In my last post, I wrote about universities like Stanford that are creating new programs in sustainability. Stanford’s move may inspire others to follow. There are pros and cons, but it seems inevitable that the organization of universities will ultimately take account of one of the biggest problems facing humanity.

Administrative reorganizations, whether in government, business, or the academy, are always difficult and costly, often taking years before the rearranged units gel into a new unit. Even if a sustainability school is going to recruit additional faculty and staff, there are real administrative costs in launching such a program, not to mention financial ones.

Are these costs worthwhile? Here are the pros and cons.

Intellectual Coherence.

I’ll talk about some more mundane considerations next, but the fundamental issue is really whether there’s enough commonality among people like energy economists, conservation biologists, and civil/environmental engineers to make it useful to put them and their students under one roof.

Just because they are studying different aspects of the same thing doesn’t automatically mean they have a lot in common. Music, acoustic design, sonar engineering, the neurology of hearing, and speech therapy all involve sounds, but combining them into a School for the Study of Sound probably wouldn’t accomplish much.

Sustainability issues have many interconnections, however. Students who are interested in conservation biology may often be interested in other issues like air pollution; they may also seek jobs that address sustainability as a broad topic. More fundamentally, sustainability problems are interconnected and lend themselves to interdisciplinary study. Ecology and conservation biology are an example: climate change will have a huge impact on ecology, but shifts in ecology (especially tropical rainforests) also impact climate change.

Sending a Message.

Reorganizations signal that a university is serious about sustainability is a field of study. As an example of a *non*-credible signal, consider a university president’s

speech about the importance of research and teaching on sustainability, a prime example of what economists call cheap talk. Having a more credible signal can be useful to a wide range of audiences: students considering colleges, faculty looking for job opportunities, and donors who care about the issue. The effect on donors isn’t inconsequential. From Stanford’s point of view, creating a new sustainability school is well worthwhile even if the only effect is to bring in a billion dollars from John Doerr and make it possible to hire a lot of new faculty.

Education and Planning.

Creating an environmental or sustainability school also provides organization that makes it easier for students with an interest in the field to understand options. It also makes things easier for donors who want to support something in the general area but don’t have a clear sense of specifics. On the administrative side, having a school provides an institutional framework for thinking in a coherent way about the university’s faculty hiring, teaching, and fundraising in the area. That seems to be the emphasis in Columbia’s new Climate School, for instance.

Research.

Putting sustainability researchers from different fields in closer proximity is likely to spur interdisciplinary research. In my view, at least, less intellectual siloing would be a very positive change. Moreover, having a Dean whose mission is to promote sustainability research can help coordinate larger grant applications. It also creates a sustainability champion in battles for scarce resources such as faculty slots.

Breaking Across Existing Structures.

Whether it’s worth pulling various academic efforts are ultimately depends on how strongly they’re connected. These connections are especially important in the environmental area, particularly in connection with climate. Human societies and technologies, ecological systems, and atmospheric and oceanic systems are tightly interconnected.

Universities are going to have to figure out new ways of dealing with the interconnections, which will mean finding ways to break across current academic structures.

There’s more than one way of doing this. A new School or College like Stanford’s is one route. Or the reorganization could take place at the central administration, with the creation of a new provost position like Harvard’s. A final option is some kind of interdisciplinary institute that has its own administration and pulls together students and faculty from across campus.

The one thing that seems clear is that a token effort won’t accomplish anything. Regardless of the form of the sustainability effort, it has to have real resources behind it in order to accomplish anything. Whether universities follow Stanford’s route or not, however, they are ultimately going to have to rise to the occasion as humanity faces the challenges of a planet in crisis.