

First MUN Earth & Human Systems Strategic Planning Session – Synthesis and Proposals

Guiding question: What can we do at MUN to increase societal capacity to deal with highly interlocking global environmental issues?

A broad cross-section of faculty at Memorial University is proposing a series of new research, teaching and operational initiatives within the University with the aim of addressing the challenge of social and environmental sustainability. Although sustainability is a global problem, the issue affects all jurisdictions, large and small, in a unique way and hence each must seek its own solutions. Moreover, inasmuch as MUN is the sole university in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, leadership shown by MUN on these issues should eventually redound across the province to the benefit of other communities and the population as a whole. This report is the outcome of an inaugural planning session held on December 13th, 2007 under the auspices of the Harris Centre and attended by 21 faculty members from the faculties of Arts, Engineering, Medicine and Science. The objectives of the session were to assess existing sustainability efforts at Memorial, evaluate strengths and weaknesses within the University system, and begin strategic planning on key new initiatives aimed at making the University a leader in sustainability teaching, research, outreach, and practice.

Recent Background

Environmental research and teaching activity at Memorial have recently gained momentum with the launch of the Earth and Human Systems Sustainability Initiative in January 2007. Results of this initiative include: an interdisciplinary journal club, a well-subscribed listserve, a graduate course on sustainability, and creation of the annual high-profile *Dialogue on Advancing Global Sustainability*. The strategic planning session sought to capitalize on the momentum established during the previous 12 months and to stimulate a wide-ranging, interdisciplinary discussion on the future of the Initiative and other sustainability activities and issues at Memorial, and MUN's role in promoting sustainability throughout the province.

The guiding question (stated above) intersects all aspects of the University's mission, including teaching, research, social outreach, and university operations, and it should therefore be of prime importance to the institution, yet efforts towards sustainability at Memorial remain fragmented, inchoate and underdeveloped. Interdisciplinary collaboration in research and teaching, essential in such a multi-faceted subject, are hindered by institutional structures, the narrow disciplinary training and research funding of most faculty, and a lack of co-ordination. Nonetheless, faculty members with an interest in sustainability issues expressed their belief that the University has the potential to become a driving force for positive change in the province and perhaps eventually an international example in addressing the challenge of social and environmental sustainability, especially within the context of a resource-based economy.

Existing Resources

Participants at the strategic planning session identified several important existing institutional resources and assets promoting sustainability research, teaching and operational practices at MUN, including:

- The Advisory Committee on Sustainability and Sustainability co-ordinator
- The existing environmental science graduate program, presently offering MSc degrees, but soon to be expanded to include a PhD program

- Many existing undergraduate and graduate courses in several faculties and departments across the university that touch on environmental and natural *resource* management issues
- Several high-profile research networks and initiatives, eg : Community—University Research for Recovery Alliance, the Canadian Healthy Oceans Network, ArcticNet, IPY projects, and SafetyNet
- A diverse set of faculty (including several Canada Research Chairs) with environmental interests.
- MUN Project Green.

Opportunities

Reflecting on these and other resources, participants identified a number of potential actions and opportunities for promoting sustainability research and practices at Memorial including:

- Establishment of an interdisciplinary environmental/social sustainability institute or centre
- Establishment of an environmental/sustainability research web portal
- Establishment of a monthly seminar series on Global Change Sustainability
- Establishment of off-campus lectures and community outreach in the province
- Integration of sustainability concepts into existing courses and the development of new courses, and curricula with interdisciplinary teaching credited to faculty course load accounting
- Significant faculty renewal over the next decade
- Connecting students, research and the community through the identification of regional research needs and projects (on the Harris Centre model, possibly via expansion of Harris Centre mandate)
- Promoting and embedding sustainable operating practices throughout Memorial University, including the elimination of major sources of pollution and the construction/refurbishment of sustainable buildings.

Proposals:

As a first step to achieving the goals of promoting sustainability in teaching, research and institutional operations at Memorial, participants at the strategic planning session (and subsequent respondents to the draft report) propose the following four actions (recognizing that the last item is a longer-term action):

1. Complete the Strategic Plan for the Earth and Human Systems Sustainability Initiative to advance environmental teaching, research, and practice at Memorial. *This will require the support of part-time staff and/or teaching release for a faculty member to develop, formulate and co-ordinate ongoing collaborative development of the initiative.*
2. Seek the endorsement of Memorial's Upper Administration for the goals of this Strategic Plan, solicit their collaboration and input in its formulation, and leadership in its implementation.
3. Pursue ongoing efforts at individual, departmental, and faculty levels and within the Administration to implement the goals of the strategic plan and thereby to widen the participation of Memorial faculty and of the University community as a whole in the achievement of sustainability goals. *Critical aspects here include the solicitation of broad-based participation from under-represented faculties such as Arts, Business, Education and Medicine, outreach to / involvement of non-faculty groups on campus, and support from all levels of the Administration.*
4. *Ensure that Memorial University's Strategic Plan acknowledges the critical importance of Global Sustainability and that the all-encompassing study of the environment at MUN is a priority.*

[To participate, join the listserv, download the full report, or for more information, refer to the interim website : <http://www.physics.mun.ca/~lev/EHSSI.html>.] or contact Lev Tarasov, lev@physics.mun.ca