

## COMMENTARY

### A POTENTIAL NEW ROLE FOR UNIVERSITIES AND ACADEMICS IN THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY MOVEMENT

MARK ST. PIERRE

#### ABSTRACT

When a ceremony starts on the Pine Ridge reservation, the spiritual leader always puts in a disclaimer at the beginning, admitting that he is a pitiful man who makes mistakes. With that said, this commentary provides only one person's opinions, but I start with some serious questions about the very concept of applied social sciences and the current hip, lingua franca. Can an effective bridge be made between the "academic life" of students and faculty, and "life in the trenches"? How can community development better be engaged? This essay, I admit, comes from a guy who until recently thought the much-discussed new paradigms referred to twenty cents in change.

**KEY WORDS:** sustainable communities, pragmatics, academic inertia

#### I. The Problem

Is the concept of "the sustainable community" a product of popular intellectualism, a sort of liberal, quasi-spiritual goal, or something that has real potential to altar human existence? If it is to be achieved, will it be by theoreticians or pragmatic doers, or will this new future be created by these two different types working together and those rare folks who have done both? Is it merely a luxurious thought of the educated wealthy and not relevant to those too poor to worry about anything but survival?

Is this concept simply just the most recent hip lingo of social Darwinists? We destroyed the only sustainable cultures in the world because of social Darwinism and we continued to erode their self-sufficiency with misguided programs right up to the present. Now sadly we hope as a luxury of our own western curiosity that those same cultures don't die out completely because of another hip term, "diversity." Perhaps it is reassuring to have these quaint curiosities survive. But, as this commentary stresses, few academics in my experience really believe in cultural diversity. At most universities and colleges it is largely politically correct "speak" for gays and racial minorities who are at the least all western thinkers and at the most dominant society sub-cultures. As I'll demonstrate, few academics really appreciate what it means to get down and dirty, and to demonstrably help those in everyday communities.

My comments are framed by my 40 years of work with Native American communities. My colleagues and I

have been able to achieve demonstrable change in the face of adversity. We've also had many frustrations. My comments also are framed as the experiences of a professional who is intimately engaged in the "applied" realm but has been all but banned from campus life. Credentialing will be discussed critically.

We are not producing enough people who value the application of academic theory in the real world of poverty and human suffering. We are not producing enough people who are actually working or willing to work in inconvenient or tough environments. This trend is fed by academically successful students who want to live and work in nice, comfortable communities with all the right amenities, communities where universities are usually located. When asked, most students say "I just want to teach," to become professors like their mentors. Mucking about in the trenches of human or societal engineering is for lesser types than the "Academic Elite." University life and all that goes with it is a deeply entrenched culture in its own right, with a powerful inertia that has actually changed far less than other aspects of American life.

Imagine actually applying sociology or using applied anthropology! That leads to an important question which further frames a central issue in this commentary. Is Community Development merely reflective of a job description that can be performed by anyone, or does it reflect the real application and testing of academic theory combined with real world skills, used while working alongside fellow citizens?



Here is what the Community Development Society states are its accepted professional goals:

**We believe that adherence to the Community Development Society's Principles of Good Practice are essential to sound community development.**

- Promote active and representative participation toward enabling all community members to meaningfully influence the decisions that affect their lives.
- Engage community members in learning about and understanding community issues, and the economic, social, environmental, political, psychological, and other impacts associated with alternative courses of action.
- Incorporate the diverse interests and cultures of the community in the community development process; and disengage from support of any effort that is likely to adversely affect the disadvantaged members of a community.
- Work actively to enhance the leadership capacity of community members, leaders, and groups within the community.
- Be open to using the full range of action strategies to work toward the long-term sustainability and well being of the community (updated 2011).

In my professional career as a community development facilitator I have worked with common people to create a variety of schools, from colleges to those covering the traditional Lakota arts. Together, we have encouraged and implemented local control of education, helped to start ambulance services and fire departments as well as built swimming pools, small businesses, cooperatives, and community development associations like the Pine Ridge Area Chamber of Commerce.

Because of our accomplishments and my desire to extend further, I recently applied for a rural community development position with the USDA. I did not get a job interview because I did not have a degree in biology. Is a biologist equivalent to a community developer? This sad reality raises some serious questions. What are "the most important credentials" to effect real change? Is rural America worth saving? Is a sustainable, increasingly urbanized America to be devoid of vigorous rural communities if competent change agents can't be employed there? Viewed through a different lens, do human populations need to be better spread out across the land? Is the future of rural America only related to agriculture or in fact, is the old idea of rural America as a place based in agriculture and

ranching, largely a sunset dream being quickly replaced by large agribusinesses whose purpose is to eliminate jobs, dominate large land holdings and -- in effect -- kill off rural communities? Which kind of professional, working in concert with common people, is needed to create the proper, sustainable landscape?

If we are to achieve a higher level of community sustainability, which will create the momentum, provide the leadership, alter beliefs, yet sustain needed cultural values? What will those people have to look like? What will be their skill set? Who will take theory and make it practical? Will it be self-absorbed, insulated, isolated, self-important, comfortable, tenured academics?

## II. University Problems

I believe that this type of effective human product is not possible from today's universities. If it is, I have not witnessed it in my life time; 99% of educated non-Lakota who have come to the reservations to "help" have left defeated because they do not have the skills or theoretically-based insights to be effective. Most left in an angry state of significant culture shock

Real change agents are risk takers who must intimately know the place they are working in. Risk-taking is a personality trait they seemingly are born with, and a university education is not even a factor. If anything a university education may pre-defeat risk takers. Sadly it is only academics who believe that it is they who count. Academics by nature tend not to be risk takers or even know how to lead, nor do they often have the personalities, skills or inclinations of leadership except within the ivy-covered walls of jealous, interdepartmental politics. I say this as someone who has lived in both worlds. Academics believe in the relevance of their lives out of self-serving, blind faith with little or no proof except through clones who also teach, but have never practiced.

If the idea of sustainable human communities has the power to change human cultures, who will make that happen? Will people with the technical know-how to build and invent the new technologies be valued? Most academics have no track record in anything but playing the academic game. Those same "game player" personalities are the opposite of what is needed to change the world. The flaming hoops of the "degree and writing-for-promotion game board" were all ignited and put in place by folks, mostly dead now, who were produced by and thus trapped in, their own self-fulfilling, self-promoting ideologies.

Academics place little value on risk-taking personalities. Trendsetters and real leaders take risks. Academics strive for a personal world of security and institutional approval where paychecks and advancement are byproducts of being a good team player, not a boat rocker. As a re-



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sult, those who question the very nature and relevance of the modern academic model become outcasts.

Will people caught in the real world of day-to-day survival be willing to listen to or follow people who have no useable skills and have never done anything but go to school? Will these unskilled “do-gooders” be met with anger and skepticism and frustration? Yes, and I believe that is where we are today.

Can people from so-called western cultures, such as white America, with their belief in the importance of the individual, their myth of rugged individuality and their dream of material success (i.e. “gross consumption”) be convinced to change their views so that they may serve as examples and actually feel the “pain” to better understand the forces that create and sustain poverty? Or will these people of the west make a token effort that in the end is just empty, political correctness?

How will the ideas and real practices of sustainability be introduced and developed? How will they be used to create major cultural and ideological changes when the distance between academics, political elites and average Americans has never been greater?

How will the average, working American be affected by an academic culture that sees getting their hands dirty and doing real, physical labor as beneath them? How will they be convinced to listen to those who they cannot relate to? Will they be able to relate to those who have traditionally made no attempt to relate to them? Is it possible to bridge this cultural divide in order to effectively achieve common goals?

### III. Academic Drift

It is the view and real experience of this writer that American Academia is drifting in a direction that makes its potential for effectiveness more and more remote. A couple of extremely disturbing trends need to be considered. First, in this day and age, a doctorate seemingly is always required in order to become a university teacher. Of course, the ability to teach and a doctoral degree actually have little to do with one another. The skill of teaching is based in a combination of enlightened perspective (read: education), talent, human insight, personality, and of course very real experience. A doctoral degree on the other hand, is based on the accumulation and reproduction of information received from books and research; the talent to teach is secondary. Certainly there are professors who are good teachers but it is becoming increasingly accidental. University relevance and effectiveness were sacrificed in the structuring of the modern American academic success model. The trend to hire solely based on credentials is all but sacrosanct. Are there exceptions? Yes, but we are generally stunned when we meet one!

The pressure to get a doctorate is placed in the minds of college students studying liberal arts or social sciences as freshmen. Universities under pressure to justify departmental stability or growth are under increasing pressure to create more graduate students. A mediocre GRE score and the ability to read and regurgitate seemingly are now the only criteria for acceptance into graduate school. Life and work experience are still talked about, but in reality are hardly considered.

Since a bachelor's degree is now the academic equivalent of a 1950s high school diploma and a master's degree is, at best, the equivalent of yesterday's bachelor's degree, a master's is now seemingly an irrelevant degree in the academic world. It is merely a papered intermediate step towards a doctorate. The doctoral or post-doctoral recipient, by his or her self-declared and sanctioned status, is beyond actually working with non-academics or getting involved with real life situations. So what to do? Maybe, just maybe, a bachelor's or master's degree in Sustainable Communities will be re-enlivened and result in the actual mastery of a useable skill set which includes basic building construction and applied economics.

Since universities and colleges are in the “student business,” producing degrees is their end product. This end product fuels budgets and justifies faculty positions. The pressure to maintain a healthy population of undergraduate and graduate students is very real to university CFO's. So in a sense, any warm body with a moderate IQ will do. The actual ability to teach or inspire and contribute new information or ideas is secondary. We now have hundreds of thousands of people who have achieved doctorates by merely recycling other people's research in a slightly altered format. The result of this recycling process is called a dissertation. While research may be a valid skill, the ability to apply those skills is often overlooked.

With the pressure to go automatically and unquestioningly from bachelor's, to master's, to doctorate, the acquisition of real world experience in a chosen academic field or in life in general, is too often side-stepped. This lack of experience outside of academia produces folks who have “great credentials” but little else to offer by way of personal insights based on experience. Furthermore, the pressure to make the financial value of a doctorate “real” has inspired the creation of a university world where a doctorate has been established as the only valid criteria for membership. As a result, real world skills and experience have become largely irrelevant.

These pressures and trends reduce college to a place where too often, immature personalities with little or no real world experience, professional or personal, are creating the very divide mentioned above. I have taught or



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lectured at seven different colleges and universities and have seen this trend at all of them. This is more than anecdotal.

Another dangerous occurrence, which I am certainly politically incorrect for bringing up, is the snowballing trend for males to be pushed aside from the social sciences. The trend is seen in current student campus populations. In the future, the result will be almost no males involved in these critical fields. It has already drifted so far this way it is likely irreversible. While this reality may be a result of countervailing historical forces, a complete reversal is not healthy either. Is this gender loading a problem? Yes. Is this elimination of males from the social sciences a Pyrrhic victory for female academics? Yes it is, and horribly misguided.

It doesn't seem to matter what an individual, male or female, can contribute in regards to relevant and useful education, it only seems to matter that the person have the magic doctorate. Some postponed adulthood and parenting to obtain it. The fact that other folks were out working, gaining real world experience and contributing mental and physical energy to sustainable community-based projects, is sadly ignored.

All of these trends severely water down the usefulness of higher education as a source of obtaining real world skills, taught by those with real world experience. This dilution severely reduces the usefulness and true human value of a college education in relationship to human problem solving. A dog chasing its tail has now become the dog chewing off its own tail. Building sustainable communities takes the acquisition of real skills.

The belief that no one without a doctorate, no matter what they have achieved in their field, has anything to contribute is very much misguided. Unfortunately, this fatally flawed thinking is the bedrock of modern university ethos and the result of an insidious, self-fulfilling, self-serving, protectionist prophecy, which is not even questioned.

In my case, although I have written books, described by Harvard professors as "cutting edge social anthropology," used year after year in classrooms across America and Europe, I have rarely been invited to speak at a college... I can't even get an interview to teach. My insights and my real world experience are rendered completely irrelevant by those deeply propagandized to believe that the imprimatur or pedigree of a doctorate is the only criteria for admission to their hallowed circles. Are there other folks out there like me? Yes!

Eric Erickson did not have a college degree. If he were around today, he would only be allowed to be a college janitor! Einstein would also be looked down upon and would not even get an interview. He didn't even have a master's. Hemingway would certainly not be allowed to teach writing either.

If that is my experience, what about the people who have worked for years making real contributions, learning real-world skills but who haven't written books or published papers? All that they know will be lost when they retire and die. These highly knowledgeable, grassroots experts in their fields, are rarely invited to share or participate in the enlightened guard of current academia. It is as if degrees and intelligence are somehow inextricably intertwined. This is tragic nonsense and all of us here know that, as uncomfortable as truly registering that truth may make us.

How are people going to remake the world in a sustainable model when they can't do anything but read and regurgitate? Problem solving and building real and working strategies are not theory. From which sources are today's college faculty pulling from for their body of knowledge? They are mostly quoting dead academics. If you don't think that the mistakes in thinking of one generation of academics are not blindly quoted as fact by the next, you are wrong. These blind quotations are only attempts to speak the Lingua Franca of their sub-specialty, and impress colleagues in their field.

As the elite world of the doctorate is further subdivided into smaller and more finite post-esoteric sub-groups, the possibility of their effectiveness in the world beyond academia is made even more remote. People with doctorates hang with their own isolated fraternity, as do lawyers and medical doctors. While these cliques reinforce their own self-importance, are they at all useful?

Where and when do you see the academic world interact with civilians? Outside of the student/professor relationship within the ivy-covered walls, their lives and academic achievements are largely a self-serving non-sequitor. No one bothers to tell those in the academic world this, because they would not, could not, believe it anyway.

It has been said the Obama brings a new respect for intellectuals. True creative, inventive and contributing intellectuals are rare and always have been. So-called "educated people" are increasingly common. The prestige associated with getting good grades, reading skills, test-taking skills and writing to impress peers are confused with actual giftedness by all the hoop-jumping involved within the "board game" called modern academia. Are the Beta minds creating an evil empire for the Kappa, where the Alpha minds don't fit?

Being secure in your job, wearing good clothes, never getting your fingernails dirty, believing all the politically correct ideas, and only living and working with people very much like yourself is not the starting place to change the world. These are all luxuries that in fact only isolate and insulate. I pose this question, "Is it possible to be a victim of your own bullshit?" Modern American social science academia, in fact the university system as a whole, is a world most often built on perfected following, not leading. We are



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producing more and more people who are academic clones. I say clones because, “the professional academic world”, despite attempts at diversity, is still a highly class-based, inherited and entitled world. Folks who actually work with their hands to build things are not even welcomed in the same room. Only when the academic needs work done on his home or car, will these “working folk” be invited in. Even then, it’s only to write them a check, not to swap ideas.

Anyone in the academic community who sees and questions any of this mythology is always removed from the equation by those threatened. Those most threatened are usually those “bought in” or should I just say “bought off”, and most often least able to make new and useful contributions in their respective fields. Are these generalizations? Yes. Are many of these generalizations true? Yes.

#### IV. Prospects for Innovation and Change

What would a university look like if it were to impact the lives of real people, including its students? It would be populated by as many doers as theorists. I answer this as someone with an undergraduate degree in community development, who has spent a lifetime in this field. What did my training look like? Was it useful? Was my life and career an opportunity to test social science theory in the real world? I recently sent for my long-forgotten, undergraduate transcript. This is what I found:

Intro to Psychology, Western Thought, Sociology, Anthropology, Intro to Group Work, Man in Western Tradition, The Family, The Community, Principles of Camp Leadership, World Religions, Principles and Practices in Group Leadership, Intro to Social Welfare, US Poverty and Community Development, World Religions 2, Social Problems, Principles and Practices of Community Leadership 2, Inter-group Education, Community Service Experience, Economics, Contemporary Social Issues, Human Development, Intro to Inter-group Relations, Principles of Problem Solving, Social Psychology, Principles of Problem Solving 2, American Government, 10 Credits in Field Experience, Anthropology of Culture and Personality, History of Economic Thought, Criminology, Case Work, Case Work and Community Development, Politics of Development, Minority Cultures in the U.S. I even researched and wrote a course called “Continuing Problems of the American Indian and Development.” This was between 1968 and 1972 at Springfield College in Massachusetts.

I was young and certainly didn’t know if any of this was useful. I spent the next forty years testing it. Was this curriculum useful? Extremely. Does the major still exist at my college? No! Imagine actually studying group leadership or group dynamics as preparation for working on sustainable communities? What a concept! Have I learned things worth

sharing with a younger generation of students with a social conscience who want to help move real communities? I know I have.

Before we know the role of universities and education in building sustainable communities, we need to know what kind of person would be most effective. What would an individual who has the potential to effectively encourage and achieve change look like? First of all, they would have to be well versed in both theory and practice. They would need to be real and subtle leaders, not the type who “lead,” based only on job title or credentials. They would have to be self-starters, have a high level of energy, patient persistence, true endurance, and real skills in terms of working with people. They would have to be willing to be forgotten and receive little or no “credit” when the community succeeds. Such facilitators must be willing to face long periods of getting to know the target community, learning its structure, cultural mores, and true leaders. They would have to be tolerant and supportive of very slow movement, learn and invisibly lead, and be able to understand group dynamics and problem solving. They would have to know the process of helping a community identify, prioritize and solve its problems in a strategic and systemic way based on existing resources. Truly effective encouragers must be able to look at and understand details along with the big picture, simultaneously. They have to know how to move through and overcome failures. They might have to live where they are needed as opposed to where they want to be. They would have to have a broad general knowledge of many things from basic construction to applied economic theory and applied business principles. They would have to be with the people, not better than the people they work with. They would have to be willing to earn people’s trust over a long period of time. Lastly, they must be comfortable with the fact that their job might not pay very well.

Paulo Friere, a great 20<sup>th</sup> century social change theorist who wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2007; orig. 1970), said that true charity means elevating the receiver to the level of the giver and I think this applies to community development regardless of the community. He wrote about banking useful skills and knowledge in people. Being a humble and effective teacher is certainly part of this task. The ability to encourage and strengthen the resolve of people who have known little success in life may also be part of the job. He or she must be a dreamer and a pragmatist to be able to see the finish line before the race has started.

#### V. Dramatic Curricular Change

So how do we get there? Who will be the practitioners out in the field? I believe they will be bachelor degree folks, and even folks who either don’t have a bachelor’s degree or don’t care about earning one. We must include



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students who do not share our culturally-based, pretentious affection for degrees and only want to have the skills to address desperate community needs. Will this movement address only the U.S. or will it be relevant to poor countries abroad. Can we have a greener world if we only focus on those that are culturally and economically like us and share our needs and wants?

Recruiting students who have real potential will require a new approach to admissions. We need to give these folks a relevant, useful and applicable undergraduate degree program, emphasizing human interaction and group work skills. The ability to take theory, apply it, and test it is the logical beginning point. But if we equip young undergraduates with real job skills and discourage them from immediately pursuing advanced degrees until they have had real experience, we must recognize that this approach flies against the prevailing winds of academia.

Exposure to people who have extensive real world experience in the field of community change is absolutely necessary, since students can smell a phony a mile away. They need to be exposed to folks who have “really done it” to clarify personal beliefs, critical attitudes, skills, grassroots insights, and engage a useful and available support system of tried and tested professionals from a wide range of human enterprises. These folks will not often have been part of the typical academic community, since they are doers not “talkers” or “observers” – and of course the doers have never been invited to be part of the “club”. The students will absolutely need all of this.

The people who teach economic, sociological, psychological, political science and anthropological theory are absolutely critical in my experience. However they must teach their discipline with a different mindset. They must carefully retool and tailor their offerings, knowing that the undergraduate needs to be able to apply what they have learned in real time, in real life. If the student plans to work only in mainstream America, the preparation may be somewhat different. This is not as easy as it sounds nor is it the usual goal of these courses, where “knowledge for knowledge sake” is the traditionally-stated goal.

These students will need exposure to folks who have proven expertise in many fields from sanitation to architecture, to a multitude of engineering areas in emerging green technologies. They will need to be taught to genuinely appreciate the value of these people. The successful practitioner of applied social science will need to have access to resource banks of experts who may not be members of the academic community, but can be called upon when needed. The university or institution that takes this on must do so in a new and open-minded light. A commitment beyond the general self-serving and self-absorbed, traditional aca-

dem is a key component to success. In order to accomplish this, a collaborative approach to teaching involving teams comprised of theorists and practitioners needs to be developed. Since effective people are not generally the result of undergraduate social science programs, open minds and new approaches are critical.

Another reason to be taught by seasoned experts is their ability to recognize and take advantage of conditions provided by accidental circumstance; the community’s self-identified needs and planned programs. Because there is little useful literature on this, anecdotal information based on real situations with real communities and real success and failures is part of the answer.

A simple bachelor’s degree is not the only way to accomplish this. Third world countries and poor minorities in this country might benefit more from non-degree based, practical seminars and summer-long training sessions that (while perhaps credit-based) may not lead directly to a specific degree as much as to the imparting of real skills.

Degrees are expensive and time-intensive. With a sincere commitment to the cause of reducing poverty and human suffering along with a desire for a greener and more sustainable world, other delivery models must be developed if this movement is to take place in anything resembling a realistic timeline. However, there will be great resistance from those deeply invested in the academic status quo.

## VI. The Future

President Obama has called for a sweeping change in American foreign policy. U.S. military belligerence is to be replaced with community development. Can radical anger and poverty be replaced by hope and movement? How will this be accomplished in a useful, timely and effective manner using the staid practices of traditional American higher education?

New methods of training and education that break the traditional molds will have to be invented soon. Faculty teams may have to travel to areas of need and work with their citizens. They must work with indigenous educators with a common purpose of developing internal capacity to produce their own agents of change within the community.

These folks cannot be traditional academics! I have heard all the “nation building” criteria of the Kennedy School of Government. What high-minded, pseudo-intellectual nonsense! Will poor countries have to wait until “all their institutional ducks are in a perfect row” or is progress to be measured by raising sustainable living standards one village at a time? Or as with poor Native American communities, will we tell them repeatedly to “just hurry up and wait for all them ducks to line up”, while secretly blaming them for their non-western cultural legacy?



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What will be the role of American universities in encouraging international community development and working in Native American communities? Will we train folks from third and fourth world, colonized, politically unstable, disease and poverty impacted nations? How will we train them? Will it take eight years before the first finished products pop out of the university ovens? As a practitioner I can't even envision that! It will be self-defeating. Academic people who are sincere will have to open their hearts and their minds in order to reinvent themselves, their departments and their universities.

Is the movement toward sustainable human communities realistic or achievable? The election of Barack Obama indicates that cultures can change and in a relatively short time. When I was in college the idea of a black president was pretty far out there. Forty years later, it has become a reality. It took a shift in thinking, a new political culture and a new generation to accomplish this, but it has happened. Nothing in human existence is impossible.

We must remember that movement toward community sustainability is not the property of universities. It must reach all levels of human life including manufacturing, agriculture, construction, retail, K-12 schools, individuals, and families. While universities may create some leadership and theory, as well as technical research, true sustainability will be defined by a cross-society movement. This movement must be based in an ethos of true inclusion, not elitism.

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