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PHD THESIS SUMMARY: Introductory economics courses and the university's commitments to sustainability.

TOM L. GREEN
PhD in interdisciplinary studies, August 2012
University of British Columbia

In 1990, fearing that unsustainable production and consumption patterns were aggravating poverty and undermining prospects for future generations, university leaders issued the Talloires Declaration, committing their institutions to fostering sustainability, which the Declaration describes as "an equitable and sustainable future for all humankind in harmony with nature".[1] They pledged to work toward population stabilization, eco-friendly technologies, and ecological restoration, implicitly acknowledging ecological limits to economic activity.

My dissertation focuses on the implications of universities' sustainability commitments—such as the Talloires Declaration—for introductory economics courses (Econ101) at Canadian universities. Sustainability commitments and the sustainability in higher education literature point to the desirability of integrating sustainability across the curriculum. Universities have made considerable progress in the greening of campus infrastructure, yet there has been little progress in updating curriculum.

I proceeded on the basis that if students are to have the knowledge to improve prospects for sustainability, they need an understanding of environment-economy linkages. These linkages include: how the economy depends upon ecosystem services; how resources are extracted from the environment and returned as waste products; and how habitats are converted in the process of economic development.

I had three main reasons for selecting the way sustainability commitments play out in introductory economics courses as the research topic. First, environmental change is largely the result of economic drivers. Second, a growing body of literature suggests that if prospects for sustainability are to be improved, new economic models

[1] The declaration is available at: http://www.ulsf.org/programs_talloires_td.html

are needed; Ricardian-like presumptions that nature has inexhaustible properties are no longer tenable (see Daly 1992; Speth 2008). Third, in North America, students from across the academy are required or elect to take these courses—by one estimate, about 40% of undergrads (see Salemi and Siegfried 1999). The content of Econ101 courses is highly standardized. These courses influence the economic beliefs that circulate through society and the types of economic policies and outcomes that are considered desirable.

The theoretical framework I utilized to analyze Econ101 textbooks and assess student and faculty perspectives on the course was constructed from the transdisciplinary field of ecological economics and focused on theoretical contributions useful in understanding deficiencies in how Econ101 conceptualizes the environment. This literature also helped identify theory students should be introduced to if they are to understand the economy's relation to the environment and sustainability. For example, ecological economists posit that human demands on the biosphere should be kept within precautionary ecological thresholds (see Meadows, et al. 1972; Rockstrom, et al. 2009), calling into question the viability of further economic growth and consumerism.

I conducted content analysis of nine introductory economics textbooks, focusing on representations of the environment-economy nexus and implicit values related to sustainability (published in part in Green 2012). I found that the textbooks privilege economic growth and consumerism and offer little to prepare students to understand sustainability issues or potential limits to growth.

Three populations linked to Econ101 at British Columbia's three largest public universities were interviewed. The first group comprised eleven economists who deliver the course. The second involved nine professors who teach undergraduates in programs that explicitly focus on sustainability and require that students take Econ101. The third consisted of 54 students who had recently completed an Econ101 course. I utilized qualitative research methods since they are considered appropriate in instances where the topic being studied has yet to be delineated through previous research and researchers are seeking to generate data about perspectives, experiences, and opinions.

Sustainability is not salient to Econ101 lecturers and they give little attention to the environment, public goods, or externalities, instead focusing on what they deem to be core theory (though two of the

lecturers were troubled at how their colleagues downplayed the theory of externalities). They are concerned that incorporating sustainability into curriculum entails enlisting them in changing student values. There is limited willingness to revisit curriculum to better address the environment-economy nexus.

Professors from sustainability-oriented programs are dissatisfied with what their students get out of Econ101 and see it as steeped in ideology and problematic values like consumerism. They are seeking to offer alternatives to Econ101 that focus on the environment-economy interface, adopt a normative position of presuming that sustainability is desirable, and scrutinize the value positions of contemporary economic policies (e.g., at one of the universities such students can now take an ecological economics course instead of Econ101).

There was near unanimity amongst students that the environment is downplayed in Econ101, taking up at most two lectures per semester. Those from sustainability-oriented programs tended to be dissatisfied with the course and saw it as dismissing ecological limits to growth; they felt dissuaded from raising concerns about standard theory's limitations or philosophical questions about the purpose of economic activity. Student performance on a brief exercise designed to see if Econ101 helps prepare students to offer informed opinions on a public policy of contemporary significance (carbon taxes) was underwhelming.

My overarching findings indicate that universities' sustainability commitments have yet to influence Econ101 curriculum and that the curriculum does not support these commitments.

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Tom L. Green obtained his PhD with a focus in ecological economics from the interdisciplinary studies graduate program at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Tom is currently a visiting lecturer at Quest University Canada, in Squamish, British Columbia, where he teaches courses in ecological economics, political economy, and global perspectives.
Contact e-mail: <viableeconomics@yahoo.com>
Thesis available at: <https://circle.ubc.ca/handle/2429/43042>