

EAQ Sustainability Workshop Feedback – Michael Maloni

Introduction

The sustainability workshop at the Europäische Akademie Otzenhausen (EAO) in May, 2018 was a remarkable opportunity to learn about environmental sustainability from the European perspective, which is significantly more advanced than that of the United States. The mix of expert speakers in specific areas (e.g., energy, water, etc.) combined with thoughtful trips (e.g., energy farm, community farm, pumping station, etc.) helped us to effectively digest a broad array of sustainability issues in an enjoyable manner. Moreover, the outstanding EAO facility enhanced the learning process. It is very professional and artistic, and the relatively remote location in Otzenhausen allows focus on learning. I also greatly valued interaction with faculty from other colleges at Kennesaw State. Considering these points, the overall experience ignited tremendous inspiration for me to advance sustainability education in the Coles College of Business. Below I discuss below key learnings and intended application in further detail.

Key Learnings

1. Sustainability requires a long-term, community perspective. As one speaker said, “We didn't inherit the earth from our parents, we borrowed it from our children.” The Europeans that we encountered throughout the trip have engaged in significant scientific and critical thought to form their perspectives on sustainability.
2. In comparison, the U.S. is beyond behind the learning curve with respect to sustainability. As we learned, our level of consumption of natural resources exceeds that of almost every other developed nation. Our cultural, social, and political mindsets are also short-term focused on individuals versus a longer-term focus on our community. Additionally, we forgo critical thought and default to following a given, often unsubstantiated perspective from media and politics. For instance, we somehow downplay a consensus scientific fact in climate change but get upset about drinking straws.
3. In this vein, a key to begin making positive sustainability impacts starts with our daily behaviors and habits (e.g., food consumption, energy use, etc.). A key question is therefore how to affect daily behaviors and habits without forcing people (e.g., legally) to do so.
4. I was struck by how several speakers eluded to the idea that it is already (or just about already) too late to make sufficient changes to reverse environmental degradation brought on by humans. The possibility that mankind is doomed to suffer hardship and major population decline as discussed during at least one session is not even a remote idea here in the U.S.
5. The details of the science around the different topics were interesting. For instance, certain energy sources seem promising (e.g., shale oil), but the cost and associated environmental degradation are unattractive. I was also amazed by the proliferation of plastics with both microplastics in everyday items (e.g., lotion) and the massive gyres of floating plastic in the ocean. The U.S. has a 25% or so recycling rate, and no one seems to know about the gyres.

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6. My favorite speaker session dealt with agriculture and global hunger. The U.S. tends to generally ignore such issues. Despite a billion or so people living in hunger worldwide, the U.S. is currently ripe with food and water supplies. With hunger, the interesting challenge is to feed the growing world population with ecological farming methods.
7. My favorite event was the wine tasting in Longuich (and not specifically for the wine). The history of the building (dating before the year 1,400) and the family winery (Weingut Schlöder-Thielen) of 100+ years exemplifies the tradition and long-term focus of the region. Additionally, the speaker had likely given the same wine tasting presentation hundreds of times over the years but spoke deliberately and passionately to us about his craft that evening. It reminds me to find the energy and passion to do this for my classes.
8. As one last key learning, I was impressed by the goals of the European Union that we learned in one session. The U.S. government and economic systems seem far less complex in comparison, but the E.U. government does not seem to be less effective.

Application

The experience and associated learnings have inspired me to pursue development of a sustainability course for the Coles College. We need to take a stronger stance in training the next generation of business leaders. We can do that by challenging students beyond the traditional course material that makes up most of our core business classes. The class would focus on the triple bottom line of social, environmental, and financial impacts of the organization, pushing the envelope on what students consider to be the objectives of a corporation and what they consider to be “wealth.” To these points, the EAO trip generated many ideas on how to present compelling facts about sustainability while challenging students to think critically about their values and personal career goals. The course could be an MBA elective or entail a study abroad incorporating the EAO in Otzenhausen and the KSU facility in Montepulciano.

As a result of the interaction with KSU faculty from other colleges during the trip, I identified several who could enrich the proposed sustainability course as guest speakers. I valued the bus trips that allowed us to exchange sustainability perspectives as well as brainstorm ideas on how these might be applied in the classroom. Their backgrounds in engineering, education, etc. would challenge the students with new ideas and approaches to solving problems.

Summary

To close, I am sincerely grateful for the opportunity to attend the sustainability workshop at the EAO. The European perspective was the most critical element of the trip for me, and the biggest takeaway was the inspiration to drive greater sustainability learning in Coles. I would certainly welcome the opportunity to attend again or even serve in an instructor or organizer role.