



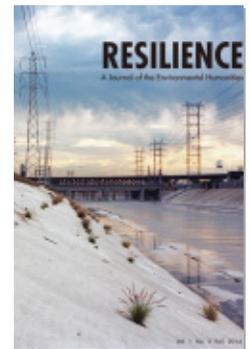
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Disavowal and Dismissal

The Struggle for Ownership in Sustainability Studies

An interview with Tom Kelly, Chief Sustainability Officer,
University of New Hampshire

PAULA SALVIO

Tom Kelly is the founding director of the University of New Hampshire Sustainability Institute and the chief sustainability officer. Kelly collaborates with faculty, staff, students, and community members in the development of policies, programs, and practices related to the Sustainability Institute's four educational initiatives: biodiversity, climate, culture, and food.

Coeditor and coauthor of *The Sustainable Learning Community: One University's Journey to the Future* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2009), Kelly has been working in the field of higher education and sustainability for more than twenty years in the United States and abroad. Current activities include working with University of New Hampshire colleagues and many related partners on developing regional approaches to sustainable food through Food Solutions New England and energy systems through Climate Solutions New England, incubating sustainability science, and emphasizing the central place of culture in sustainability and sustainability education and pedagogy. Kelly was a founding member of the Northeast Campus Sustainability Consortium and the Inter-institutional Network for Food and Agricultural Sustainability (INFAS). He currently collaborates with the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) and Second Nature on curricular and pedagogical innovation through the design and facilitation of regional symposia of the American College and

University Presidents Climate Commitment (ACUPCC) and the annual curriculum convocation of the AASHE national conference.

Kelly was a visiting scholar at the Center for US-Mexican Studies at the University of California, San Diego, and a visiting professor of transboundary environmental issues in the US-Mexican borderlands at El Colegio de Mexico, Mexico DF. In addition to an undergraduate and master's degree in musical composition and conducting, he holds a PhD in international relations, from the Tufts University Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

Paula Salvio met with Tom to discuss the challenges facing educators committed to creating substantive programs in sustainability studies within increasingly corporate college and university structures. Over the last several years, Kelly has been working with a group of faculty at the University of New Hampshire to design and implement an undergraduate dual major in sustainability. He reflects on this work in an effort to explore the promise and the limits to creating studies in sustainability within the academy. Why do academics tend to both disavow the relevance of sustainability studies while at the same time argue about who "owns" sustainability?

Paula: Tom, could you begin by discussing what you believe has been most challenging about integrating the humanities into sustainability?

Tom: Well, if you set as your task, "I want to integrate the humanities," then you're basically already inside of a carved up world of disciplines and of fields. But from a practical standpoint, that's one of the ways to go about it, because we're in a world that's carved up. So getting the humanities as they are currently practiced into the sustainability project may or may not lead to what you're trying to get to. So I think that it has been a struggle at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) to integrate the humanities, or it's been part of a struggle. Let's just say that it's one of the approaches we've taken, to try to reach out and bring the humanities in. The humanities, in many cases, disqualified themselves. And in the first gathering of the UNH culture and sustainability working group, several humanists said, "I don't even know why I'm here." Upon further discussions, it was assumed that environmental science defined the field of sustainability.

What is difficult for faculty to grasp is that sustainability isn't inter-

disciplinary or even transdisciplinary. It's bigger than the disciplines. And that's probably the biggest conceptual barrier at work in higher education: the dominance and infrastructure of the disciplines. There is a philosophical and mental architecture, and there is an institutional architecture and processes that just magnify that. So then, what's the real problem? The real problem is that the first question people in higher education ask about sustainability is "what discipline is it"?

Paula: Yes, that's generally the case.

Tom: And so you're already off on a path that's inherently problematic. And the farthest you can get with that is with the answer, "It is transdisciplinary." For example, in the European context of the International Council of Scientific Unions, transdisciplinary is defined as involving practitioner and stakeholder equal participation. So now you're getting outside of the academic disciplines.

Paula: And the language of "stakeholder" comes out of a corporate structure.

Tom: Yes, exactly. It's this battle that you can see in the language of trying to break out of the disciplines. And so how do you conceive of something outside of the disciplines and relate disciplinary knowledge and practice to it? That's the challenge. At a university that's very, very difficult to do, because the disciplinary architecture is deeply embedded in the consciousness of the faculty, administration, and the larger culture.

Paula: Do you see the same challenges when you work with students, particularly at the undergraduate level?

Tom: I think it varies. But remember, students are inculcated into this disciplinary worldview. Specialization is the goal.

Paula: Even at the undergraduate level?

Tom: Oh, absolutely. I mean you've got to pick a major. That's one of the greatest anxieties of undergraduate students, is figuring out what their majors are.

Paula: Tom, could you talk a little bit about why you believe the faculty at the University of New Hampshire—across all the colleges—have substantial difficulty understanding the concept of a dual major. What is your analysis of why the dual major in sustainability has not been approved at this point?

Tom: Well, there are a number of factors at play . . . I think it does come back to the primacy and privileging of academic disciplines. I think that everything flows from that: the stature, standing in legitimacy, the hierarchy in the university.

Paula: The hierarchy being . . .

Tom: The faculty stature is rooted in their disciplinary PhDs and scholarship. And their practice is also department based, which is another outgrowth of the disciplines. When you bring in a value like academic freedom that is mediated through this disciplinary culture and everything that goes with it, you get a strange distortion of a value like academic freedom, which has good reasons to exist and is vital to a participatory democracy. But when academic freedom is mediated through this disciplinary culture, it becomes potentially problematic. In the name of academic freedom, the free development and exchange of ideas that potentially challenge disciplinary structures and the unquestioned epistemic privileges embedded in them, are too often undermined.

Paula: So, when you say “in the name of academic freedom,” what do you mean?

Tom: Let’s start at the endgame of the claim made by UNH’s College of Engineering and Physical Sciences belief that the administration was pressuring them into approving the dual major in sustainability—which we know wasn’t the case. Faculty felt their agency was compromised. They believe that only faculty should be in control of the curriculum and that their academic freedom was violated.

Paula: Despite the fact that no proposal has ever been vetted so thoroughly across the university by faculty or had more faculty participation across the university.

Tom: Yes, despite the fact that three years ago twenty faculty gathered together for two days and designed the original program, including four faculty members from the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences, who were a part of the design process for the dual major. So . . . I think that the dual major was not the point. The content in the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences vote was not the point. The point was, who is in charge of curriculum? The faculty in Engineering and Physical Sciences argued that by bringing in the humanities, the dual major would suffer—it would lack rigor. Who are the guardians of rigor? And so we see a battle for rigor played out among the disciplines.

Paula: As well as in sustainability studies, wouldn't you say?

Tom: Well, I don't know . . .

Paula: Well, there is quite a bit of evidence that confirms the dominance of white male scientists in sustainability science. It's very hard to find women and minority men and women with high profiles in this area, although they have long legacies of accomplishments.

Tom: Oh, I see, that's very interesting . . . in sustainability studies. Yes, that is very interesting.

Paula: And what strikes me is that the argument on campus about rigor has been taken up by white men in the sciences primarily, except for a few.

Tom: I see, yes, so then, what you get into is a culture of white male supremacy . . . and that appears to continue to pervade the consciousness of academic culture.

Paula: Do you believe there is a resonance between what's happening in the outer sphere of sustainability studies and its limitations and the way it gets played out within the context of university politics?

Tom: Yes, well, I think that the problem keeps coming back to the underconceptualization of sustainability. The demand that it conform at some level to the presuppositions that the university is built upon, which is discipline-based knowledge and specialization. So something

like sustainability, well, if it conforms, then it loses its integrity. If it doesn't conform, then it's at odds with the campus and the campus culture. So then, you either get driven, I don't want to say underground, but you make space, create space, if you can . . . until either you get enough momentum, enough of a coalition, to create something. I think the school of sustainability is still an expression of a discipline-based culture. For example, Tufts' College of Citizenship and Public Service (Tisch College) does not have a physical space and this is by design. The intention is to cut across colleges and disciplines.

Paula: I see, like a floating school.

Tom: Yes. The same thing was done in environment at Tufts when I was there. I don't think it really works out well, because it's basically an infusion model.

Paula: Which you are very much against. Could you talk about your concerns with the infusion model?

Tom: Yes, the infusion model doesn't question the categories of disciplines as the primary categories for making sense of the world. It takes the disciplines as a given and then infuses something into them. So it trivializes what you are trying to infuse. You take in only as much as what you can bear or is comfortable. Or you may just take what you think is interesting.

Paula: Yes, this makes me think of Roland Barthes's concept of inoculation (rather than infusion), in his analysis of how the white middle classes of 1950s rendered, organized, sustained, and reproduced what was perceived as a meaningful life in culture and society. The inoculation is that consciousness that defends against difference. At best, it provides cautious, tidy injections of difference.

Tom: So, yes, you could argue that sustainability challenges the white, middle-class, Western set of values embodied in the academic disciplines . . . And sustainability cannot be treated with integrity if it's simply infused into the disciplines. I think you can do things with the university as part of your work . . . to treat the subject with integrity. But it's different kinds of activities . . . for example, the regional food system

work we're doing involves faculty, but we are deeply involved with communities around the region, and academic knowledge is not privileged in the conversations, in the ideas, in the activities.

Paula: Would you see this as one of your exemplary projects as you think about how you define sustainability? Because one of the biggest issues sustainability faces are the debates about what sustainability is.

Tom: What I have found over the years is that the vast majority of people don't know the history of sustainability. So you have a sense that people have no historical context for their definition.

Paula: So, where do you trace sustainability, historically?

Tom: Historically, sustainability came from sustainable development, and sustainable development came from a critique of development. And development was, and still is, the dominant paradigm of the post-World War II economic plan.

Paula: Yes, the Marshall plan, the World Bank . . .

Tom: Yes, and it runs very deep. What does it mean to develop? What does it mean to be modern? And that's where the World Commission on Culture and Development treated some of those questions. People wanted to establish their own notions of modernity. They didn't want a single model to be imposed on them, although that is exactly what happened, although it was being universalized as if it's natural. And what the US did and what western Europe was doing, as you know well, the coaxing along, be just like us, you'll never catch up by the way, but sustainable development, was then an incremental adjustment to development to try to deal with the contradictions of the whole dominant paradigm for economic development.

Paula: The Brundtland Commission's report is a report you refer to often.

Tom: Well, I refer to it, not as the definition of sustainability. I refer to it as a very important process and product, an artifact, an articulation of sustainable development. Following the Brundtland Commission was the World Commission on Culture and Development, which

almost nobody remembers. But it was the same kind of process, the same kind of setup.

Paula: It's interesting because the World Commission on Culture and Development creates a legitimate place, if we have to seek a means through which to legitimate culture and the humanities, to enter into the conversation about sustainability . . .

Tom: Not only that, but it said it's time to move culture to the center of the discussion.

Paula: And what year was this?

Tom: It was just before or after the first earth summit—1992 or 1994. There are people who are highly critical of the conception of culture that is in the report.

Paula: What kind of criticisms do you hear?

Tom: Well, not many, because not many people know it exists.

Paula: Yes, but what would the critiques be? Was there concern because non-Western conceptions of culture are valued?

Tom: No, it's just now that, you know, culture is a contested term. And so some see culture instrumentally, some see it as something deployed, by actors, in groups. There is a complete disregard for the history of sustainability. And it's not that you have to study the history and origins of everything you do, but part of the key underlying presuppositions of sustainability is that we live in a historical world. We need to understand what its basic premises are. What are its commitments?

Paula: I think that is an important question. What are its commitments?

Tom: Right. So if you don't know the history of sustainability, how could you understand sustainability's commitments? So people project on it what they want.

Paula: Yes, and so the claim, if everything is sustainability, nothing is sustainability.

Tom: I've had that rhetorical maneuver used, where someone will try to force you to constrain sustainability by saying if sustainability means everything, then it means nothing. And again, we go back to the culture of disciplines that we live in. This culture simply will not accept a definition that isn't couched in disciplinary terms and conforms to those terms. And so sustainability is ridiculed, dismissed. Ironically, it's a cultural battle that we're up against. So I think a dual major was and is the right vehicle, in the culture and structure that we're in, because you don't want people to major in sustainability. That is almost antithetical to sustainability.

Paula: Could you say why? Why wouldn't you want to see students majoring in sustainability?

Tom: Because it's not a specialization. It cannot be approached as a specialization. I mean, people can focus on it. I focus on it, but I can't do it myself. The only way I can work is in collaboration and across various structures, including disciplines and colleges, but also out into the world, with practitioner communities of all kinds.

The curriculum is the problem. This brings us full circle. The university curriculum continues to be dominated by the disciplines and majors. You can point to interesting things like our dual major in ecogastronomy and how students are treating it as if it's their major. There are over a hundred students in it. It is a success. And so what we've done with that dual major is to create an educational space where students can see connections and systemic connections among things.

Paula: It's interesting because you say that it's a mistake to think about majoring in sustainability, but the term "dual major" in sustainability contradicts that.

Tom: Yes, but at UNH the dual major offers something that is more than a minor but less than a major.

Sustainability is about the big questions. You have some sense of what they are and what they can be. What is the good life? What is a life well lived? The dual major is a dual major in the life well lived. How do we define that in the culture of the disciplines? I thought the humanities would welcome this with open arms: What are our obligations to ourselves and to others in the past and future? What is just? What is beautiful?

Paula: What is also striking, in this struggle for sustainability—it seems to me there is a struggle over who owns sustainability. People both disavow it—they dismiss it—but at the same time, they want it. And so you have a kind of double bind. Do you see this at other institutions?

Tom: Yes, you have sustainability science, for example. There is legitimacy in it by putting the word science next to it . . . and so we have the Sustainability Research Collaboratory now to facilitate the work of sustainability science. This kind of work is seen as innovative, but I have my reservations . . .

Paula: What is meant by innovation?

Tom: It's a frontier-mentality innovation, cutting edge. I think the concept of innovation too often suffers from a linear view of things. There is a loss of proportion. People fail to remember history; it's all about the new and the novel. Trends in innovation don't value recovery or synthesis, archeology. If we think of evolution as one framework that profoundly altered natural sciences—well, evolution turned everything on its head, in part by introducing the concept of natural selection. If you start to think about innovation in the context of natural selection, the act of selection, questions are raised about what gets nurtured and picked up—human and the social and cultural—what are we taking and lifting up and carrying forward and what and whom do we find disposable?

Paula: Are you suggesting that innovation is vulnerable to discarding history?

Tom: It depends . . . is innovation in the selection process or in the new idea or gadget? I think if I were to put it in that frame, I would argue that it's in the selection process. It's what we as societies value enough to sustain, nurture, keep alive . . . It's all about problems and solutions.

Paula: Do you believe sustainability curricula should be framed as solution based . . .

Tom: No, but solution-based rhetoric is strong. The work we're doing in food—food solutions—focuses on problems to be solved. But part of the rhetoric of how we try to broaden this discourse is by asking what

sustains us. We turn to meaning, so you're not just focusing on problems. At the same time, we have a suite of unbelievable problems . . . bearing down on a global scale and intergenerational reach. We need to organize partly around those. They are one and the same project. People forget who can. And there are too many vulnerable populations who are not afforded the luxury of forgetting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paula Salvio is a professor of education at the University of New Hampshire. Her teaching and scholarly interests include studies in psychoanalysis and education, feminist theory, life writing practices, and media and public engagement. She is the author of *Anne Sexton: Teacher of Weird Abundance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); *Love's Return: Psychoanalytic Essays on Early Childhood, Teaching, and Learning*, with Gail Boldt (New York: Routledge, 2006); and numerous essays and book chapters. She is currently an Education and Culture Faculty Scholar at the University of New Hampshire's Sustainability Institute. In this role, she works with faculty on designing projects that bring the knowledge and creative inquiry of the humanities to studies in sustainability. Her most recent book, "The 'Story-Takers': Public Pedagogy, Nonviolent Protest, and Italy's Contemporary Resistance against the Mafia," will be published in 2015 with the University of Toronto Press.