

Sustainability and the ACUPCC

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It is clear that the environment in which America's colleges and universities do their work is encountering significant changes and challenges. These are financial and technological, social, and demographic, but of even greater import is the challenge of environmental degradation. Hence, the term sustainability has arisen and become increasingly pervasive in the educational facilities field.

Although the literal definition of sustainability refers to the ability to maintain a positive status or set of conditions over time, in the past two decades the concept of sustainability has emerged as an aspiration for society to embrace. In fact, sustainability cuts across all facets of human life, from environmental to economic, social to political. The work we engage in every day as educational facilities professionals is directly impacted by this movement.

A key area of impact is the move from traditional economic development to a new kind of development—sustainable development—defined as, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This definition has become the most commonly accepted meaning of what is now called sustainability. However, sustainability is not just about protecting the environment—it is also about finding ways to meet the basic needs of all current and future generations of humans.

For the first time in human history, the size and scale of the population and its technological and economic prowess have made humanity the pervasive and dominant force in the health and well-being of the earth and all its inhabitants. No

part of the earth is unaffected by humans, and the scale of our impact is growing exponentially. Furthermore, global warming, is leading to an unprecedented destabilization of the earth's climate. Global warming is a stark indication of the fact that humanity is out of sync with its life support system.

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Higher education's reaction has been to make exponential growth in distinct programs related specifically and more exclusively to the environmental dimension of sustainability. Educational facilities professionals have been on the forefront of this work, having incorporated numerous programs, projects, and services into their daily operations. Unfortunately, there are numerous facets and dimensions to the problems we face that will require a multi-disciplinary approach, a strategic focus, and bold leadership that pushes the limits of knowledge to go beyond what is possible now. Now we are at a crossroads. We need an unprecedented shift in the way we think and act. And the focus must be systemic and interdependent.

In the last 18 months there has been a significant shift in the thinking and commitment as evidenced by the launch of

the American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment (ACUPCC). The ACUPCC is a high-visibility effort to address global warming by garnering institutional commitments to neutralize greenhouse gas emissions, and accelerate the research and educational efforts of higher education to equip society to re-stabilize the earth's climate. To date there are nearly 500 signatories representing over 3 million students in 48 states, ranging from the largest public university to one of the smallest private colleges, a growing number of state university systems, and many community colleges.

These presidents believe leading society toward a low-carbon, less auto-dependent and circular production economy fits squarely into the educational, research, and public service missions of higher education. Indeed, no other institution in society has the influence, the critical mass, and the diversity of skills needed to successfully reverse global warming. Getting to climate neutrality may be the hardest thing that modern society will ever attempt. We will need new technologies, economic instruments, and a whole host of strategies for which the research capability of higher education is crucial. It will take vision, leadership, research, and higher education will need to become a model for society. The participating presidents are committing their institutions to create a comprehensive institutional action plan to move towards climate neutrality. Given the actions that need to occur to make this goal achievable across institutions, educational facilities professionals will and should play a critical role.

APPA will support this vital role by engaging a community of higher education leaders, experts in the field of sustainability, and facilities professionals in a dialogue about this sustainability imperative and its subsequent issues, actions, and approaches. We are happy to announce that Affiliated

Engineering, Inc. (AEI)—a major resource in sustainable energy and facility planning for colleges and universities—will sponsor these conversations at a conference in November.


The scope of this project is to engage in a discussion and distillation of the major issues surrounding the ACUPCC sustainability initiative and its impact on college and university facilities, and to better inform all educational facilities professionals on alternative ways to address carbon neutrality, climate issues, and greenhouse gases. By engaging a broad range of thought leaders, we will develop a better understanding of the actions needed to achieve climate neutrality as intended in the ACUPCC and identify best practices for incorporating sustainability concepts into the operating culture of the educational facilities organization.

APPA and AEI will synthesize these views and ideas in the form of a practical guide for meeting the goals of the Climate Commitment and achieving a more sustainable institution. We will support this work through webinars highlighting the tools and approaches outlined in this practical guide and will do our work in collaboration with other relevant higher education associations and the business community. We are also considering the opportunity to explore potential research topics for application and portability across all educational facilities. Creating new knowledge and/or synthesizing it into best practices that are useful to educational facilities professionals will ensure a greater understanding of sustainability, its future challenges and opportunities within the education marketplace.

We plan to offer a special track at the September 2008 Institute for Facilities Management, and a Users Conference in November to support the broader effort of sustainability whether one is represented as an ACUPCC signatory school or not. We believe all educational facilities professionals can use this type of content and focused work no matter what their institution's status with the ACUPCC.

The scope of such a project is multi-

faceted, will occur over multiple years, will require extensive support from the business community, and will require a long-term collaborative approach with other higher education associations. Yet, this important work will position our organization with other associations in the higher education community as an invaluable contributor to sustainability development. Moreover, this

ambitious project is critically important at this point in time for APPA to engage on behalf of its members. 

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