Getting on the Same Page
Communication and Cooperation at Smith College

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Abstract:

The purpose of this project is to assess the amount of communication and cooperation that exists at Smith College with respect to environmental issues. Seven people were interviewed and 150 students were surveyed to assess people’s opinions and experiences. The students surveyed identified a very wide range of priorities, both for themselves and for the college. The people interviewed said that environmental activity is very decentralized at Smith. The Sustainability Committee, however, presents great promise for organizing environmental activities and uniting them with the mission of the college.
# Table of Contents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction:

The goal of this project is to assess the level of communication and cooperation that exists at Smith College with respect to environmental issues. It aims to do this on several levels. First, are environmental leaders on campus in agreement on what Smith’s environmental priorities are, what they should be, and the general state of environmental involvement at Smith? Second, are leaders making these priorities clear, and can students identify them? Third, are students unified in their environmental concern, or are they interested in many unrelated issues? Fourth, do students support the College’s environmental priorities, or do they think they should be different? Some of these questions were answered more successfully than others, but one thing is clear: while environmental efforts at Smith are still somewhat decentralized, the Sustainability Committee is well on its way to better organizing Smith College’s efforts towards environmental sustainability.

This project was born out of my own personal experiences during the fall of 2002. I was the chapter co-chair of MassPIRG, a state-wide environmental group with a Smith chapter. MassPIRG’s unique funding structure\(^1\) must be re-approved by the student body every other fall, and I was very much involved in the campaign. In the course of my work, I tried to gain student support by gathering endorsements from groups that shared our goals. Older MassPIRG members warned me about Gaia. Apparently the two groups historically had a stormy relationship, due to an attitude of “there’s not room in this town for the both of us.” That year we did work more extensively with Gaia than we had in the past, culminating in a jointly-sponsored Earth Day fair. From those beginnings, some

\(^1\) MassPIRG is funded through a waivable fee that appears on the spring tuition bill. It cannot be funded through the student activities fee because of its relationship to a state-wide advocacy group.
dedicated and involved students formed the Smith Environmental Coalition to bridge the gap between various environmental groups on campus. I was curious about the extent to which environmental groups on campus cooperate today, and about their relationship with the administration.

In the fall of 2002, Richard White wrote a report about Smith and sustainability for a conference on “Greening the Valley’s Ivory Towers.” That report provides an excellent baseline of where Smith was two and a half years ago, so that we may begin to assess the progress that has been made. White identified several problems, notably that Smith’s environmental efforts were quite decentralized. “Efforts toward sustainability at Smith are highly decentralized. No one opposes them, but they have not become central to the institutional identity of the College; neither, for the majority of us, have they become central to our personal identities” (White, 2002, p. 7). At the time of the report’s writing, the Campus Planning Committee was in the process of forming a subcommittee on sustainability (White, 2002, p. 5). Provost Susan Bourque had “articulated the goal of placing such a committee in a well-defined niche within the College governance structure, with clear lines of communication for proposals to receive serious consideration” by various decision making bodies (White, 2002, p. 6).

From those beginnings came the Smith College Sustainability Committee. Eliza LaRocca, a student member of the Committee, provided me with its official mandate:

The Committee on Sustainability shall be concerned with the best long-term use of finite natural resources and with the College's impact on the local, regional, and global environment. It shall identify, implement, and evaluate approaches for increasing Smith's commitment to sustainability in all areas of the campus, including (but not limited to) construction, transportation, materials and energy use, waste management, purchasing, investment, and the campus curriculum.
The Committee is supposedly endowed with the ability to “implement” projects to improve sustainability at Smith, but they do not really have the power to do so. In order for Smith to have a unified vision for sustainability, and a logical plan to achieve that vision, the Sustainability Committee must be given a stronger policymaking role.
Methodology:

Interviews:

I conducted seven interviews with various members of the Smith community. Since each person spoke about different issues, I did not follow any particular interview format. Below is a list of the people I interviewed and the general theme of questions that I asked them:

- **Richard Korzeniowski, Physical Plant:** He is the Health and Safety Coordinator at Physical Plant. I asked him about Smith’s place in the regulatory environment. We spoke on the phone for approximately 20 minutes on April 11.

- **Marea Wexler, Office of Advancement:** She meets with alumnae regarding “major gifts,” and as such has one-on-one contact with them regarding their priorities. We met for approximately 30 minutes on April 11.

- **Don Baumer, Government Department and Sustainability Committee:** He is the current chair of the Sustainability Committee, and I met with him to ask about their work and priorities. We met for approximately 30 minutes on April 12.

- **Richard Myers, Director of Budget and Financial Planning:** I met with him to ask about the financial aspects of sustainability at Smith, and about what priorities his department may have. We met for approximately 30 minutes on April 13.

- **Thomas Litwin, Director of the Science Center:** He is the designated leader on the Good Company project, so I met with him to discuss that particular project and others that he may be involved with as the Director of the Science Center. We met for approximately 30 minutes on April 13.
• **Changxin Fang ‘05, Student Leader, Clean Energy for Smith:** I met with Changxin to discuss her experiences as the leader of a very active student environmental group. We met for approximately 30 minutes on April 27.

• **Eliza LaRocca ‘07, Member of the Smith Environmental Coalition and the Sustainability Committee:** I met with Eliza to discuss the Sustainability Committee from the perspective of a student member. We met for approximately 30 minutes on April 29.

**Survey:**

Between April 7 and April 29, 2005 I administered a survey to 150 Smith students. The text of the survey is reproduced in Figure 1. I collected surveys in several locations on campus: the Campus Center café, Chapin lawn, Tyler lawn, and dining rooms in Tyler, Comstock, King/Scales, Cutter/Ziskind and Hubbard. These locations were chosen because people seem more willing to take surveys when they are relaxed, and meal times are typically relaxing.

In questions 1 and 2, I attempted to gauge student’s concern for the environment. I believed that asking people if they care about the environment would be of limited usefulness, because most people would say that they do. Instead, I asked more specific questions. Question 1 asks about consumption patterns, while question 2 asks about voting patterns. On the assumption that they care about the environment on some level, these question assess whether they actually act on this concern.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Year:</th>
<th>05</th>
<th>06/06J</th>
<th>07/07J</th>
<th>08/08J</th>
<th>AC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. I _________ consider environmental issues when deciding what to buy.

   Always          Often          Sometimes          Occasionally          Never

2. I _________ consider environmental issues when deciding who to vote for.

   Always          Often          Sometimes          Occasionally          Never

3. What is the global environmental issue that you are most concerned about?

4. What on-campus environmental issue concerns you the most?

   Paper waste       Food sourcing
   Water waste       Food waste/disposal
   Pesticides and grounds keeping   Garbage disposal
   Transportation       Green architecture
   Curriculum
   Other (explain):

5. What do you think are Smith’s major environmental priorities?

6. What do you think they should be?

7. Any other comments on sustainability/environmental issues at Smith?

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**Figure 1:** Survey administered to 150 Smith students, April 2005.

The purpose of questions 3 and 4 was to determine which environmental issues Smith students were most concerned about. I wanted to know if everyone was interested in different issues, or if there were a few particular issues that garnered more concern. I
was curious about this because I had heard that environmental work at Smith was very fragmented, and I wanted to know if the level and primary issue of concern was very fragmented also. I was also curious if the on-campus and global issues were related (for example, paper waste and deforestation or clean energy and global warming). If they were highly related, it may suggest that global concerns could be used to get people interested in on-campus issues.

The purpose of question 5 was twofold. I talked to people in environmental leadership roles and asked them about their priorities and the priorities of the college. I wanted to see if Smith students correctly identified the priorities of the college as determined by the administrators. I also asked question 5 so that I could compare it to question 6. The purpose of question 6 was to assess whether Smith students generally agree with the College’s environmental priorities. I felt that simply asking if they agree may be seen as overly confrontational, so I opted to compare the priorities that students identified with the ones that they would have preferred.
Results:

Interviews:

I met with Richard Korzeniowski in order to discuss Smith’s relationship to the larger regulatory environment. He is the Health and Safety Coordinator at Physical Plant, and it is his job to take regulations from OSHA, the EPA, the state, the city, and other entities and make sure that Smith is in compliance. As a result, his work is mostly “behind the scenes,” and he almost never interacts with students. He said that Smith is in compliance with all major regulations, but that there were more “optional” programs that the college could take on if it wanted to, and that they were the province of the Sustainability Committee (Korzeniowski, pers. comm. 4/11/05). The rest of this report discusses these so-called optional programs.

I met with three members of the Sustainability Committee: Don Baumer, Tom Litwin, and Eliza LaRocca ‘07. They were in agreement about the general state of the Sustainability Committee now, and where it may go in the future. Tom Litwin said that the Committee wants to know “who is interested in what, and where are they?” He also hopes that the Sustainability Committee can be a “conduit for organizing discussions.” Dom Baumer said that the Committee’s strength lay in the diversity of its membership. There are students, faculty, and staff on the committee, and they all bring their own perspective to the discussions. For example, faculty members know very little about housing and dining, but students and staff deal with those issues every day (Baumer, pers. comm. 4/12/05).

The Committee is only in its second year, and they all emphasized the idea that the committee was still getting organized and solidifying its goals. They all identified the
Committee’s main priority as clarifying its mission on campus, rather than working on one particular issue this year. All three stressed that the committee’s role within the college needs to be better defined, and that hopefully Good Company can help them do that. Don Baumer said that ultimately the Committee’s role will need to be shaped by the college’s level of commitment. If Smith is an institution with a solely academic focus, it is difficult to justify significant spending on sustainability. There will inevitably come a time when the sustainability initiatives will come into conflict with the academic mission. If sustainability is not made an explicit mission of the college, it will be difficult to justify sacrificing academics. Those peer institutions that have impressive sustainability programs, like Colby and Middlebury, also have sustainability as an explicit part of their overall mission (Baumer, pers. comm. 4/12/05).

All three members of the Sustainability Committee stressed that it has made great strides in bringing together different groups on campus. Tom Litwin said that before the Committee existed people were working on a “hodgepodge of different issues” with no real pattern. In such an environment it was easy for important issues to get dropped and disappear. For example, the College had a composting program during the 2002-2003 academic year, which was abandoned because of budgetary concerns. It died because it was not connected to anything else, and the sustainability committee aims to bring those issues “in from the cold” and “give them a home.” Now that the Sustainability Committee exists, there will never again be environmental issues that people care about, but that do not have advocates in the organizational structure of the college (Litwin, pers. comm. 4/13/05).
The Sustainability Committee works on projects of a variety of scales. They have worked on making sure that the new science building is LEED certified, which is a very time-consuming undertaking. They have also worked on projects that are very small scale in terms of spending. Tom Litwin cited the fencing around Chapin Lawn as an example of a project that had a very small cost, but a large impact in terms of making a statement. “For the cost of a few yards of fencing” the college was able to make a statement that they really care about the landscape and the environment right here on campus.

They are all optimistic about the future of the Sustainability Committee, but say that it needs a better defined mission and more power in order to be truly effective. Right now they have an advisory role, not a policy-making one. Don Baumer said that more influence would be necessary to create an “integrated sustainability effort.” Eliza LaRocca said that students who know that she is on the Committee often ask her questions about Smith and the environment, like why composting ended and why grab-n-go is so wasteful. She said that she tries to give them the answers that they are looking for, but that the committee does not have those answers itself. In order to do its job more effectively, the Committee must have better access to information about environmental issues on campus (LaRocca, pers. comm. 4/29/05)

I met with Marea Wexler of the Office of Advancement to get a sense of alumnae attitudes. Ms. Wexler deals with “major gifts,” which means that she has one-on-one contact with alumnae who make substantial contributions. She said that it is very hard to gauge the overall level of concern for the environment, because there are tens of thousands of living alumnae and there has never been a survey on those issues. There
have been, however, many gifts over the years that reflect personal commitments to environmental issues. For example, a member of the class of ’64 set up a “substantial” endowed fund for the Environmental Science and Policy Program, and a member of the class of ’57 has written a gift for the program into her will (Wexler, pers. comm. 4/11/05).

This year in particular they have seen an increase in environmentally-related giving, because the new Engineering and Molecular Sciences building is a major fundraising priority. Alumnae are particularly excited about the building, because the College is effectively making “a public statement that it cares about science and the environment.” I mentioned that my fiancé is a student at Brown and that they are building a new Biomedical Science building, and she reminded me that I was not alone. Many Smith alumnae are married to or otherwise connected to alumnae of peer institutions, and they want to make sure that Smith keeps up (Wexler, pers. comm. 4/11/05).

Not everyone believes that Smith is keeping up with environmental issues the way it should. A member of the class of ’68 withheld support because she did not think that Smith was doing enough for the environment. She was told that all of the advancement materials are printed on recycled paper, and did begin to give. She will not give to the Environmental Science and Policy Program, however, until it becomes a major. Ms. Wexler cited this as an example of alumnae using their financial leverage to affect change on campus, but said it was relatively unusual. Many alumnae are concerned about aspects of Smith today, whether they are environmental issues or ones like changes in the
dining system. Even when alumnae have concerns, they are usually very supportive of the college in general (Wexler, pers. comm. 4/11/05).

I spoke to Richard Myers in the Office of Budget and Financial Planning to determine the role that fiscal concerns play in Smith’s commitment to the environment. He said that there is no specific fund set aside for environmental initiatives, and that funding for small and medium scale projects comes from discretionary budgets of the individual departments. He gets involved if the discretionary funds cannot cover the initiatives, and described two types of projects with their own criteria. Operational efficiencies require a capital cost, but will save money in the long run. For example, new windows would require a capital outlay, but would save heating costs over time. Operational efficiencies are typically considered a good investment if they pay for themselves in five to seven years. There are other projects that will not save money and will not pay for themselves, but should be undertaken nonetheless because they represent a “community priority.” An example of such a program is the switch to fair trade coffee in the dining rooms (Myers, pers. comm. 4/13/05).

Larger scale environmental initiatives take time to implement, because it takes time to come up with funding. Each year there is a budget cycle, and late in the fall semester rough budgets are determined for the following academic year. It is harder to get initiatives approved “off-cycle,” because the money needs to come from somewhere and it is difficult to juggle priorities once the year has started. The budget office does not lack a commitment to environmental issues, but such issues do need to be worked into the regular accounting framework like all other issues (Myers, pers. comm. 4/13/05).
Mr. Myers said that the budget office is definitely interested in sustainability initiatives, but that the college needs to set its priorities before any more major initiatives begin. One of the roles of the budget office is to determine where resources would do the most good, and they are reluctant to “sprinkle money around” without a larger vision. They want to make sure resources are being used most efficiently, and it is very difficult to take away funding once you’ve offered it. They want to “allocate it correctly in the first place,” and in order to do that the College’s environmental priorities need to be made more definite (Myers, pers. comm. 4/13/05).

I met with Chanxin Fang to discuss her experiences as a student leader. Her group “Clean Energy for Smith!” was recently named Outstanding Student Organization at the Recognizing Excellence awards (Fang, pers comm. 4/29/05). She described an excellent relationship working with other student groups, but a somewhat frustrating experience working with the administration. The Smith Environmental Coalition has helped different environmental groups on campus work together while still fulfilling their individual missions. It is hard to organize something like Earth Week without a large group, and the SEC helped various groups get together. In general the Sustainability Committee has been very supportive, but seems to lack the resources to research issues themselves. When she did all the research and presented them with the findings, they seemed to be very excited to get involved (Fang, pers. comm. 4/27/05).

**Surveys:**

The first goal of my survey was to gauge how concerned Smith students are with environmental issues. I assessed their level of concern by asking two questions. The first
was “How much do you consider environmental issues when deciding what to buy?” and the second was “How much do you consider environmental issues when deciding who to vote for?” Figure 2 shows the results to the two questions. Fully a third of students “sometimes” consider environmental issues when deciding what to buy, and many others said that they “often” or “occasionally” consider environmental issues. Very few students said that they “always” or “never” consider environmental issues. By contrast,

![Figure 2: How often Smith students consider environmental issues when deciding what to buy or who to vote for.](image)

40 percent of students said that they “often” consider environmental issues when voting, and almost 25 percent said that they “always” do. Less than 15 percent of respondents said that they “occasionally” or “never” consider environmental issues when voting.

The second pair of questions was aimed at identifying the environmental issues that students were most concerned with. Question 3 was open ended, and it asked
students to identify the global environmental issue that they were most concerned with (see figure 3). A third of students identified global warming as the most important issue.

![Figure 3: Global issues that Smith students are most concerned with (only shows issues that were listed by more than three students).](image)

Other issues included deforestation, air pollution and overpopulation, but none of them were listed by anywhere near as many students. Question 4 asked students to circle the on-campus issue that they were most concerned with. The list of issues was based on the topics of previous EVS 300 seminar papers, and while there was the option to list another issue, very few students did. More than a third of students listed paper waste and more than a third listed food waste/disposal as their top on-campus concern (see figure 4).
Figure 4: The on-campus issues that Smith students are concerned with.

The third pair of questions was aimed at comparing what students believe Smith’s environmental priorities are today with what they believe they should be (see figure 5).

Figure 5: A comparison of what students believe Smith’s environmental priorities are now, and what they should be.
There was a very wide variety of issues named as Smith’s priority, with the most common answer being “don’t know.” When students were asked what they think Smith’s priorities should be, there was again a large variety of responses and many said that they did not know. Many students listed “food waste/disposal” as an important priority.

(Note: the number of responses for questions 5 and 6 do not sum to 150 because some people listed more than one issue).

I then compared student’s answers to questions 5 and 6 to determine whether they felt that Smith was pursuing the priorities that it should be pursuing (see figure 6).

![Figure 6: Issues that students listed when their idea of the current priority matched what they said it should be.](image)

There were 38 students who listed the same issue for both 5 and 6. The distribution of these issues can be found in figure 6.

I also solicited comments from students, and some of the comments echoed discussions that we had had in class. One student remarked “In my experience, the college doesn’t respond quickly to students’ complaints about the heating or leaky faucets. This could discourage students from getting attention to these problems, and
energy and water will continue to be wasted needlessly.” Another said that “I definitely had my windows open all winter because of overheating. Energy conservation and promotion of such would be really cool!” Five different students (all in the class of 2005) mentioned that they missed the composting program that had been in place during our sophomore year.
Discussion:

Everyone agrees: Smith’s environmental priorities are unclear, and so is its general level of commitment to the environment. Smith students listed a wide variety of issues that they think the college is focusing on, and a wide range of issues that they believe the college should be focusing on. Only about a quarter of survey respondents listed the same issue as one that the college should be focusing on, and one that it is currently focusing on. This is not surprising, however, given the very wide range of on-campus issues that students are interested in. The student body is certainly not unified behind any one issue either.

It would be very interesting to redo this study in two or three years. All of the members of the Sustainability Committee that I talked to agreed that their main priority was still clarifying their mission and role within the college. Therefore, it is not surprising that students did not identify the issue that they are working on. It seems that once the Committee really gets going, and gets the power that they are looking for, they will be able to accomplish great things for the sustainability of Smith College.

It is clear that if Smith is to achieve sustainability the way that our peer institutions like Oberlin and Middlebury have, sustainability must be a part of the mission of the College. At Middlebury College, the Trustees and the President designated an “Environmental Peak of Excellence” that “linked academic and organizational sectors through the institution’s broadly defined environmental commitment” (Jenks-Jay, 2004, p. 265). Environmental priorities would not take a back seat to academic priorities the way they do at Smith, because at Middlebury they are both part of the institutional mission. There is environmental concern at Smith College, it just needs to be harnessed
and directed. The Sustainability Committee will be ready to do that as soon as they have a clearer mission and more authority. Once the Sustainability Committee’s mission is solidified it will be able to make great strides towards sustainability at Smith.
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