

Young Harris College  
Sustainability Strategic Plan:  
*Learning to Think and Act Sustainably*

Goals for 2008 – 2012

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Young Harris College educates, inspires and empowers students through a comprehensive liberal arts experience that integrates mind, body, and spirit. The strategic plan for

sustainability draws on this YHC mission statement to encourage our college community to think and act sustainably. One of the values statements within the Strategic Plan for the entire YHC college community is “the role of leadership dedicated to creating a sustainable, just and caring society. Under these mission and values statements lies the impetus for the Sustainability Strategic Plan.

### ***Historical Background of Sustainability.***

Almost thirty years ago through the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the *World Conservation Strategy* (WCS) was published as an early attempt to recognize the importance of sustainability within the context of the current global environmental crisis (IUCN, 1980). The WCS emphasized the role of humans as an integral part of nature and questioned the continuation of *Homo sapiens* on the planet unless nature and natural resources were conserved. Too often we humans, a biological species, have removed ourselves as part of the biological diversity on this planet. This important document attempted to bring *Homo sapiens* back into the argument and was seen as a “call to arms” to make significant changes in the way development was carried out around the globe.

The term “sustainable development” was defined in the WCS document; a definition that incorporates the interdependence of environmental, social and economic factors; what has become known as the triple bottom line. The current globally accepted and popularized definition of sustainability was based on this definition of sustainable development from the WCS. The *International Union for Conservation of Nature* (IUCN) publication defined sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” The United Nations established the *World Commission on the Environment and Development* and, in 1987, through the publication of *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), additional currency was given to the concept of sustainability. In 1992, at the First Rio Conference, *Caring for the Earth* was launched (IUCN, 1991) as a follow-up to the *World Conservation Strategy*, and the resulting ground swell across the globe in support for sustainable approaches, at all levels, has been significant.

From the onset, defining sustainability has been problematic since it incorporates three fundamental and overlapping factors: environmental, social and economic. The clearest understanding is that of environmental sustainability since the concept was first developed by environmental and conservation professionals concerned about the future of Earth. However, as clearly explained in the *World Conservation Strategy* the concept of sustainability is much broader than its environmental underpinnings and encompasses ideas, aspirations and values that inspire all of us to become better environmental stewards while promoting positive economic growth and fair social objectives. Social sustainability is related to how we make choices that affect other humans in our community, both locally and globally, and is based obviously on ethical decisions. An activity can be considered socially sustainable if it conforms to the local social norms or

does not stretch beyond a community tolerance for changes. These norms may or may not be codified in law, but are largely based on religious, traditional and customary systems. Therefore, ethics plays a significant role, as well as value systems, education, class systems, tolerance and other aspects that are not motivated by economic considerations. But, sustainable policies need to be economically effective and efficient as well.

### ***History of the Sustainability Initiative at Young Harris College***

Young Harris College (YHC), situated in the north Georgia mountains, has a long and rich history in its association with natural resources and the social capital of Appalachia. Southern Appalachia has arguably the richest biodiversity resources of any bioregion in the continental United States. Multiple ecosystems converge in this bioregion and unique habitats created between mountain valleys harbor exceptional species combinations and endemism. Among the traditional societies of this region, beginning with native indigenous peoples and more recently with Appalachians from European backgrounds, high values were attached to natural resources. As with many traditional peoples, natural resources were extremely important and the local livelihoods, both social and economic, were intricately intertwined with a strong ethic for land and other natural resources. This ethic resulted in a natural resource based economy and society.

Founded in 1886, Young Harris College has offered a venue of higher learning for these Appalachian communities against this backdrop of outstanding natural capital and beauty. Serving the communities surrounding the college has always been an important component of the YHC mission. The following is a timeline of the events leading to the Sustainability Strategic Plan:

- In more recent history a student-run organization, Common Ground, began the mission of recycling paper, aluminum and plastics as early as the 1989. This group was led by faculty advisors from the Math and Science Division and is still active in the recycling program on campus and in helping to educate other students on issues concerning the environment.
- From this grassroots and largely student-initiated beginning, a concerned group of students, professors, and staff founded the Greener Campus Committee in 2006, which would be the precursor of the YHC Sustainability Committee. The Greener Campus Committee was originally an action oriented committee concerned with the ways YHC impacted the environment. The committee augmented the existing campus recycling program and encouraged other campus wide initiatives leading to operational sustainability ideas at a higher level.
- In a clear demonstration of commitment by the YHC president and administration, and with the strong support of the student body, the Greener Campus Committee morphed from an action oriented committee to an officially recognized standing committee called the Sustainability Committee in 2007, and began to formulate policy and recommendations to the administration, faculty, staff and students. The newly formed standing committee drafted a sustainability policy statement

and developed and submitted an application to join the Partnership Program for the Pollution Prevention Assistance Division offered by the Georgia Department of Natural Resource in November, 2007.

- In the spring of 2008 as a demonstration for support of sustainability, students made an official request to the College President to sign the Presidents Climate Commitment, a formal declaration signed by over 600 colleges and universities to reduce the carbon footprint of these institutions to zero by a time judged by each individual president.
- With an eye toward transitioning from a two to four year institution, YHC included sustainability language in the YHC mission, goals, values and vision statements for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools proposal to become a recognized and accredited baccalaureate granting institution in August, 2008.
- Young Harris College further demonstrated its commitment to sustainability by the creation of a Sustainability Coordinator position in August of 2008. This position would operationalize the sustainability activities guided by the YHC Strategic Plan and would build upon those initiatives started by the Greener Campus Committee.
- YHC, through the efforts of the Sustainability Coordinator, joined the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) in November, 2008. Through these commitments YHC joins many other institutions of higher education in efforts toward a sustainable future.

With this overview of the sustainability initiative at YHC, a clearer historical and institutional understanding is created that leads the College now to the development and implementation of its Sustainability Strategic Plan: *Learning to Think and Act Sustainably*. Three areas representing the mission and goals statements of Young Harris College and the implementation of the goals all point YHC toward a sustainable future. These three areas are: (1) Curriculum, (2) College and (3) Community. A goal statement is added to explain each one in this plan and to connect each one to the YHC Strategic Plan and the college slogan; "Educate, Inspire, Empower".

**Statement of purpose:** Young Harris College will incorporate sustainable issues into the curriculum of the college, promote sustainable economic and business practices within campus daily processes, and support community sustainable endeavors while advocating that meeting the needs of the college is fairly and justly accomplished inside all social parameters.

**Vision:** Young Harris College will be an example to the community for sustainable practices through education and implementation.