
Interview with Sallie Traxler

Executive Director of the Association of College and University Housing Officers

by Mary Reilly

This is the first in a series of interviews with HEASC members that we'll publish on occasion. I spoke with Sallie Traxler on July 25, 2007 to discuss ACUHO-I's actions and initiatives in regard to sustainability and how membership in HEASC has affected these efforts.

What does sustainability mean to ACUHO-I? In the context of ACUHO-I's work, operations, activities and membership, how does sustainability fit into your mission?

Sustainability is not part of ACUHO-I's formally stated mission right now. We're really still trying to "wrap our arms around it". We've taken a number of actions towards sustainability but have not yet created a clear, strategic goal. We'd like to bring this up with our board at the next meeting—I know that Norb Dunkel (president-elect of ACUHO-I's board) is very interested in making sustainability a board goal. We (Norb, Sallie and the ACUHO-I staff) are a bit ahead of the game in regard to sustainability—we need to bring our board up to speed.

Describe some of the sustainability initiatives or actions that have been undertaken by ACUHO-I.

Much of what we have done has been in our communications. We're beginning to weave threads into publications like *Talking Stick* (ACUHO-I's bi-monthly magazine) with articles and columns with a sustainability focus. We also just switched over to using recycled paper with post-consumer content for *Talking Stick*. It was already being printed using vegetable-based inks.

(NOTE: the May-June 2007 issue of *Talking Stick* included articles on sustainability by Tom Kimmerer of AASHE and Deb Rowe of the US Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development.)

At our annual conference this year, we used edible centerpieces on the tables and people loved it. We also gave out recycled cotton bags printed with a message so people would understand why we used them. And our conference program was printed on recycled paper with post-consumer content.

But probably the biggest thing that ACUHO-I has done with regard to sustainability is that we made it one of the defining concepts of our *21st Century Project**. All the architects had to look at sustainability as one of the components in their design. Projects like this are pushing our architects, manufacturers, suppliers, and housing staff to take sustainability into account. This, together with the Presidents Climate Commitment (ACUPCC) is allowing our members to walk, lock-step towards the same goals.

*Does ACUHO-I do any LEED** consulting?*

No, we don't currently do any LEED consulting but it is an interesting idea. I think would be useful to have a cross-association team that could partner to develop a database of LEED consultants. These endeavors (campus building) always involve a number of other associations—planners (SCUP), business officers (NACUBO), facilities (APPA) so it would make sense to have a joint effort on something like this.

What kind of challenges or barriers have you encountered in your sustainability efforts?

Lack of understanding in terms of what really makes a difference; Lack of overall plan (we are just not there yet).

What prompted you to join HEASC?

We were recruited by Jolene Knapp (Executive Director of SCUP) who said, “You really need to do this.” We had also just attended a CHEMA meeting where Debra Rowe spoke very passionately about sustainability. This really lit a fire for our former president to get on board with HEASC. And our current board president-elect, Norb Dunkel, also jumped on to the sustainability bandwagon.

What have been the benefits to ACUHO-I from your membership in HEASC?

HEASC is our portal to investigate and learn about sustainability. And quite frankly, membership in HEASC makes it a priority in terms of having to track it and report what we are doing. It makes us pay attention, which is important when you have so many other things competing for your time and attention.

The staff training was incredibly valuable. It was particularly good in that it happened all at once (with almost the whole staff) and got everyone on board at the same time. It’s given us a focus.

Even though we don’t have a big, well-oiled, detailed plan yet, we’ll get there eventually.

Have you collaborated with other HEASC member organizations on sustainability initiatives or projects?

We haven’t yet because of our membership in HEASC, although we have collaborated with other members. (We have formal affiliations with APPA and NASPA, and have worked jointly with NASPA, ACPA, NIRSA, NACA, and ACUI on student affairs initiatives. These and other higher education associations participated in the 21st Century Project. This came about through cross-collaboration with CHEMA members.

Are there other things that you would like to see happen within HEASC in regard to joint projects, activities, communications – or anything else at all?

I think we’re a young group and just getting started. I think having the monthly conference calls is good. The way associations operate is that we always have to present updates (to inform our boards). I have monthly board meetings so this helps keep me up to date re HEASC activities.

Another thing is that while it is important to have executive directors involved, it’s equally and sometimes even more important to identify key members who can champion an idea or initiative. Norb often champions sustainability. So as HEASC grows, how do we involve our volunteers?

Something we may end up doing is creating a task force on sustainability. At ACUHO-I, we have standing committees but also have created task forces with defined objectives and missions. These task forces are limited in scope and the duration is not forever. Once we have sustainability as part of our mission, we could then create a task force.

One of the main goals of HEASC that was identified for 2007 is support of the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment (ACUPCC), which now has over 300 signatories. Do you have thoughts or ideas as to how ACUHO-I might play a part in supporting the goals of signatory schools to become climate neutral?

(Answered by Norb Dunkel, Director of Housing and Residence Education at the University of Florida and President-Elect of ACUHO-I’s Executive Board)

There are three areas where ACUHO-I can support the ACUPCC: in sustainable residential learning communities, purchasing, and housing construction/renovation.

We are very interested in incorporating sustainability into residential learning communities. A faculty member and I have started a grant-funded project (at University of Florida) for which we have identified over 50 sustainable learning communities in the United States. We will have a panel of experts rank various aspects of

these communities in order to determine a benchmark that can then be used for a residential model at UFL. This could also evolve into a database of sustainable learning communities, which would be useful to other colleges and universities for researching how they might go about building similar sustainable residential learning communities. Many institutions are interested in living-learning communities and ACUHO-I would like to be a leader in encouraging *sustainable* living-learning communities—which of course, will benefit ACUPCC signatory institutions.

The next step for our ACUHO-I Executive Board will be to adopt sustainability into its vision. This would be the push we need to make with projects like the sustainable learning communities a priority. The Executive Board will need to also consider creating a sustainability task force at ACUHO-I that would be made up of staff and members—some of whom are very experienced in the realm of sustainability. (Members would be housing officers and faculty.)

Purchasing is a second area in which ACUHO-I could be influential. Housing operations purchase hundreds of thousands of dollars of materials annually and would like to adopt more sustainable practices in this regard. This is something that perhaps others in HEASC could help with.

And the third area of opportunity is in construction and/or renovation of residential housing—promoting LEED buildings for example. Most every housing operation is either constructing new campus housing or renovating existing housing. Increasing the knowledge of LEED approaches will be increasingly valuable.

**The 21st Century Project* is a series of design competitions for residential housing. For more information, go to:
<http://www.21stcenturyproject.com/home.htm>

** Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) is a green building rating system developed by the US Green Building Council (USGBC).