

- **No.88**
- **Educating for Sustainability: Can We Bridge the Disconnect Between Student Training and Critical Reflection?**

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- **Abstract:**

- With growing attention to sustainability education and practice, we also find a corresponding lack of attention to critical understanding of the meaning and practice of sustainability in capitalist market economies. This paper acknowledges the disconnect and considers steps toward bridging the gap in a manner that trains students and community activists in sustainable practices revealing, rather than obfuscating, the social relations of production as they influence the definition and attainment of sustainability.

Dickinson College, a small liberal arts institution in Central Pennsylvania, has emerged as a national leader with training in sustainability education and practice. Recently we received the highest "Gold STARS" rating from the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. Of particular note, we run one of the largest volunteer water quality monitoring programs in the nation--lately focused on training watershed groups to monitor the impact of natural gas shale fracking--while the college organic farm provides sustainable agriculture training and fresh produce both for students and the wider community. Through these and other programs, students are collaborating with community residents to acquire the knowledge and skills associated with sustainable practice.

The explosion of student interest notwithstanding, there remains a disconnect between commitment and understanding, more specifically between the students' commitment to sustainability and their weak understanding of how definitions of sustainability are ideological. Given the inherent contradiction between the social nature of capitalist production and its private appropriation, with the resulting emphasis on expansion to avoid economic and social dislocation, it appears that ecologically sustainability requires more dramatic change in the control and allocation of production than most are comfortable with.

Most students, faculty, and community activists are reluctant to explore this ambiguity of capitalist sustainable development for fear of challenging engagement with self-congratulatory sustainable practice. Thus, while we continue to train students to participate in production systems that are promoted as local, appropriate, and sustainable; there is little appreciation of how practice tends to perpetuate, rather than challenge, the social relations contributing to the necessity of material growth. Drawing on case studies from community resistance to energy production, local monitoring of industrial

pollution, and student engagement with organic farming, this paper concludes with suggestions on how to broach this impasse by focusing on sustainability education and application that also make obvious the social roots of contemporary environmental problems and their proposed solution.