

Viewing choices through a sustainable lens

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Sustainability is a human decision — a responsibility that relies on good information and how we choose to use it — according to George Basile, a senior sustainability scientist at Arizona State University, who made that point in this month's cover story in *Sustainability: The Journal of Record*.

Reframing [sustainability](#) as a human decision challenge, rather than "some version of people, planet and profit coming together," was one of the subjects discussed by Basile in the "On the Record" feature with journal editor Jamie Devereaux.

"Sustainability is something that humans want. We want a future that is sustainable for us, so it is a human construct.... Therefore, humans to a certain extent are in charge of making that happen, or not," said Basile, a professor of practice at ASU's School of Sustainability.

"As you frame (sustainability) as a decision challenge, you turn it into a communications challenge, too, because decisions are made up of dialogues, whether they are internal dialogues or cultural narratives," he said.

"The decisions we make are based on the stories we tell ourselves, the information we have, the conversations we have, and ultimately how actions are fed back into those conversations," Basile said. "So having the knowledge and the information out there that can be trusted and getting it to the right people becomes critical to how sustainability is framed — what sorts of information and knowledge we have to act on."

Editor Devereaux came away from the Q&A with a renewed focus in the prospect of sustainability.

"One point in particular that struck me was Professor Basile's view on sustainability as a human construct, a [human decision](#). This is really just a grounded view of sustainability and he put it in a very accessible way for both me and the audience," Devereaux said.

"He went on to say that viewing sustainability in this way 'puts the responsibility squarely in our hands.' I think this is a great way to look at sustainability — not a government policy, not an activist movement, but a decision made by people," she said.

Basile, who received a doctorate in biophysics from the University of California, Berkeley, was the R&D head of The Natural Step, an accelerator of global sustainability. He has led his own consultancy, serves on the boards of nonprofit organizations and new ventures — such as the ASU student-led social network and sustainability start-up eEcosphere — and advises Fortune 500 clients on sustainable business practices. He also is a co-editor of the three-volume set, "The Business of Sustainability: Trends, Policies, Practices, and Stories of Success."

That varied experience led Basile to ASU's Global Institute of Sustainability where he is now part of a team developing an Executive Master's for Sustainability Leadership (EMSL) program that will prepare professionals to significantly advance sustainability practices in the workplace.

This type of executive master's degree is one of the Rob and Melani Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiatives being created at ASU to develop and deliver real-world solutions for sustainability challenges in diverse geographical, political and cultural settings. Such activity at a research one university like ASU prompted Sustainability's editor to ask

Basile his view of the current sustainability field within higher education.

Basile responded: "Sustainability has permeated most of our big institutions, and that is certainly true at the university level. It has been interesting to see new efforts emerging specifically around sustainability, and also sustainability being embedded into existing fields, like engineering and other areas.

"Students can either go headlong at sustainability as a new field, or they can bring it into more classic studies and efforts," he said.

And, universities are central to communicating information and knowledge about sustainability, according to Basile.

"This is a place where knowledge is shared, where people do have trust, and where trusted information comes out," he said in the article.

In describing a main opportunity for sustainability education, Basile noted that "sustainability forces us to look at the world and say what is working and what is not. When we have a planet where the majority of people are outside the global economy and where we have large numbers of people without access to meeting their basic needs, and where we do not have good solutions for that, sustainability forces us to ask: How do we solve that through decisions and our institutions?"

Basile also discussed in the article viewing choices through a sustainability lens, notably with students' entrepreneurship and innovation. "It really does open up new ways to think about things. A new perspective combined with a better understanding of reality, combined with permission to act and resources to act, you get the ingredients for innovation," he said.

"Sustainability, by giving us a better lens to view the world through and giving us a better picture of reality, really gives not just education," said Basile, "but all institutions the opportunity to innovate and be creative in improving themselves to meet the sustainability challenges we face."

More information: More about *Sustainability: The Journal of Record* is at www.liebertpub.com/sus

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