In May, Stanford grabbed headlines by announcing a billion dollar gift to launch a new School of Sustainability. There hasn't been much written about the details of Stanford's effort, or about what other schools are doing along similar lines. There's little in the way of systematic information, but there does seem to be a lot of ferment in the area.

I want to begin by lamenting the lack of systematic information. A lot has been written about the efforts of universities to clean up their own carbon emissions. There's also extensive writing about how to design sustainability curriculums. I couldn't find anything that simply listed sustainability or environmental studies colleges, let alone assessing them in a systematic way. More surprisingly, our research librarians found a lot on teaching of sustainability but nothing that really filled this gap. As a result, I'm limited to some impressionistic observations.

Arizona State University launched the first U.S. school of sustainability in 2006. The website isn't very informative about the sustainability school, but it seems to be akin to a medium-sized department, with something around thirty of its own faculty. Notably, other departments like Ecology remain separate. For example, the Department of Conservation Biology and Ecology is in the School of Life Sciences.

Stanford's effort is much more ambitious. Of course, ASU's would undoubtedly be too if someone had given them a billion dollars. That being said — and for someone at Berkeley, saying this is painful — Stanford's plans are really impressive. The School will incorporate the existing departments that cover geology, environmental engineering, and energy science and engineering. It will add new departments in oceans and environmental behavior, environment & ecosystems, climate science, and global environmental policy. The School will also include the Woods Institute for the Environment and some other existing programs.

According to the Washington Post, the School "will be housed in multiple buildings with rooftop gardens on a new Sustainability Commons area on the west side of campus, with 90 existing faculty members expected to be joined by an additional 60 new professors over the next decade." Even though it sounds like a fair chunk of the money will go for posh new buildings rather than academic substance, Stanford's hiring plans have real significance.

Other leading private universities seem to be making efforts of their own. Columbia has established a new Climate School. The website is pretty uninformative about what exactly the School does. However, a description of the School stresses its

leadership role on campus:

> “If climate is part of the curricula and research programs of so many parts of Columbia, you might ask ‘Why do we need a climate school?’ At present, we do not have central, strategically focused coordinating structures and mechanisms for developing education, research, technology and policy hubs linked to climate. The Climate School will provide that. Different schools contribute in their own very significant way but the university needs to strategize about what we should do next, how to develop a new initiative, what degrees will be needed and who we should recruit.”

Harvard has taken a different approach to this leadership function. It has established a new Vice Provost for Climate and Sustainability. It remains to be seen how successful that effort will be.

For better or worse, Berkeley and undoubtedly many other schools have relied much more on bottom-up initiatives within existing academic structures, with the leadership role being taken by individual faculty, departments, and deans. In my next post, I’ll talk about the possible advantages of creating new academic units.

In the meantime, all I can say is, “Congratulations, Stanford. I hate you.”