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## Manifesto for a Sustainable University: Big Picture Thoughts

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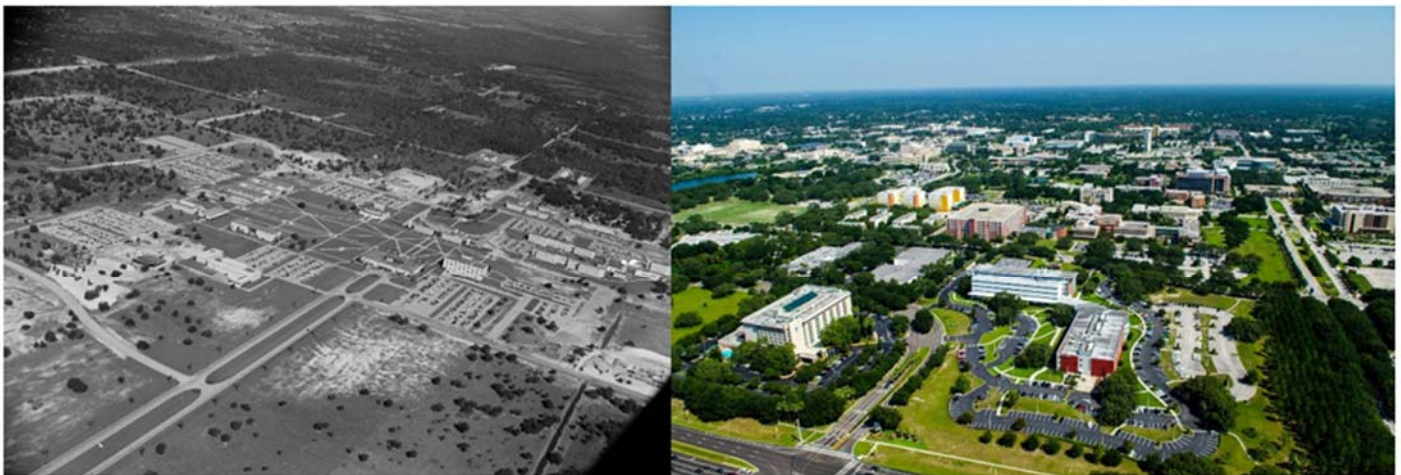


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There are easy ways to think about sustainable universities, and hard ways. Even the easy ways are hard, but the questions they help pose are at least relatively straightforward. Can a university reduce its carbon footprint? Of course: universities can invest in photovoltaics, electric busses, low-carbon construction methods, locally sourced foods and other consumables, high-efficiency lighting and climate control, and so on. The necessary investments are not cheap, but they often serve the cause of sustainability not only by reducing the university's environmental impact, but also by generating long-term savings in operating expenses, perhaps sufficient savings that, amortized over the service life of purchased equipment, a net cost reduction results. There are at least hopeful signs that such a strategy can work, as at the [Pennsylvania State University](#). The same holds for the prospect of formulating and implementing sustainable responses to

COVID-19, and viral pandemics in general: again, the necessary investments (in remote-instruction technology, in PPE, in instructional spaces hospitable to social distancing) aren't cheap, but they may generate long-term savings.

The problem for most universities is that the constraints of funding cycles, electoral cycles, accreditation cycles, and strategic planning cycles are inimical to commitments on the necessary timescale. A much harder way to think about sustainable universities is to think seriously about these constraints, taking them as an invitation to deeper reflection on the history and sustainability of the very funding model of contemporary academia. The contemporary American university system is the product of a rapid, dramatic expansion during the post-war years, as it geared up to serve the baby boom, a generation unprecedented both for its size and for the access its members enjoyed to the surplus wealth necessary for pursuing post-secondary education. That expansion was funded on the expectation of growth, an expectation that remained unchallenged through the middle of the 1970s.



*Growth of the University of South Florida campus from the 1970s to now.*

Since then, however, the expectation has been consistently thwarted. American population dynamics have shifted, and demand for post-secondary education has grown much more slowly, when it has not stagnated outright. Yet our basic funding model has not changed in response. We have lost economies of scale. The burden of increased costs is shouldered largely by students, such that our recent alumni, rather than pouring disposable income into their alma mater, find themselves shouldering trillions of dollars of student loans, setting the stage for our next great financial crisis. During the pandemic, unemployment has reached its highest levels since the 1930s, and a critical mass of alumni face default. Bernard Madoff did not set out to run a Ponzi scheme. But when his fund reached the point where promises to old investors could be honored only on the strength of new subscriptions, he crossed a line. At the present time, the American university system is not quite a Ponzi scheme, for we still deliver a product. However, the time may come when the value of our product, to individuals and to the society we serve, ceases to justify its cost.

Universities should be exemplary institutions, and by showing that we can reduce carbon footprints and flatten our curve while at the same time reducing our costs, we will set an example. That's all to the good—but it is not the same thing as making our universities sustainable. A campus built of green buildings, festooned with photovoltaics and wind turbines, bordered by gardens and greenhouses, is of no use to the planet when the buildings are empty, the turbines rusting, the gardens poisoned by rising salinity, and the alumni who once studied there crippled by debt. Wishful thinking does not make this prospect any less likely.

The sustainable university depends on a sustainable business model. Speaking strictly for myself, I do not know whether such a model is even possible, let alone what it would look like. However, a university is among other things a brain trust. If what I envision is possible, then it will emerge as the product of collaborative work by the very smart, highly trained people who inhabit the university, and who have made sustaining and nourishing it their life's work. If we can succeed, we'll both save our institutions and justify their continued existence to the societies we serve, by demonstrating the social value of having a brain trust in the first place. For the transition from a growth-based funding model to a sustainable model is a challenge faced both by universities, and by the larger-scale systems of which we are part. To call for a sustainable university is to call for universities to exercise leadership beyond addressing planetary challenges.