

## Chapter 25

# Using Accreditation to Foster Education for Sustainability in Higher Education: The Implementation of the *Peace with Creation* Project at Eastern Mennonite University

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### ABSTRACT

*Education for sustainability in higher education often faces numerous financial and institutional barriers. One overlooked mechanism for the promotion of education for sustainability is accreditation requirements. This chapter studies Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), a Christian liberal arts university accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which took advantage of this mechanism by choosing education for sustainability as the topic for one of its accreditation requirements, the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). EMU's QEP, Peace with Creation, builds on grassroots efforts and focuses on infusing education for sustainability throughout the undergraduate curriculum. Challenges faced along the path to implementation of the plan included confusion over the definition and scope of sustainability, early fatigue and cynicism by the student body, and uncertainty as to how the now well-supported plan would mesh with other sustainability efforts on campus. Three years into implementation, it has become clear that the accreditation mandate has significantly advanced education for sustainability at EMU, and it is evident that accreditation can apply powerful leverage for integrating education for sustainability into an institutional framework.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Like most campuses across the country, Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) saw a renewed emphasis on sustainability (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987) in its campus life during the past decade. But how does an institution build on its own mission and values to integrate education for sustainability (President's Council on Sustainable Development [PCSD], 1996) in an authentic manner into its curriculum and campus culture? And when do grassroots efforts at institutional change grow to such a height that they can withstand, and even thrive, by becoming part of a top-down, institutionalized process? EMU is in the midst of a five-year journey that may provide answers to these questions. Grassroots efforts to increase sustainability practices and teaching at EMU were transformed when reaffirmation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges ([SACSCOC], 2012) required a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). The campus community seized the opportunity to develop a QEP focused on sustainability, *"Peace with Creation: Sustainability from an Anabaptist Perspective"* (Eastern Mennonite University, 2010).

In this chapter, we will first describe our process for developing the plan, from selecting sustainability as the topic to its approval and recognition by the accrediting body as an innovative and model QEP. Next, we will provide an overview of the plan and describe the impacts of its implementation so far. Finally, we will share some of the challenges that have arisen and our responses to them, as well as what we have learned regarding institutional change and sustainability in higher education.

## ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Founded in 1917 in Harrisonburg, Virginia, Eastern Mennonite University is a small, Christian liberal arts university with an enrollment of approximately 1500 students (900 undergraduate and 600 graduate, seminary, and adult degree completion students). EMU is a leader among faith-based universities, offering undergraduate, graduate and seminary degrees that emphasize peacebuilding, creation care, experiential learning, service and cross-cultural engagement. Although not exclusively Mennonite in student enrollment or personnel, the institution maintains a strong affiliation with Mennonite Church USA (Mennonite Church USA, 1995). Mennonite Church USA is one of the Anabaptist Christian denominations (Becker, 2008), all of which include among their central tenets peace, justice and reconciliation with all creation (Finger, 2000).

EMU is regionally accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges and accreditation was most recently reaffirmed in 2010. One of the requirements for reaffirmation was the development of a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), "a carefully designed course of action that addresses a well-defined and focused topic or issue related to enhancing student learning and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution" (SACSCOC, 2011, p. 39). Note that the specific focus or issue of the QEP is not prescribed by the SACSCOC but is rather determined by each institution based on its mission and educational goals.

EMU's mission statement focuses on the unique identity of the institution and its task of education. Specifically, the statement summarizes the fundamental Anabaptist values of the institution, highlighting a commitment to "care for God's creation." This mission-driven commitment to creation care is the foundation of EMU's QEP, *Peace with Creation: Sustainability from an Anabaptist Perspective*.

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