embracing UIC's identity as an urban campus, a commuter campus, and a campus closely connected to Chicago communities.
 - Engaging populations on campus that are key to sustainability efforts but often left out of planning and decision-making processes, including building service workers, faculty and staff in arts and humanities, tradespeople, and international populations.
 - Raising awareness of sustainability as a top priority connected to other campus priorities, such as diversity and student success.

7. **Curriculum Integration:** Integrative learning processes are key for students to be equipped for work in the 21st century and to accomplish UIC's mission "to create knowledge that transforms our views of the world," Students must be prepared to understand and develop solutions to complex challenges through an integrative and interdisciplinary approach . To advance integration, sustainability planning should:
- Build on other interdisciplinary learning models used on campus like the Natural Science courses to educate future elementary teachers.
 - Promote energy education.
 - Implement a sustainability minor open to all undergraduates.
 - Use campus operations and infrastructure to provide learning-lab opportunities for students.
 - Facilitate sharing and integration of best practices in sustainability teaching across all departments, with the goal of all students taking a course containing a sustainability module.
8. **Regional Leadership:** UIC has the potential to become a regional leader in sustainability. Our Great Cities mission of partnering "with Chicago and the State to enhance the human condition of its citizens" embodies a critical aspect of sustainability. We need to make evident the connection of this work to sustainability and consider especially the following:
- UIC has colleges and centers that have reputations in sustainability and are leading the way to regional leadership. Further collaborations among colleges and centers would advance campus leadership in sustainability.
 - The Office of Sustainability supports UIC's high-level commitments to climate action, energy efficiency, and waste reduction. Critical to further demonstrating this leadership is to develop and use metrics for decision making and benchmarking like true cost accounting¹.
 - Our sustainability collaborations with regional agencies are key and should be strengthened.
 - We need to visibility of UIC's sustainability work across the region, to attract partnerships as well as external funding.
9. **Leading Sustainability on Campus:** A campus structure needs to be created and supported to implement and facilitate partnerships focused on a comprehensive vision of sustainability that includes and goes beyond green initiatives. We should consider the following:
- Increase the scope of the Office of Sustainability to include other functions with the goal of working in partnership with other campus offices on a holistic sustainability vision.
 - Create an umbrella organization that combines various sustainability initiatives across campus in the operational, academic, research and community realms.
 - Emphasize sustainability as a campus funding priority by providing incentives to advance sustainability in research and teaching.
 - Develop financial structures that support and incentivize operational sustainability.
10. **Addressing Sustainability in UIC's Mission and Goals:** Sustainability should be explicitly called out in the UIC mission or goals. Specifically, in the following ways:
- Language should be integrated into the campus strategic plan.
 - Colleges and units should be held accountable to reporting their accomplishments in this area.

¹ True cost accounting is defined as "the true costs of products and services that take into account environmental and social impacts" (Sustainability "Big Ideas," http://sustainability.utah.edu/get-involved/faculty/Sustainability_Big_Ideas_2010.pdf).