

The (Un)Creative University:
A Model for Innovation and Sustainability in the 21st Century

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Introduction

This past year, the University of British Columbia's student run Farm was the focus of an intense grassroots campaign to protect the land from planned housing development. Formally known as the Centre for Sustainable Food Systems at the UBC Farm, this 24 hectare teaching and research farm is located on the university's campus and is the last working farm in the city of Vancouver, B.C. Although the farm is a unique and important asset to the university, its overall academic value has been marginalized by pressure to generate revenue through commercial housing development, a value estimated at approximately 200 million CAD.

Designated a "Future Housing Reserve" on official zoning and campus planning documents, the Farm is the centre of tense political jockeying and debate at the university. This tension reached unprecedented heights last year when the university initiated a development process for a new campus master plan. In the fall of 2008, as the threat of losing the Farm to luxury condominiums and retail outlets drew ever closer, UBC students, faculty, staff, as well as Vancouver residents, mobilized to start a "Save the Farm" movement. Under the name of "Friends of the UBC Farm" (FOF), this grassroots organization quickly gained campus-wide and city-wide support, convincing UBC to reevaluate its development plans for the area. Although FOF has not yet secured a formalized commitment from UBC regarding the Farm's future, it appears that the value of the Farm is now being recognized beyond the mere potential of condominium sales.

UBC is a globally recognized university with a strong sustainability mandate and a well-established reputation for forward-thinking environmental practices – both in its everyday operation and its long-term vision and mission. This reputation has been seriously jeopardized, however, by the university's rear-guard thinking and profit-seeking attitude it has adopted when dealing with the UBC Farm. As students studying agriculture, we must ask how and why this happened. Why, in a world of escalating food, environmental, energy and sociopolitical crises, is it acceptable for a university to bulldoze its farmland? Why are we still neglecting the value of farmland habitat, biodiversity and ecosystems? Why are so many people removed from the natural world that sustains them, unaware of where and how their food is produced? As it is our responsibility to ask such questions, we are also responsible for attempting to answer and, hopefully, solve them. In doing so, we must look beyond the mere act of growing food and stewarding land; we must uncover and attempt to understand the complex web of social, political and economic forces at play in the world of modern agriculture. Such a task will no doubt be difficult, requiring us to reevaluate prevailing norms and practices, broadening our collective horizons and developing a bold, new approach to

food, community and the environment. Given the supposed role of universities as incubators of creative thinking and innovation, many of them home to a sizable population of students and academics willing and eager to initiate movements of positive social change, why not begin there?

What is the UBC Farm?

The UBC Farm is a unique and invaluable resource for a North American university. Situated directly on campus, the Farm provides an outdoor classroom for integrated, multi-disciplinary education and 'on the ground' experiential learning. Currently overseen by the Faculty of Land and Food Systems (LFS), with an additional 13 UBC faculties and colleges using the site for curriculum and studies, people from all walks of life become immersed in the opportunity to steward a working, productive landscape. In the process, they develop the theoretical and practical skills, knowledge and experience necessary to address many of society's most pressing issues relating to sustainability. This is partly made possible by bringing people closer to something everyone, everywhere can relate to: food.

For almost a decade, the UBC Farm has been growing not just food, but young farmers. It has been (re)connecting urbanites with land, nature and community, while also (re)cultivating the skills, knowledge and cultures lost with the industrialization of agriculture in North America. The Farm is home to a student-run, weekly market garden that sells over 250 varieties of organic produce. A small staff, 10 apprentices and hundreds of volunteers work together to manage the continually increasing yields produced by the Farm's fields. In addition to the weekly market, Farm produce is sold to several restaurants on campus and around Vancouver, and through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) box program. The Farm's diversity of programming and operation expose those involved to entry level and professional level food production systems, cultivating knowledge, especially among young people, that has largely been lost in North American society and globally.

The Farm hosts countless UBC graduate and undergraduate courses and research projects, as well as many community programs through Vancouver organizations that are working toward socio-ecological sustainability. Plots designated for communities such as aboriginal, inner-city school children and immigrant groups are an integral component of the Farm's human and social ecology. The Urban Aboriginal Community Kitchen Garden Project for instance, brings aboriginal residents from the poorest neighborhood in Canada, Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, out to the Farm to garden, cook, eat, skill-share and build relationships with land, food and people. The Maya in Exile Garden is a plot where the Vancouver Mayan community, exiled from Mexico, practices traditional agriculture from outside of their native country, teaching indigenous methods of agriculture to students and faculty. This season, hundreds of research projects and courses will begin and culminate at the Farm in academic fields as diverse as soils, engineering, human geography and agroforestry. Each year, the Farm continues to expand its academic and community programming, making it not only an indispensable resource for UBC, but an important and relevant model of sustainable food and agricultural systems world-wide. The Farm offers UBC a rare and vital opportunity to address global food, energy and environmental crises in a living laboratory within the university.

“Farms, Not Condos:” A Student’s Perspective and Experience in the Struggle to Save the Farm

Although the Farm’s agricultural production, academic and community programming, visitor attendance and general popularity in Vancouver are increasing every year, its future has never been more uncertain. Despite massive amounts of public interest and support, the Farm receives very little funding or other supportive resources from the university. The Farm in its current configuration was founded in 2000, at a time when UBC was in the early stages of planning development for the area. Consequently, the Farm has never had a secure land base, making many hesitant to invest monetarily in its infrastructure, staffing capacity and other resources. As a result, fundraising and grant writing have become as much a part of the Farm as food production. But the struggle to keep the Farm alive does not end with economics. Deeply complex political issues concerning academic priorities, land-use pressures and a long legacy of dissipating interest in agriculture, both at UBC and in North America, have further compounded the difficult task of securing a future for the Farm. This has all begun to change however, through the tireless efforts of Friends of the UBC Farm.

The bulk of the “Save the Farm” movement began last fall when Campus and Community Planning (C&CP)¹ began to hold mandatory public consultation sessions regarding South Campus where the Farm is located. FOF had prepared for these consultations in the prior year, becoming well versed and well researched in the arena of UBC political structures and governance. By this time, FOF had also amassed a solid base of public support and word of the Farm’s threatened status was beginning to spread; roughly 10,000 petition signatures against developing the Farm had already been collected through vigorous FOF outreach and city-wide events. FOF made sure to build relationships with student and city politicians, environmental organizations and non-profits dedicated to supporting local and organic food. When the school session began in the fall of 2008, FOF and other student groups held a five-day conference entitled ‘Food is Fundamental,’ drawing attention to the plight of the Farm. FarmAde, an annual student-organized fundraising concert and barbeque, attracted record numbers and introduced new supporters to the cause. FOF held weekly meetings, gained new members and found creative, engaging methods to educate people about the Farm’s struggle. Despite FOF's collective lack of experience, its members soon became savvy activists, politicians, writers, spokespeople, artists, campaigners, lobbyists, organizers and teachers. Many people set aside their primary role of student or professor to focus on political organizing during the most pressing times of the campaign. For months, FOF fought and campaigned against the agendas of powerful decision makers at multiple levels of government, standing in the face of overwhelming odds.

As was expected from past consultations, the C&CP consultation sessions proved to be inadequate forums for public opinion and presented just three development options², all of which proposed significantly reducing the size of and/or moving the Farm to soil

¹ The governing and administrative body at UBC responsible for development on campus.

² It is important to note that the market-housing plans for the farm are part of a larger neighborhood development project UBC is currently undertaking called U-Town. U-Town to date has created almost no affordable student housing and though most buildings are designed to be ‘green,’ they have come nowhere close to the potential for truly innovative and sustainable dwelling.

not suitable for agricultural production. In a thrilling and emotional week, the consultations were filled with Farm supporters lamenting the prospect of losing the farm, while also demanding that the three options be revisited or scrapped entirely. Disappointingly, this response from the public was completely ignored in the official feedback from the consultations presented to the UBC Board of Governors.³ Left with little alternative, FOF staged a media event in which UBC President Stephen Toope was handed 15,000 petition signatures (and homemade pumpkin pie from the Farm). Suddenly, with the news of the petitions, the FOF campaign began to grab headlines and garner attention from media outlets throughout the city.



In a matter of weeks, FOF was holding press conferences, speaking on national radio stations and being asked to endorse locally campaigning politicians. After four months of frenzied media coverage and meetings with President Toope and other UBC executives, a media release was made public, stating:

“The UBC Board of Governors has directed UBC administration to develop academic plans for a 24-hectare parcel of South Campus land for teaching and research purposes that are ‘academically rigorous and globally significant’ around issues of sustainability” (UBC Media Release, Dec. 1, 2008).

While this statement was a huge success, symbolizing a major turning point in the university's public stance towards the the Farm, it provided little gaurantee that the Farm's current landbase would be preserved.

Still wary about the future of the Farm, organizers spent the next several months planning a massive protest and celebration of the Farm, entitled the Great Farm Trek, as a final push for the Save the Farm campaign. Roughly 2,000 people marched from the centre of UBC campus to the Farm, sending a clear message to UBC decision makers that the planning process was illegimate and a reevaluation of the university's agenda, one which better reflected the interests of students, faculty and the general public, was in order .

³ The Board of Governors is UBC's highest decision-making and governing body.

Currently, this reevaluation is taking many forms, the most significant of which is the comprehensive and strategic academic plan being developed by a number of UBC Farm stakeholders, including the Farm's Program Coordinator. While the fate of the Farm is still far from certain, one thing is abundantly clear: any further attempts by the university to impose its narrow agenda on the Farm will be met with serious resistance – a lesson which is undoubtedly not lost on the UBC administration.

Agriculture, Politics, and the University

“Throughout the world, universities possess huge land assets that could, with imagination and leadership, revitalize the way we live in our cities” (M’Gonigle & Starke 2006). This quotation sums up a simple, yet worthy, message: universities around the world are responsible for taking a leading role in changing the way we live and impact the planet. If universities – home to some of the brightest minds in our society - are not critically examining their own impact on the earth and dedicated to finding a solution, who will?

The UBC Farm has such vast untapped potential that if given the resources and support it deserves, could easily become a world leading demonstration and research center for sustainability. Despite this, business-as-usual, status quo thinking at UBC has pitted the Farm against short-term, economic pressures and outmoded ways of thinking. Like the Farm struggle demonstrates, it is difficult to convince powerful decision-makers of a Farm's academic, community and economic value – even when the answers seem obvious in the face of global food, energy and environmental crises. The struggle and movement to save the Farm is a representation of something that is occurring globally, and not just at universities. Although a comprehensive analysis to such a problem is beyond the scope of this paper, I will now discuss some ‘big picture’ reasons behind the UBC Farm's predicament and why it is, unfortunately, not an uncommon situation.

- 1) *UBC's land endowment and governance structures.* Sitting on an endowment of over 3,000 acres, UBC's very foundation and existence depends on its enormous land allocation. Like many universities, much core institutional funding comes from profits generated through developing their endowed lands. Accompanying this pressure to develop is the governance of such lands. Without getting overly detailed, the final decision regarding UBC endowment land ultimately rests with the Board of Governors. The majority of Board members are *appointed* by the Canadian Provincial government rather than elected by the UBC community, creating an atmosphere where accountability and transparency are not always present. This became clear during the aforementioned consultation sessions for the Farm. What is important to illuminate here is not UBC governance in particular, but the complex nature of land issues: politics, power and social histories thus become an integral component of agricultural issues everywhere. As was made clear by the experiences of FOF, it is an unpleasant reality that cannot be ignored.
- 2) *More than half a century of declining interest in agriculture in North America.* With the advent of the Green Revolution, the so-called modernization of agriculture, and inexpensive, exploitative global free-trade markets, farming as a

way of life has nearly vanished in North America. Family owned farms have been bought-out by multinational agribusinesses and most agriculturally related research has become lab-based. In Ontario, Canada alone, the number of farms has fallen from 200,000 in 1921 to 57,211 in the year 2006 (Palmer 2008). This has resulted in a population disconnected from their food-systems, a loss of basic food skills (growing food traditionally and organically, cooking and storing food); a declining enrollment in agriculture degrees and a perception of farming as an undesirable career path. North Americans (especially young people) feel uninspired by agriculture and farming, many perceiving it as irrelevant to their lives, education and career ambitions. This trend is reflected in the 2006 census statistic stating that the median age for farmers in Canada is approximately 52, and farmers aging 35 or younger are decreasing by 7.7% annually (Palmer 2008). For these reasons, the UBC Farm is viewed by the university administration as dispensable and without a place in the university. While these trends are societal and not limited to UBC or universities elsewhere, it is vital that universities understand and actively adopt a role working to address these problems. Without focusing on sustainable agriculture, it is impossible to solve larger issues of “sustainability.”

- 3) *Food politics: industry, research and universities.* Again, a full investigation and articulation of such an immense topic is beyond the scope of this paper. The central theme to bear in mind here is the relationship and links between corporate food industry interests, the market, subsequent funding for research and where that funding is placed in a university. When the food industry⁴ in North America (usually in the form of massive conglomerate agribusiness corporations) wants to convince consumers (the public) to move in a direction of purchasing certain foods, it is extremely advantageous to supplement such efforts with expert advice, scientific evidence and research studies: much of which originates in a university environment. As academic nutritionist Marion Nestle (2002) points out, “[m]any parts of the [food-system are of] “vertical’ integration: ownership by one corporation of all stages of production and marketing.” This, in turn, creates large companies whose power and economic interest is conducive to sponsorship and influence of university level research. “Because dietary advice affects food sales, and because companies demand a favorable regulatory environment for their products, dietary practices raise political issues that cut right to the heart of democratic institutions” (Nestle 2002). The kind of foods being grown and activities taking place at the UBC Farm – direct and local marketing, organic production and transparency – are in direct conflict with dominant food industry practices and business models. Therefore, what you eat and where your food comes from is intensely political. The Farm has never been a priority for funding at UBC, but when one looks at the vending machines around campus and discovers that CocaCola has an exclusive contract with the university, one cannot help but wonder how this influences decision making, funding and academic priorities at UBC.

⁴ Food industry here “encompasses the entire collection of enterprises involved in the production and consumption of food and beverages” including companies that “produce, process, manufacture, sell, and serves [foods] “ as well as, “...the food service sector – food carts, vending machines, restaurants, bars, fast-food outlets, schools, hospitals, prisons, and workplaces...” (Nestle 2002).

So why am I illustrating all of these links and using my own university as an example? It is because I firmly believe that UBC, like many universities, is no longer acting like a university, but as a business. And as long as academic and other “higher pursuits” traditionally associated with the mandate of a university remain subservient to an unending quest for profitability, ambitious goals of environmental sustainability will remain out of reach and the future of the UBC Farm, and other valuable resources like it, will continued to be threatened.

Creativity in Response to the Global Food, Environmental and Energy Crisis: Changing Universities

I have read that “[t]o enter onto Kyushu University’s New Campus in suburban Fukuoka, Japan, is to enter a complex experiment of ecology in action” with almost 275 hectares on campus dedicated to conservation and integrated environmental studies (M’Gonigle & Starke, 2006). At Kyushu, the campus community lives as inhabitants and citizens responsible for maintaining the health of their surrounding environment and infrastructure, all within an academic framework. Incorporated into the planning and subsequent implementation of such an experiment are cross-disciplinary dissertation and course topics focusing on the design, execution and maintenance of the project with long-term, persistent and sustainability objectives in mind. This process teaches ecological literacy, problem solving and cooperation; it also builds a sense of community and place – all fundamental aspects in living well and sustainably. This exemplifies the type of projects universities can and *must* engage in if they are going to take leading roles in solving today’s most critical issues. Like Kyushu University’s new campus in Japan, why not look beyond the ordinary and encourage students to be thoughtful stewards of the environment and visionaries for the future?

As David Orr points out in *What is Education For?*, even amidst massive booms in information, knowledge and technology in the 21st century, “we are becoming more ignorant of the things we must know to live well and sustainably on the Earth” (Orr, 1991). He challenges campuses to measure education, that is, *all* education, against a standard of sustainability. Orr calls on campuses to examine resource flows: energy, food, water, waste and minerals, evaluating whether or not they are contributing to development of sustainable regional economies or negatively impacting them in the name of efficiency. Such undertakings should not be limited to agricultural and environmental faculties and departments, however. Such processes must be collective and university-wide, as these problems are common to us all. Sustainability can and should be woven into curriculum spanning from law to engineering, accounting to landscape design. All over the world there are hopeful glimmers of small-scale, creative and inspiring projects and initiatives with similar ideas and objectives in mind. In universities, I think most of these are student-driven, which is essential in catalyzing change. However, students must also be given the resources and support necessary to cultivate both the practical skills and theoretical knowledge necessary to defend, advocate, learn, teach and participate in sustainability in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Trying to imagine solutions to global food, environmental and energy crises is a daunting task. Indeed, we must dare to be creative. And realistic. But what does creativity mean when applied to such overwhelming and immense issues in today's world? If we engineer bicycle-powered kitchen appliances and re-use restaurant grease as fuel, are we creatively addressing an energy crisis? Certainly. Is gardening on rooftops in urban centers one of many creative solutions to a food crisis? Absolutely. When you look at it, "creative solutions" seem to be everywhere. Despite all of this seemingly positive change however, we are still exhausting and polluting our land, oceans and air, we are still extracting natural resources at an accelerating pace, we are engaging in more wars, and people are still starving in the streets, even in North America.

So, what is missing from this creativity? It is the courage to *truly dare to be creative* and the *creativity to truly dare*. What I mean by this is, in order to truly be creative in a world so full of creativity, we must question and challenge the very order in which such things exist. We must truly dare to imagine a better world. This requires having a mind so open and a heart so compassionate that we are willing to evaluate, question, reject and re-think some of the most dominant social, economic and political systems of which we are a part. We must be so creative in fact, that we are willing to put everything we have been taught and come to know as status quo, business as usual, or 'normal' on trial. Science, education, technology, business, agriculture, government: we must examine it all and rethink how all of it is related. What better time and place for students to start than in the home, the streets and the university?

As the youth of today, we bear the responsibility of taking a look around and asking if the world is in a healthy state of being. Would we be having this conference with this year's topic if it was? As I have learned this past year with the UBC Farm movement, creative solutions to global food, environmental and energy crises don't end at the farm gate or in one field of study. The need to solve such pressing issues requires multidisciplinary examination and it requires universities to lead by example. Changing the structure of our universities and the ways in which they conduct academic, community and business pursuits is, I think, a perfect place to begin. And we as students are in the perfect position to do so.

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