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Planetary Stewards

The role of liberal education in preparing students to protect the earth

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The scope and scale of the challenges humanity faces today are unprecedented. The disruption of natural systems, such as the climate system, in addition to the growing tensions within human systems, expressed in multidimensional inequities and intergenerational conflicts, undermine people's chances to achieve well-being. We live in an era characterized by the impacts of a single force: human activity. Hence, atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and others coined the term *Anthropocene* at the beginning of the twenty-first century to describe our current epoch and acknowledge humanity's influence on the animate and inanimate world.

Complex dynamics characterize natural and human systems. Once these systems reach certain tipping points—such as a specific degree of global warming or a critical number of people who engage in certain behaviors, like favoring a personal car over public transportation—they can rapidly and potentially irreversibly change their properties. Since the last glacial period, the earth's natural systems have, for millennia, been in a dynamic but relatively stable state. This period, called the Holocene, has provided humans and other life forms with conditions to thrive. Currently, though, with multiple environmental crises unfolding, we risk reaching tipping points that could trigger profound changes in our living conditions with unforeseeable consequences for planetary habitability.

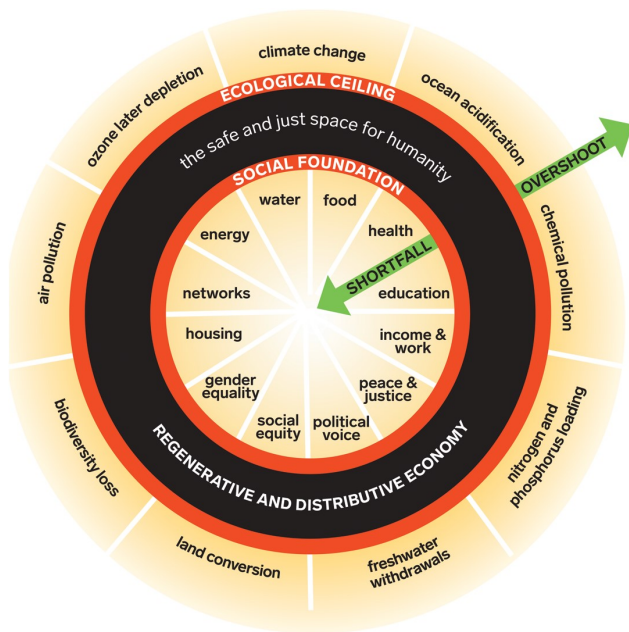
The concept of planetary health sheds light on these unfolding crises and their relationship with well-being while seeking solutions to address them. Planetary health encompasses the notion of health contingent on and inextricably linked with thriving natural systems. It further emphasizes the importance of the political, economic, and cultural systems that we design and shape in determining our health and well-being. Planetary health as a field and movement builds on preceding paradigms such as eco-health and One Health and places immense importance on Indigenous knowledge systems, which emphasize the interconnectedness of humans and nature. As the field grows, higher education efforts all over the world are harnessing the potential of the planetary health framework and placing planetary stewardship at the heart of learning.

Not only a theoretical concept but an emerging field of scientific inquiry, a powerful frame, and a social movement, planetary health has gained traction with educational institutions, health professionals, and other groups over the past five to ten years. As economist Kate Raworth suggests in a 2012 Oxfam discussion paper, the aspirational concept of a safe operating space for humanity that functions within planetary boundaries and has a strong, equitable, and just social foundation depicts the vision of planetary health.

In 2020, the Planetary Health Alliance, a global network of nongovernmental, educational, and policy organizations, created an educational framework that enshrines the principles and perspectives of planetary health to guide curricular and institutional transformation across disciplines and geographies. Instead of a prescriptive list of competencies, the framework seeks to acknowledge the values and inquiries that underpin planetary health education. For example, the framework looks at the why, or affective (anthropogenic changes on a planetary scale); the what, or representative (the Anthropocene era and health—including human, animal, and ecosystem health); and the how, or strategic (systems thinking, or a transdisciplinary approach to understanding complex phenomena, and social movement building). Planetary health education aims to foster learners' factual knowledge while nurturing values, practical skills, and a sense of self-efficacy to appreciate the need for and to drive societal transformation as has been described by the authors of the Association for Medical Education in Europe's consensus statement on "planetary health and education for sustainable healthcare." Planetary health education aims to enable learners from all backgrounds and educational levels to protect and restore planetary health through transformative action. This includes activities to decrease one's ecological footprint, such as adopting a primarily plant-based diet, and, more important, actions to increase one's political handprint, through advocacy activities like taking part in demonstrations and promoting sustainability in the workplace, such as supporting environmentally friendly policies for how waste is handled.

To help achieve sustainable human behaviors in line with planetary health, higher education will have to challenge and restructure prevailing orthodoxies within institutions, including critically analyzing power asymmetries (in line with the decolonizing higher education movement and anti-racist approaches, which examine what is taught, who teaches, and who accesses education). The transformation must also include structural reforms in the knowledge production process, higher education's role in social and environmental justice, and the democratization of higher education. Colleges and universities need to move away from the

idea that education exists to transmit knowledge and skills for the sake of employability. Instead, higher education must emphasize perspective transformation, personal growth, and reflexivity, such as the ability to critically analyze one's values and worldviews.



Having a strong and just social foundation and remaining within ecological boundaries are both key to creating a safe and just operating space for all humans now and in the future. (Source: Oxfam)

Given the breadth of our common challenges, institutions of higher education have a lot to contribute. They are strategically located at the intersection of knowledge production, innovation, movement building for social change, and community impact and can therefore significantly contribute to what has been called the Great Transition—a comprehensive shift in how human beings interact with each other and nature. An essential approach toward reaching this vision includes the formation of a critical mass of change agents we refer to as “planetary stewards,” based on the concept of planetary stewardship put forward by 126 Nobel Prize laureates in their 2021 statement “Our Planet, Our Future: An Urgent Call to Action.”

Planetary stewards can recognize the intertwined nature of our common challenges and seek to form a global community aware of our interdependency with each other and the systems around us. These stewards are action-oriented, seek to join and create movements, and focus on structural changes with intergenerational and interspecies justice in mind. They seek to support, protect, and regenerate the earth's natural systems while working toward the well-being of societies. They assume a moral responsibility toward planetary well-being. The idea of planetary stewards also expands on the Global Learning VALUE Rubric put forward by the American Association of Colleges and Universities and the role and virtues of global citizens that a liberal education seeks to develop.

Both planetary health and a liberal education aim to foster a set of norms and values in learners that guide individuals' actions to address shortcomings of current societal activities. Values and norms emerge and change through conversation, discussion, conflict with others, shared experiences of living in particular circumstances, and deeply moving emotional experiences. We envision planetary stewards to be starters of such conversations, empathetic and appreciative discussion partners, and role models for decreasing their environmental footprint while enhancing their activist handprint. They are human beings who possess the knowledge, skills, and value systems to drive the transformation of behavior, knowledge, and values in others needed at scale to shift societies' current trajectory toward planetary health.

Planetary habitability—the existence of favorable living conditions—is the ultimate determinant for a life of dignity to which everyone is entitled. Planetary stewards from diverse cultural backgrounds and settings can drive the emotional realization and formation of this shared value and hence help tip societies toward planetary health on a global scale. Higher education has the potential to not only accelerate this change but to play a defining role in providing the conditions in which the change agents that are urgently needed, the

planetary stewards, can thrive.

Illustration by Raymond Biesinger

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