

Oh the Possibilities ...

Planet U: Sustaining the World, Reinventing the University, Michael M'Gonigle and Justine Starke, Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2006.

Reviewed by Fraser Los

The university is one of the oldest and most invariable institutions in the Western world. In *Planet U*, authors Michael M'Gonigle and Justine Starke make an impassioned case for its full-scale reinvention in the post-modern age.

Their first claim is daring, yet highly persuasive. They argue the university is unparalleled in its capacity to lead the way toward a sustainable society. While drawing on the energy of their students, universities collectively comprise a global network of researchers focused on every imaginable discipline. At the very least, the university will continue to churn out the best and brightest of society's future leaders. As the authors proclaim, "In the knowledge economy, it is literally the mother of all industries!"

On this point the book is airtight. It would be difficult to doubt the university's preeminence as *the* institution most likely to herald a new era of sustainability. Consider that almost every medium-sized city in the developed world has a university. It is conceptually vital in terms of education and research, while the campuses themselves are economically massive, generating a vast infrastructure of jobs and services, as well as the corresponding local impacts of transportation, resource use and waste. In other words, universities (as a collective) reach into every nook and cranny of society, from the ivory tower to the city buses carrying students, staff and faculty to class.

But given this enormous local footprint, universities are often conceived and constructed with no regard for surroundings. They may be situated locally, but perhaps more than any other industry, the focus – in curricula and research – is often oriented elsewhere. The authors decry this "placeless" university, which they say promotes the kind of detached abstraction and reductive reasoning that has committed Western society to its unsustainable ways.

They argue instead for a local focus that would "ground" curricula in traditional forms of knowledge.

Though the book's main theme is rock solid, these deeper claims are difficult to defend. The authors do not simply assert that the modern university is a symptom of unsustainable economic models, but a fundamental cause of Western society's doomed perpetual growth paradigm. The justification given is worthy, but not entirely convincing. They rightly claim that narrowly focused disciplines are a major stumbling block toward the kind of holistic knowledge required for sustainable communities. However, things get muddled as they denounce the Western idea of "truth" in general. It would be convincing enough, and more to the point, to state that universities have not sufficiently embraced interdisciplinary learning structures.

For example, it's certainly useful to criticize the highly specialized disciplines of modern science, but questioning the underlying "truth value" of science, as the book does, leaves the authors on shaky ground. At one point, their argument reduces scientific knowledge to simply "what works" technologically, thereby dismissing the most essential element of any scientific truth: independently verified empirical evidence. This contradicts their appeals for "communal" or "traditional" forms of local knowledge, which are utterly dependent on just such empirical evidence gleaned over centuries of practiced trial and error.

Beyond these complaints, *Planet U* is effective when it focuses on the future – specifically its prescriptive ideas for the university's prominent role in a sustainable revolution. It is refreshingly detailed on practical solutions, suggesting major improvements for urban transit that use the university as a central hub and impetus, or that appropriate student and faculty experts share their ideas during campus planning initiatives and for land-use issues. In short, these propositions are doable, pragmatic and full of common sense.

But M'Gonigle and Starke do not simply list these exciting possibilities; they deliver a blueprint for the kind of

operational structure conducive for innovative change. First, they reject the university's top-down and centralized decision-making structure as an obvious hindrance to any form of change. They also link this nicely with the prevailing university curricula, noting that organizational mobility and flexibility is essential to good planning, just as interdisciplinary thinking is essential to fruitful research. In both cases, innovation flows naturally from dialogue, participatory learning and collective decision making. The hope is that university power structures have the courage to relinquish some control and not only listen to the experts, but also act on their suggestions.

Planet U brings a fresh perspective to society's long struggle toward sustainability. At times the book can seem overly optimistic and lacking in critical reflection, while at others it rambles too far into post-modernist territory with its assaults on Western rationality. However, its main thesis is simply too compelling and plausible to be tarnished by those issues. 🌱

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