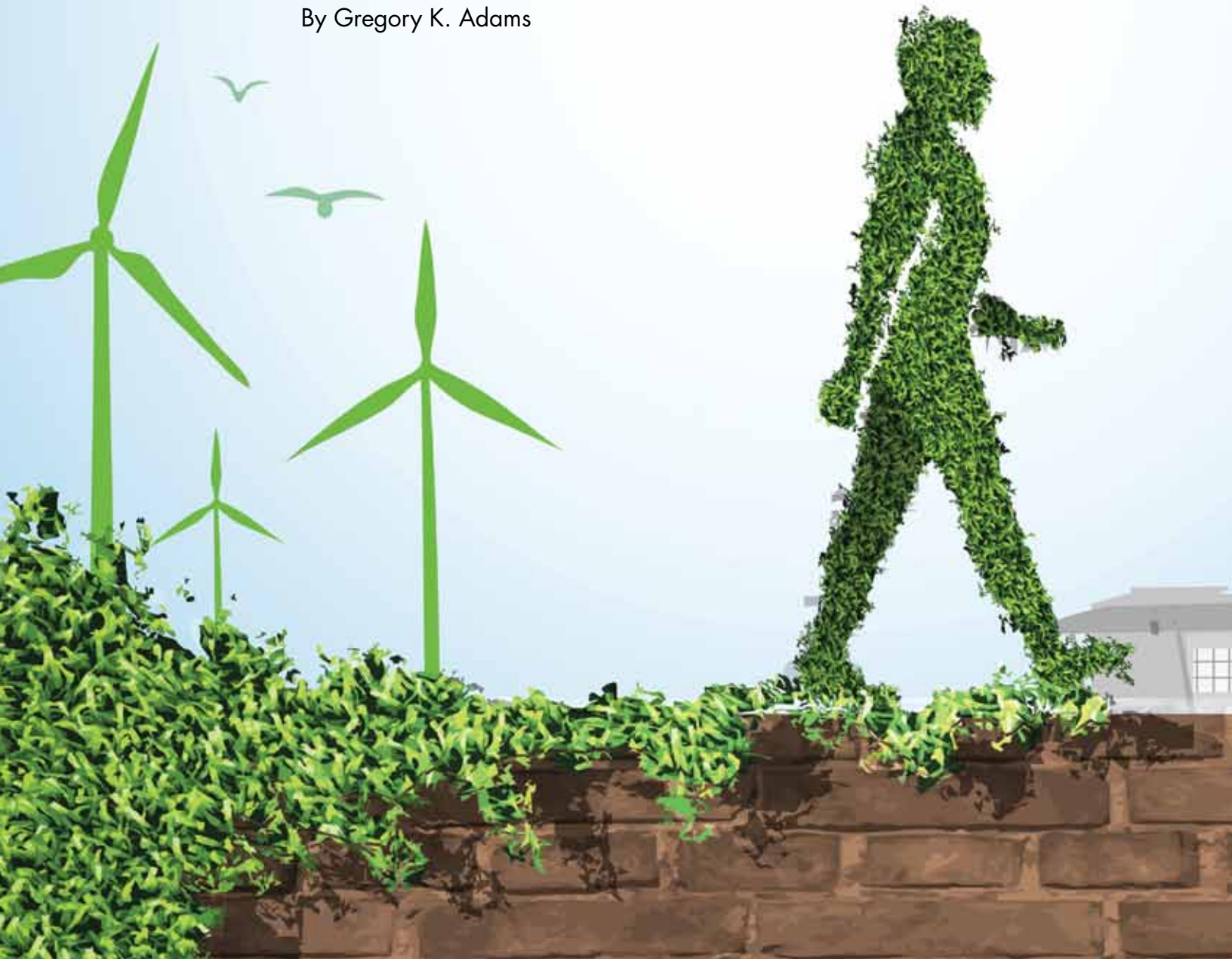


# Facility Management's Role in Organizational Sustainability

By Gregory K. Adams



**D**efining sustainability for any particular area of study, ecosystem, societal institution, organization, or entity is almost always problematic. The literature regularly makes this case (Levin, 1997; Pearce & Vanegas, 2002). Bell and Morse (1999) observe, “Almost every article, paper, or book on sustainability bemoans the fact that the concept is broad and lacks a broad consensus; this is usually followed by the author’s own preferred definitions, which in turn add to the lack of consensus!” Bell and Morse go on to argue, building on previous works, that it may not be necessary to closely define sustainability to practice it. It appears to be generally accepted that defining sustainability is context or discipline specific. For the purposes of this article, a sustainable organization and its physical facilities is assumed to be one that fulfills the mission of the organization in way that is least detrimental to the natural environment, the social welfare of the culture in which it exists, and one that can sustain itself financially throughout its life cycle as an organization.

Facility managers have questions about sustainability. How do an organization’s physical facilities—its built environment—and the management of them, influence the sustainability of the organization or institution as a whole? How important is Facility Management (FM) to the overall sustainability profile of an organization? If facility managers act in as sustainable a manner as possible in all things within their direct influence, but the rest of the organization pays little attention to sustainability, is it worth the effort? Can environmentally conscious facility managers influence other parts of their organizations to act more sustainably? How is sustainability defined and measured for facilities management and for the entire organization?

Facility managers face a dizzying array of complexities in relation to sustainability in their facilities, and in the larger context of the sustainability of their organizations and the social and environmental contexts in which the organization exists. Pearce and Walrath (2003) compiled and cited over 200 different definitions of sustainability from the literature. Pearce and Vanegas (2002) state, “One of the most significant challenges for applying sustainability to built environment systems is defining exactly what conditions must be met in order for a facility to be sustainable,” and that there is no consensus in the literature in how to define sustainability in the built environment.

## ACCOUNTABILITY AND REALITY

Facility managers must concern themselves with how operational sustainability fits into the strategic goals of the organization and how the overall organizational sustainability assessment is affected by its facilities. How to direct resources to achieve sustainability in FM, such as the best use of operations and capital renewal dollars, is a complex issue. Theoretical models have been developed for prioritizing and choosing between sustainability project alternatives (Pearce, Gregory, & Vanegas, 2000; Ramkrishnan, 2007). However, these methods are not widely used in the FM environment.

Dresner (2008) concludes his seminal work, *Principles of Sustainability*, with this: “Just because we don’t know how to create a truly sustainable society, that doesn’t mean we can’t do things to become less unsustainable.” Among the myriad complexities and choices embodied in sustainability, facility managers might find it helpful to adopt Dresner’s philosophy to act within their spheres of influence to make their facilities and their organizations “less unsustainable” until more coherent, coordinated, and universal solutions are presented.

“Ownership” of organizational sustainability performance is often assigned by an organization to its operations function. Many times, sustainability coordinator positions, or similar positions, reside in an organization’s facility management operation. These positions are often charged with advancing sustainability within the organization and with accounting for those advances. But then, accounting for sustainability in a coherent manner requires understanding what sustainability means for the organization and requires some ability to measure the state of sustainability in the organization. In addition, an understanding of how organizations become sustainable is helpful.

Increasingly, organizations seek to measure and improve performance within the context of sustainability. Accordingly, many organizations are adopting sustainability reporting guidelines developed

by the Global Reporting Institute (GRI) and other assessment methodologies. Businesses and other organizations typically report performance in quarterly and annual reports. However, GRI guidelines recommend that organizations also report performance in relation to the wider contexts of sustainability:

Information on performance should be placed in context. The underlying question of sustainability reporting is how an organization contributes, or aims to contribute in the future, to the improvement or deterioration of economic, environmental, and social conditions, developments, and trends at the local, regional, or global level. Reporting only on trends in individual performance (or the efficiency of the organization) will fail to respond to this underlying question. Reports should therefore seek to present performance in relation to broader concepts of sustainability. This will involve discussing the performance of the organization in the context of the limits and demands placed on environmental or social resources at the sectoral, local, regional, or global level. For example, this could mean that in addition to reporting on trends in eco-efficiency, an organization might also present its absolute pollution loading in relation to the capacity of the regional ecosystem to absorb the pollutant (Global, 2007).

### THE UNIQUENESS OF EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

Tracking sustainability is only part of the effort. Understanding how organizations behave, and therefore how they are likely to advance toward sustainability, is important. Organizations behave differently in different sectors. Private organizations act quite differently from public ones. Corporate organizational sustainability in private sector organizations is strategically tied to a profit motive, which differs significantly from public sector organizations, one type of which is the main subject of this paper, namely colleges and universities. Even private sector colleges and universities behave uniquely as a group from other organizations.

Walton and Galea (2005) discuss the differences and tensions between business and universities related to achieving sustainability:

Few will dispute the claim that universities are unique places and very different from businesses. Tenure, academic freedom, faculty governance, adjunct and part-time teaching, tensions between teaching and research, and other characteristics make universities the special places that they are. Rosovsky (1990) provides an excellent discussion of how these things shape the university. Sharp (2002) lists several relevant characteristics of the nature of the university, including complexity derived from goal ambiguity, numerous sub-cultures of decision-making styles, and conflict revolving around poorly understood problems. Sharp also describes how the mental models held by university faculty tend to be local, and that universities generally do not see themselves as part of a larger, global system.

### THE MISSIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND BUSINESS

Walton and Galea also note various arguments as to why businesses choose various corporate stances toward sustainability, all of which revolve around how sustainability affects profit because, after all, producing a profit is the reason businesses exist. However, the mission of universities and colleges is to educate rather than to make a profit, with the possible exception of certain private sector “diploma mills.”

Not only are missions different, but Walton and Galea point out the mistrust that exists between faculty and business. Business models are increasingly applied to the classroom resulting in the incremental marginalization of faculty as the “new managerialism that pervades higher education, with its focus on corporate mission statements, goals, monitoring procedures, and performance measures” (Gough, 2004, p. 158). This trend shifts emphasis from a teaching, or a “motive-oriented” mission, to a learning, or “results-oriented” endeavor.

Gough expresses the viewpoint that a business approach in higher education undervalues faculty intellectual skills, academic freedom, equity, and the environment, all of which are important to the pursuit of sustainability. Walton and Galea argue that, in spite of these tensions between business and higher education, that higher education can benefit from business by adopting business best practice in operational areas that both have in common, such as energy management, water management, packaging and waste reduction, facility management, and hazardous materials management. The common functions in common between private sector businesses and higher education identified by Walton and Galea often reside in whole or in part within the responsibility of the role of the facility manager in higher education.

Research by Enticott & Walker, 2008, suggests there is value to an organization in facilities being managed sustainably even if all of the interconnections of the organization in terms of sustainability are not completely understood. However, a discussion is warranted about how higher education organizations are transformed into sustainable ones (Jennings & Zandbergen, 1995).

Bartlett and Chase (2004) edited a compilation of papers about sustainability in higher education finding that effective sustainability efforts emerge from all levels of the university in varying degrees at various campuses—from faculties, administrative units, and student groups. Emphasis is placed on the foundational shifts necessary within institutions to promote sustainability. Such shifts include efforts to redesign curricula to infuse sustainability into subject matter and to promote trans-discipline sustainability instruction, on developing sustainable facility practices, on engaging constituent communities, especially students and faculty, in sustainability awareness and action, and on building a systemwide commitment to sustainability.

In *Higher Education and the Challenge of Sustainability: Problematics, Promise, and Practice*, Corcoran and Walls (2004) edit a compilation of papers focused on higher education sustainability efforts, on the evolution of sustainability declarations in higher

education signed by many college presidents, on the emergence of sustainability as one of the most pressing issues of our time, and on philosophical frameworks for sustainability in higher education. Various projects are presented highlighting efforts of several institutions to promote sustainability on their respective campuses.

Efforts to bring about sustainable universities are varied. Thompson and Green (2005) recognize this in efforts they studied at the University of Rhode Island and from the literature. Thompson and Green note that, while strong support from top institutional leaders is a distinct advantage to sustainability efforts on campus, as in the case of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, such support is rare. Quoting them:

While committed leadership from the top has immense value, we argue that the process of incorporating sustainability into the life and mission of an IHE (Institution of Higher Education) will often involve a relatively small and stable group of faculty and staff. These core leaders will work with a fluid, ever changing coalition of faculty, staff, students, and administrators. These coalition members will have overlapping, but differing, incentive structures and, hence, various levels of commitment. Regardless of their incentive structure, all members of the coalition will repeatedly calculate the opportunity costs of participation and adjust their participation accordingly.

A strategy is proposed where this dedicated, stable core of sustainability supporters can foster transformation on campus by recognizing barriers to sustainability, by working to overcome these barriers through efficient dissemination of information about the needs and opportunities to act, and by creating rewards for acting. The second plank of the strategy is to take advantage of windows of opportunity. The third component of the strategy is to “create sites of unconventional wisdom” through which conservation of existing resources is demonstrated and natural sites are restored to their original states.

Such projects serve to demonstrate to stakeholders how much impact the institutions of higher education (as well as all modern entities) have had on the natural environment. They also serve to raise the

awareness of stakeholders of the need to design, build, and operate facilities in a sustainable manner so as to minimize detrimental impacts. An example of such a project is Emory’s eco walking tour (Bartlett, 2002). The key to the success of the Thompson and Green strategy is to elevate sustainability to the “action agenda” of the institution, if it does not already reside there.

The implication for facility managers today in higher education is that they are not likely to find themselves mandated to instill sustainability on campus, nor necessarily supported by upper level management in their efforts to implement sustainability. Rather, it is much more likely that facility managers focused

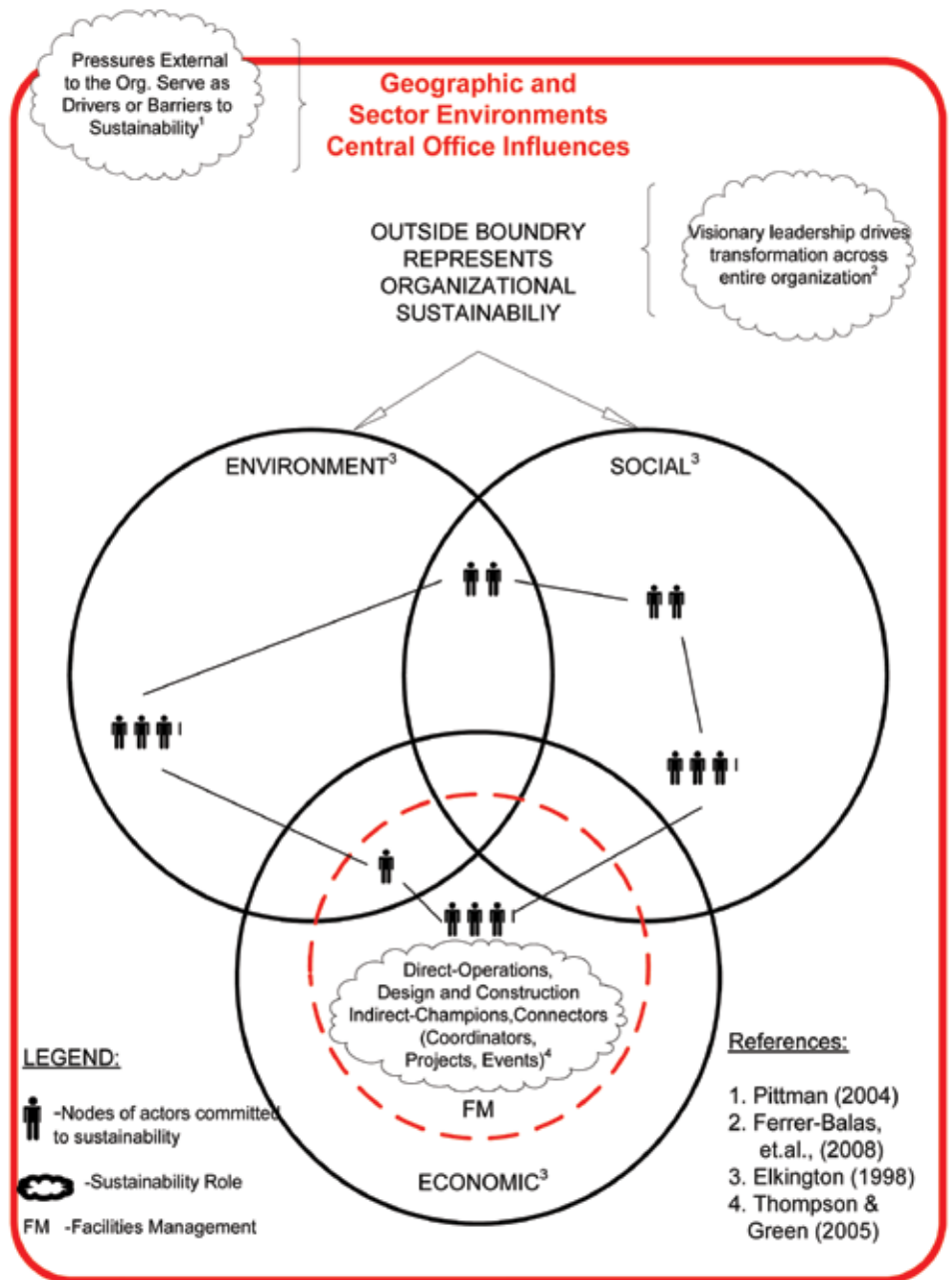


Figure 1. Facilities management roles in organizational sustainability in higher education institutions: a synthesis from the literature

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on sustainability on campus will find themselves a part of a core group of sustainability constituents in the organization searching to find creative ways to network with others to overcome barriers to sustainability. They would achieve this by capitalizing upon opportunities that present themselves to demonstrate sustainability through discrete projects that will, in best-cases, ignite further action toward sustainability which eventually become a part of the strategic plan of the organization until a tipping point is reached that turns the culture of the organization toward one of sustainability.

#### THE FM CONTRIBUTION TO SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP

There are many aspects of FM that affect whether facilities are owned and operated in a more or less environmentally sustainable way, and in so doing, whether or not FM contributes to the overall systemic sustainability of the organization. These aspects of FM sustainability practices are identified in the literature and are collectively conceptualized by this author as belonging to two classes of FM activities, the direct sustainability role and the indirect role. The direct role consists of the more tangible operational aspects of FM under the direct control of practitioners such as how efficiently buildings are operated, how waste streams are handled, whether buildings are constructed in environmentally sensitive ways, and what chemicals are used in the operations of buildings.

The indirect sustainability role is less tangible, being comprised of functional aspects that many times reside in FM such as sustainability coordinators and project managers who can act as sustainability actors and advocates that use their job duties to connect other sustainability actors in the organization by providing sustainable projects, events and initiatives around which other sustainability actors in the organization can coalesce, thereby advancing systemic organizational sustainability. The direct and indirect sustainability roles in FM are assumed to impact organizational sustainability because of evidence from the literature. These roles are modeled in Figure 1, and described here.


The higher education institution exists in the larger environment of the region or sector to which it belongs. Influences in the environment external to the organization can exert pressures on the organization to promote or discourage sustainability (Pittman, 2004). The totality of organizational sustainability exists within the boundaries of the triple bottom line constructs

of economic, social, and environmental impacts (Elkington, 1998). Organizational sustainability can be advanced through visionary leadership which helps drive the culture throughout multiple segments of the organization, though it is not absolutely necessary to the development of a sustainable culture (Ferrer-Balas et al., 2008).

Higher education institutions are led to a tipping point toward sustainability through the actions of sustainability champions within the organization in connection with a network of sustainability actors distributed through the organization who capitalize on events, projects, and/or sustainability coordinator positions that act as “connectors” to provide the impetus and opportunity to move the organization toward sustainability, and to grow support for sustainability (Thompson & Green, 2005).

Evidence from the literature demonstrates the influence of facility departments in advancing sustainability within various institutions of higher education through the provision of sustainability champions and through projects such as sustainable construction, recycling, and sustainable housing projects that serve as connectors for nodes of sustainability actors throughout the organization to rally around and in which participants drive the organization toward sustainability.

The author further argues that FM plays a “direct role” in organizational sustainability through those operational aspects that are directly under the control of facility managers and can directly affect the organizational constructs of economic impacts, social impacts, and environmental impacts. Sustainable performance in these areas has been correlated with sustainable performance in the organization (Enticott & Walker, 2008).

The model facilitates understanding the relationship between FM and organizational sustainability in higher education as evidenced by the literature. However, the literature contains little in terms of measuring the strength of the relationship. One would expect the direct role to be more easily quantifiable than the indirect role. However, the real ability of facility managers to ignite a sustainability culture in their organization most likely lies in their ability to leverage relationships across their institutions to influence other sustainability partners using their indirect role in organizational sustainability. 

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Greg Adams is director of facility services at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. This article, produced under the auspices of APPA's Center for Facilities Research, is taken from his master's thesis prepared for the Georgia Institute of Technology. He can be reached at [adamsg@uwm.edu](mailto:adamsg@uwm.edu).

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