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DOT EARTH

Nine Billion People. One Planet

Obama and 'Generation E' in Arizona

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Last night President Obama addressed a huge crowd packing Sun Devil Stadium in Phoenix as part of Arizona State University's commencement ceremonies (no honorary degree included). The speech was very traditional commencement fare, brimming with encouragement about pursuing public service and helping propel a new "green revolution."

Swallowed up in the audience were 13 students representing the first class of degree recipients from the university's School of Sustainability (one student received her degree last fall). The program, created in 2006, is the first in the country to offer degrees in this multidisciplinary arena mashing up environmental, economic and social advancement. They appear to be part of what I've been calling Generation E, (generally) young people committed to shaping human endeavors in ways that smooth the path toward a stable, prospering population.

The School of Sustainability currently has 55 enrolled graduate students and more than 300 undergraduate majors. The mission of the program, officials say, is to "train a new generation of scholars and practitioners, and develop practical solutions to some of the most pressing environmental, economic, and social challenges of sustainability, especially as they relate to urban areas." When I heard about the graduates, I sent four questions to Charles L. Redman, the director of the sustainability program.

Q. Sustainability is one of those weird words that means a thousand things. What's the working definition in A.S.U. context?

A. I have resisted providing a single definition for sustainability to the consternation of those who seek it. My reason is that I don't believe it is a "simple" condition or a stable state that we might attain. I think it will be dynamic and contextualized both by place and time and by the observer. Having said that I do say to students in the program that there are five elements of sustainability that I expect them to measure themselves and their work by:

- Awareness of the challenges facing us and the interconnectedness of the world and of our actions
- Creativity to deliver innovative solutions in technology, business and social relations
- Stewardship of limited and precious natural, human and cultural resources
- Institutions that are flexible and effective because they continuously learn, adapt and provide leadership
- Values that enhance equity, justice and inclusiveness

Q. As I pointed out on Dot Earth recently, President Obama has called on scientists to help create a generation focused on making things more than consuming things. My guess is your students are already on the case? If yes, what traits or accomplishments of theirs make you think this is true?

A. Our students come to us with a variety of backgrounds and many already with graduate degrees (especially M.B.A., Engineering, and Law). These are people who already were successful in the world as it exists, but wanted more (and I don't mean more things). Of course they are focusing on near term solutions such as renewable energy, cool materials, life cycle of electronics, etc., but we also are encouraging them to think about how technological solutions may not only have cascading implications on the environment, but how a new innovation may further disadvantage poor people or others with limited access. Throughout history, when we "solved" a problem there were winners and losers....

Q. Arizona, by many estimates, is not sustainable, given the deep history of megadroughts, blazing growth, and whatever shifts in resources are coming from human-driven climate change. Does that make ASU's educational task in this arena easier or harder?

A. Arizona, to many, seems eminently unsustainable, but that is an overly simplistic (linear) view... I am often asked how there can be a city in the desert, to which I reply that is exactly where virtually all of the original cities in the world were established! The interesting precedent is that Phoenix was home to what may have been the second largest "city" in prehistoric North America (the largest I think was near East St. Louis) and the largest irrigation system north of the Andes. The conditions were just as harsh then as now. The key ingredient is that people can only be successful in this type of environment if they aggregate into larger groups and organize themselves to reduce risk and maximize control and output. In a strange way Arizona has some of the most advanced and effective water management systems largely because it is obvious that if we didn't this place would not work at all. That does not mean we haven't made lots of mistakes here in terms of urban layout, resource use, etc. This all makes us a really exciting test case and one that may have more to say to the developing world (where rapid urban growth is the norm) than a city like Portland — which has a strong sustainability consciousness, but has more to say to a European city (that isn't listening) than to where the real challenges are emerging.

Q. Outside of the sustainability curriculum, is the general student population focused much on these issues?

A. It is hard to generalize about students today (or ever), but the concern with sustainability is widespread. We have just as many business school students taking a "concentration" in sustainability as we have majors. I am not a person who grew up using the word Sustainability (or even used it much before Mike Crow assigned it to me), but increasingly I think it is the "sweet spot" that allows a person to be concerned about fragile environments, limited natural resources, and poverty yet believe that the way out can only be in collaboration with the private sector and will only succeed if we improve people's lives, not make them "sacrifice."