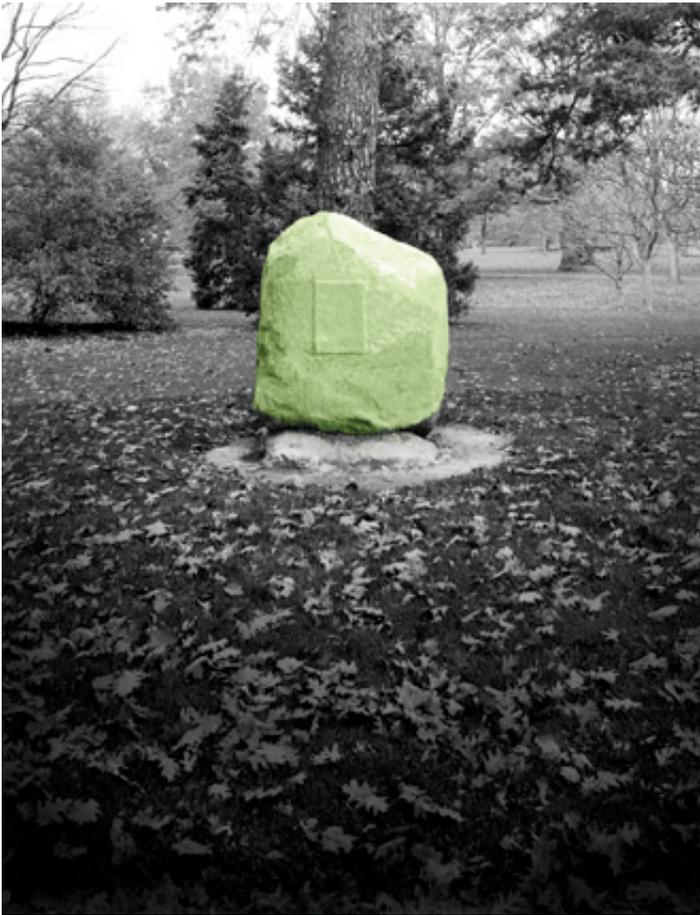


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[The Oberlin Project]

What do we stand for now?



(photo by Kristina Deckert)

by David Orr

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Historian Geoffrey Blodgett once captured the ethos of oberlin in three words: "stubborn moral idealism." That legacy is evident, notably, in Oberlin's leadership in race-blind admissions and coeducation. In the 21st century, moral issues will be far more daunting and difficult than ever before, but mendacity, confusion, evasion, and paralysis are rampant in high places.

In these circumstances how does our legacy inform our future? Will the college once again be in the forefront of leadership in higher education on humanity's two greatest challenges? The first is the preservation of a

habitable planet — the sine qua non for all other moral, political, economic, and social issues. The second is the establishment of a fair, decent, resilient, prosperous, and durable global society. What does leadership on these issues mean for college curriculum, management, operations, and finances?

In the summer of 2009, the college reconceptualized and joined four otherwise disparate objectives (described in greater detail below) as an overarching initiative, the Oberlin Project. In affiliation with the city, we aim to revitalize the local economy, eliminate carbon emissions, restore local agriculture and forestry, and use the entire effort as an educational laboratory relevant to virtually every discipline. The era of cheap fossil fuels is over. The era of rapid climate change is upon us. We live in an economically challenged region. Given those three facts, there is no question that we should do such things. However, there is a question of how we should go about doing them. We can be reactionary and do them as a series of disjointed, one-off, overly expensive ad hoc responses to external crises, supply interruptions, and volatile prices. Or we can envision and create an integrated, well-thought-out system in which the parts reinforce the resilience and prosperity of the entire region. The latter choice is the Oberlin Project.

The specific responsibilities of the college in the project are those primarily of providing the leadership required to conceptualize and launch the effort, rebuilding the Green Arts District as one of the primary economic engines for the downtown economy, and eliminating its own carbon emissions — a goal to which it is committed as an early signatory to the Presidents' Climate Commitment (2006) and as one of 19 members of the Clinton Climate Initiative (2010). The larger effort will be driven by partnerships between the city, the college, private investors, local corporations, and regional development agencies. It will be funded in the decade ahead by a combination of private investment, state funding, new market tax credits, federal support, philanthropy, and savings from increased efficiency in the use of energy, materials, and water.

We have a useful model for the Oberlin Project in the creation of the Adam Joseph Lewis Center. Begun in 1995, we aimed to build the first substantially green building in higher education as the home for the Environmental Studies Program. The goals for the 250 participating students and the 20 members of a remarkable design group were to join all the parts of the building (materials, energy use, water, and landscape) into a model of integrated design and a laboratory for education and research in a one-acre microcosm, and in the process "cause no ugliness in the world, human or ecological, somewhere else or at some later time." We intended to make not just places where education happened, but a place that taught by design, operations, and by the way it evolved over time. We could have aimed lower, conformed to conventional wisdom, built cheaply, avoided risk, and said nothing of importance to our students and to the wider world. But we chose to do otherwise.

Sixteen years later the Lewis Center is widely acknowledged as the best environmental studies facility in higher education and home to the best environmental studies program anywhere. Among other awards, it has been acknowledged as "one of 30 milestone buildings in the 20th century" by the U.S. Department of Energy, and in a 2010 survey published in the AIA magazine, *Architect*, as "the most important green building of the last 30 years." The Lewis Center was funded by donors otherwise "unlikely to give to the college."

The collateral benefits of the Lewis Center included increased student yields, national and international recognition, an enhanced reputation for leadership, a larger pool of donors, and the creation of an unprecedented laboratory in ecological problem solving for students and faculty alike. It opened the way for higher campus building standards later manifest in the Kohl and Kahn buildings. It also showed that in a larger perspective the right thing to do is often the smartest thing to do and that a policy that is reflexively averse to risk can sometimes avert opportunity as well.

With that example as background, what would it mean for Oberlin once again to step forward and how would that actually transform the college and the city?

Imagine Oberlin in the year 2025 with a vibrant 24 / 7 downtown featuring local foods, arts, and music, powered by energy efficiency and sunlight. Imagine arriving from Hopkins airport on a light-rail coming through a 20,000 acre greenbelt of farms and forests that terminates close to a new, deep green hotel with a cuisine featuring local foods. Imagine your reunion in 2025 held in an adjacent solar powered conference center. Imagine a Green Arts District in which great college strengths in music, the arts, and drama are joined to those in the sciences as the backdrop for performances, exhibitions, lectures, and an ongoing conversation on the most important issues on the human agenda, all having to do with whether and how civilization might endure and flourish in radically altered biophysical conditions.



Look deeper and you'll discover an economy designed for the future, with thriving local businesses that sustainably provide renewable energy, foods, materials, and services; a city with the lowest unemployment and poverty rates of any mid-western city; a college curriculum founded on the thoroughly liberal belief that no student in any field should graduate without knowing how the Earth works as a physical system and why that is important for their lives and careers.

Imagine Oberlin as a perennial front-runner in national rankings and media headlines, celebrated for its role as the anchor institution that led in the effort to create a model of post-cheap-fossil-fuel prosperity, economic resilience, and "full-spectrum sustainability" that integrates education, agriculture, renewable energy, economic revitalization, green building, policy and law, and community development into a system in which each of the parts reinforces the resilience of the larger region. Imagine a college and city collaborating to launch a renaissance of possibilities in a world running short of applied hope.

That vision grows from Oberlin College's historic commitment to calibrate its educational and institutional priorities to advance human dignity, social justice, and equal access for all. In the 1830s, the college began to

grow into its historic commitment to fairness and human decency. Over time it became clear that this was not first and foremost a financial issue, but a moral one. The majority of the founders of this institution saw what many others did not or would not see. They were courageous in a time of moral confusion and political evasion, and we have lived on that moral capital ever since.

Where Are We Now?

Despite great national progress in areas of racial and gender equality, issues of justice are becoming more complicated and portentous than anyone could have imagined in 1833. We've entered what the editors of the *New York Times* and *The Economist* have called the "Anthropocene," an age when the actions of seven billion humans have become, for better or worse, the dominant force changing the Earth. The most important fact in that transition is the permanent and global effects of burning fossil fuels. We are not just warming the Earth, but progressively destabilizing virtually everything on the planet. One result, of many, is that people — disproportionately the poor and women — are now dying because of droughts, more intense storms, heat, and rising seas caused by rapid climate change — unprecedented ecological changes that will threaten food supply, water, and human health and thereby social cohesion, prosperity, and political stability. The World Health Organization has put the number of annual deaths related to global warming at 150,000 and predicts that the number will double by 2030. In addition, estimates of numbers of people who will become "climate refugees" range upwards of 250 million by 2050. Such things are not distant possibilities, but presaged in daily headlines. So far this year — in the United States alone — we have experienced record heat and drought from Arizona to Florida, unprecedented floods in the Mississippi Valley, larger wildfires in Arizona and Texas than any in recorded memory, and swarms of tornadoes across the South unequalled in numbers and destruction.

At the founding of Oberlin, the big issues on the nation's agenda had to do with justice, human dignity, and fairness. They will remain foremost in the 21st century, but are now magnified many times over by planetary destabilization. But for most people that reality is an abstraction until its effects are experienced directly as personal suffering and loss.

An Oberlin Response

One difference between the issues of justice at our founding and those ahead has to do with the longevity and complexity of the problem. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) from the combustion of fossil fuels will stay in the atmosphere for thousands of years and so cast a long and deepening shadow over all future generations and over the entire web of life on which they will depend. We are now in the rapids of human history. The Oberlin Project is an effort by the city and college to create an integrated response to these challenges. It is an umbrella term that includes six concrete and very practical goals:

[1] Develop a 13-acre Green Arts District at the U.S. Green Building Council Platinum level as a driver for community economic revitalization. The district will include restoration of the Allen Memorial Art Museum (completed) and Hall Auditorium along with a new hotel and restaurant, business complex, and, possibly, a culinary school, jazz club, conference center, and center for innovation and ecological design. The major goals in the redevelopment of the district are to create local employment, income growth, and community development as well as to construct a streetscape that will serve as an exciting gateway to the downtown and to the college. In the process, we will set a new benchmark for community-scale green development;

[2] Create new business ventures in energy efficiency and solar deployment, food and agriculture, and the sustainable use of local resources. In the transition to carbon-neutral sustainability, we propose a transformation of the local economy that involves creating and expanding locally owned businesses, fostering

a prosperous downtown economy, and encouraging widespread ownership of new enterprises to spread wealth throughout the city while increasing our economic and financial resilience;

[3] Shift the city and college to renewable energy sources, radically improve efficiency, sharply reduce our carbon emissions, and improve our economy in the process. We presently spend roughly \$15 million each year on electricity and natural gas—twice as much as we would need to spend if we were as efficient as is now economically advantageous and technologically feasible. We propose to reduce energy use by improving efficiency (saving millions of dollars), building a local renewable-energy economy that creates jobs and ownership, and growing the local economy while buffering Oberlin from rising energy prices and sudden cost spikes;

[4] Establish a 20,000-acre greenbelt and develop a robust local foods economy the local farm economy, create new employment opportunities in farming (including summer jobs for teens) and food processing, while improving the taste and nutritional quality of food we eat;

[5] Create an educational alliance between the college, the Oberlin schools, Lorain County Joint Vocational School, and Lorain County Community College focused on education appropriate to issues of sustainability. The transition to sustainability and a more resilient economy poses large challenges to educators at all levels. What does the rising generation need to know to live well and purposefully in the decades ahead? How should they learn to think in terms of systems and interrelatedness and extend their time horizon? Such questions are pertinent to education at all levels and all educational institutions. In the search for answers and educational methods appropriate to our challenges, we intend to help teachers and faculty members break out of the proverbial silos within educational institutions and help institutions cooperate to transcend those that separate different kinds of educational institutions;

[6] Replicate the project at varying scales and in different regions through a national network of diverse communities and organizations (The National Sustainable Communities Coalition) with similar goals. To this goal we are collaborating with other projects and communities across the United States that are taking a similar approach by integrating food, agriculture, energy, sustainable economic development, education, public policy, community engagement, health, and transportation.

Our intention is to integrate these goals in a way that each of the parts reinforces the prosperity, resilience, and health of the larger community. To that end we have organized the community into working teams including economic development, education, energy, policy, agriculture, community, and data collection and analysis.

Education

The Oberlin Project represents both an educational challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge for faculty, administrators, and trustees to understand how the Earth works as a physical system and the connections between the biosphere and college curriculum, operations, and finances and to recalibrate things accordingly. Can an institution that purports to advance learning itself learn in relation to rapidly changing biospheric, climatic, economic, political, and social conditions?

On the other hand, the project is an opportunity to join the theoretical and practical sides of learning — head, hands, and hearts — in the remaking and revitalization of Oberlin in a different era. No department or discipline need be outside this effort. The goal of building a sustainable, inclusive, and fair economy, for example, is an opportunity to test and perhaps rethink basic assumptions of economics, business management, and investment for the long term relative to environmental and human health. The collaboration of city and college is a case study in applied politics, public policy, and leadership in a small town. The need

for data collection, analysis, and feedback will require collaboration among several disciplines and will include tracking biophysical flows (such as nitrogen and carbon), economic data (investment and income), and public attitudes and knowledge, and developing real-time feedback systems to enhance learning and improve management decisions at all levels. Teaching the capacity for foresight and the skills of systems analysis involves all of the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. The transformation of city government and college administration is a case study in organizational theory. The need to understand community values and opinions, as well as improve leadership throughout the community, poses important issues for sociology and psychology. Documenting and analyzing the transformation now underway is an opportunity for Oberlin writers, artists, bloggers, and filmmakers. The larger background conditions of global population growth, species loss, conflict, and poverty concern regional studies, politics, and world history. The awareness that things don't always work out as we might wish is the stuff of literature, philosophy, and classics leading to a deeper understanding of what Spanish philosopher Miguel Unamuno once called "the tragic sense of life." Rebuilding local soils and forests for the greenbelt is ecology, biology, and chemistry. The shift away from reliance on fossil energy to improved efficiency and renewable energy includes physics, ecology, economics, and the psychology of energy users. Consideration of how we might pay for sustainability is in the realm of finance and economics. Design and construction of buildings and facilities in the Green Arts District is art, architecture, and engineering. And the collaboration of the sciences and the arts in the new venue of the Green Arts District is a challenge to our creativity and capacity to reach across disciplines to cultivate a deeper dialogue about the largest issues humans have ever faced.

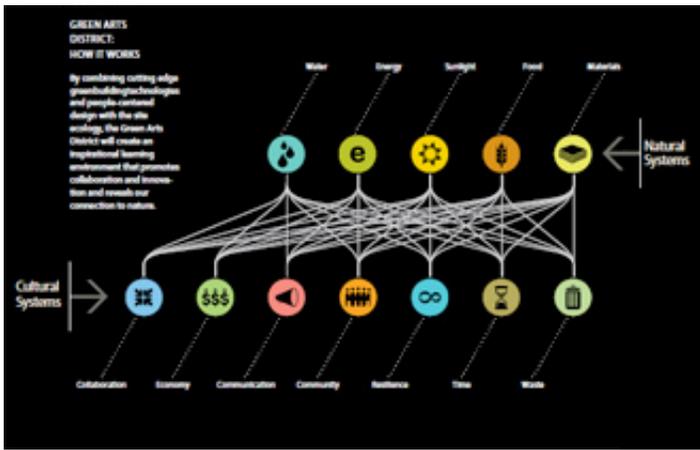
The Oberlin Project represents an opportunity to enliven curriculum, develop courses and research that transcend disciplines, and build tangible connections to the big issues of the 21st century but at a scale that is comprehensible while being large enough to be important beyond Oberlin. It is an opportunity to bridge the chasm between ideas and practical application and to engage students in solving practical problems and raise their sights to a farther horizon.

So, what is the Oberlin Project? It is, in fact, many things depending on one's vantage point.

- To prospective students it will mean a college with an unprecedented commitment to the most pressing issues of our times;
- To current students it will mean a vibrant and exciting downtown and an educational laboratory;
- To the faculty it will mean better facilities; and
- unparalleled opportunities to engage students in a broad array of issues that pertain to virtually every department and discipline;
- To Oberlin merchants it will mean a more prosperous downtown economy;
- For Oberlin citizens it will mean increased opportunities for good work in a healthier community with more physical activity, wholesome food, cleaner air and water, and fewer toxic chemicals;
- To Senator Sherrod Brown and Representative Marcy Kaptur it will be a model of sustainable economic development applicable throughout Ohio;
- To the Clinton Climate Initiative it will be an early example of urban prosperity without fossil fuels;
- To architects, engineers, and designers it will be the first significant model of integrated design in the United States;
- To those concerned about security, broadly defined, it will be a community-scale model of resilience that reduces vulnerability to outside disruption whether from malice, technological accidents, or rapid climate change; and
- For future citizens of Oberlin and the wider Oberlin family the fact that this small community once again stood up when it counted will be a source of pride.

The Oberlin Project is, of course, all of these things. But most important, it is a renewed commitment to make the world more fair and decent while preserving a beautiful and livable Earth. And if we don't stand for such things, what do we stand for?

What Has Been Done So Far:



(graphic by BNIM)

How far have we come?

Since the launch in the summer of 2009, we have:

- Raised \$9 million in grants, gifts, and commitments from 14 foundations and individual donors;
- Organized the community into 10 teams working such issues as energy, education, policy, civic engagement, economic development;
- Established a Friends of the Oberlin Project group with a goal of raising more than \$1 million over the next five years;
- Pursued a power purchase agreement to deploy 2 MW of solar electricity;
- Organized a faculty team to track economic, social, and physical data and provide community-scale, real-time feedback with Lucid Design, Inc. (a company founded by Oberlin students and faculty);
- Completed a \$1.1 million Department of Energy-funded study on the regional transition to energy efficiency and renewable energy;
- Established a downtown office in the East College Street complex—a \$17 million LEED-gold facility created by three Oberlin alumni;
- Hired a managing director, Bryan Stubbs, who has assumed responsibility for day-to-day management of the project, including integration of the 10 community teams;
- Created a website and larger communications strategy for the project.



Allen Memorial Art Museum

In addition, the college has completed a \$12 million LEED-gold renovation of the Allen Memorial Art Museum, which anchors the northwest corner of the Green Arts District.

The city, in turn, has adopted an energy plan that will eliminate 85 percent of utility carbon emissions from electrical generation by 2014 along with a partnership with the Vermont Energy Investment Corporation to improve energy efficiency throughout the community. The city has also recently completed an initial Climate Action Plan that predicts city-wide reductions of carbon emissions of 50 percent or more by 2015. The Oberlin City School District has authorized BNIM Architects to draft a conceptual study for a new, green, consolidated public school building north of the Green Arts District. The Oberlin Public Library is currently working on improvements to lighting and heating systems that will reduce its energy consumption and carbon footprint.

What's Next

Among our goals for the next 12 months are to:

- Complete the site plan for the Green Arts District;
- Meet a \$5 million challenge gift toward a new hotel at the LEED-platinum level;
- Complete a land assessment for greenbelt planning and a regional food plan;
- Develop a series of short films documenting the project;
- Launch several new businesses;
- Create a new standard for assessing progress toward sustainability that incorporates physical, economic, and social data into easily understood metrics and graphic form for community-wide feedback;
- Complete a community-wide educational plan across four institutional partners that prepares young people to meet the challenges and opportunities ahead;
- Develop a special issue of the journal *Solutions* on the Oberlin Project for fall 2012;
- Complete an economic development plan with a community development bank and a business incubator; and
- Complete a comprehensive community outreach strategy including broad community and student involvement in the project.

Suggested Reading

Stephen Gardener, *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

The National Research Council, *America's Climate Choices*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Science Press, 2011.

Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2010.

David W. Orr, *Down to the Wire: Confronting Climate Collapse*, Oxford University Press, 2009.

David Orr, John Petersen, Cindy Frantz, and Rumi Shamin (eds), Special Issue of *Solutions*, "The Oberlin Project" (forthcoming, 2012).

Aaron Wildavsky, *Leadership in a Small Town*, New Brunswick: Transaction Press, 1964/2004.



(photo by John Seyfried)

Professor David W. Orr is the author of seven books and the recipient of seven honorary degrees. His many awards include the Millennium Leadership award from Global Green, the Bioneers award, the National Wildlife Federation Leadership award, and a Lyndhurst Prize acknowledging "persons of exceptional moral character, vision, and energy." When not working on the Oberlin Project, Orr enjoys spending time with his four grandchildren.

Academic Leadership for the 21st Century