

# Moving Toward a Sustainable Future

Sustainability is a lens through which increasing numbers of community colleges and other higher education institutions are collectively examining and acting upon our shared ecological, social, and economic world systems. In the United States, the national sustainability education trend is evident. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *NBC Nightly News*, and other news media have reported on this development. Sustainability is being integrated into community colleges' mission and planning, curricula, student life, operations and purchasing, and community partnerships. Students and staff at hundreds of campuses are engaged in sustainability committees and actions.

Businesses often refer to sustainability as "the triple bottom line," meaning the simultaneous creation of healthier ecosystems, social systems, and economies.

Businesses are ahead of higher education in many ways regarding sustainability; investors are aware of the increased risks from social and environmental irresponsibility and threats such as climate change. Investment firms such as Goldman Sachs and others typically request sustainability reports from companies to more completely assess risk and value prior to investing. The business-sector team of the U.S. Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development issued the following statement:

"All students need to learn, through an interdisciplinary approach, not only the specifics of our sustainability challenges and the possible solutions, but also the interpersonal skills, the systems thinking skills, and the change agent skills to effectively help to create a more sustainable future. We are looking for these sustainability educated students as future business people, as employees, as consumers, innovators, government leaders, and investors."

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and its member institutions and affiliated councils are responding to this need. In November 2004, AACC passed a board resolution

BY DEBRA ROWE

in support of education for sustainability. AACC was also one of the founding associations of the Higher Education Associations Sustainability Consortium (HEASC). HEASC

members consist of professional associations representing U.S. college and university presidents, approximately half of all of the boards of trustees and a large majority of facilities directors, chief academic officers, business officers, college and university planners, purchasers, and student affairs staffs. HEASC also supports the American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment, signed by more than 550 presidents in all 50 states. Its goals: to eventually eliminate greenhouse-gas emissions and to educate students about the sustainability movement.

The United Nations recently defined sustainability education as "enabling people to develop the knowledge, values, and skills...to participate in decisions that will improve the quality of life now without damaging the planet for the future." This emphasis on decisionmaking and effective action encourages stakeholders to extend their focus beyond just quality thinking and analysis to educational programs that support solutions.

Though it boasts less than 5 percent of the world's population, the United States reportedly consumes more than 25 percent of the planet's resources.

Given the world's environmental and resource challenges and the crucial need for policy and behavioral changes, many community college faculties are choosing to include sustainability in their curricula.

The importance of working on real-world societal problems has also been recognized by the Disciplinary Associations Network for Sustainability (DANS). DANS consists of more than 20 academic disciplinary associations collaborating to discuss and act upon their potential contributions to a more sustainable future. Participants include the national or international academic associations for psychology, sociology, philosophy, religion, biology, chemistry, engineering, anthropology, political science, math, broadcasting, architecture, women's studies, and others. The objectives of the DANS working groups are to integrate sustainability into curricula, professional development, standards, and cross-disciplinary projects. DANS also uses its expertise to inform legislative actions about sustainability and educate the public about how to create a sustainable future.

Across the country, faculty are reorganizing courses and degrees so students can become literate about sustainability and have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to engage in meaningful dialogue about the environment. Community colleges are uniquely positioned to support the emerging green economy by including sustainability education in workforce training programs, continuing education offerings, and technical programs across the full suite of academic disciplines.

Dozens of colleges already offer courses in energy conservation, renewable energies, and sustainable design. Many colleges are integrating sustainability into existing vocational programs for heating and cooling, construction, facilities management, automotive, and industrial design. The National Science Foundation (NSF) has funded a number of Advanced Technological Education grants for energy management and renewable energy education; the U.S. Departments of Labor, Energy, and Agriculture also have funded sustainability education. Changes are

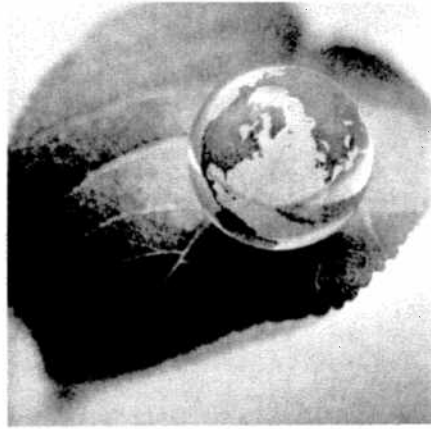
colleges to offer the course, has had 30 to 34 students enrolled in each session. Javid Mohtasham, the school's director of sustainability, safety, and health, is thrilled with the response. "Many people come to change careers. It has become very cost-effective and profitable for the college," he says.

Kim Hughes, the lead instructor for NaSBAP at Mt. Hood, encourages schools to send staff members to the program whenever possible. "One of our facilities people took the program and put what she learned to work on campus," says Hughes.

Another way to work sustainability into the curriculum is to create new programs with an environmental focus. "We know there's a job market for students who develop skills in heating and air conditioning or in maintaining equipment so that it has less of a negative impact on the environment," says HCC's Spangler. As a result, her team is working with the area metro, which recently renewed a contract for Houston's light-rail system and will need people to take care of the new cars. The school will develop a certificate in light-rail equipment maintenance; down the line, it may also create a management-skills program.

Miami Dade College in Florida is at the forefront of curriculum integration. As part of its 15-year-old Earth Ethics Institute (EEI; [www.earthethicsinstitute.org](http://www.earthethicsinstitute.org)), staff and faculty across all campuses are trained to incorporate sustainability into their work or classes. EEI offers workshops, programs, and resources for the school and the community, including outdoor immersion programs, audio lectures, and online courses. For educators eager to bring sustainability topics into a class or two, there are more than 20 replicable lessons online, covering everything from behavioral studies to philosophy to accounting.

"Community colleges—since they are teaching institutions—may not have cutting-edge information on what's happening in sustainability," says Colleen Ahern-Hettich, director of EEI. "We bring in consultants to educate our faculty. Our instructors can't keep teaching as if we have cheap oil."



## Green Resources

1. The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education—[www.aashe.org](http://www.aashe.org)
2. The Higher Education Associations Sustainability Consortium—[www.heasc.net](http://www.heasc.net)
3. The Disciplinary Associations Network for Sustainability—[www.aashe.org/dans](http://www.aashe.org/dans)
4. The American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment—[www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org](http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org)
5. Monthly conference calls for community colleges on sustainability. To sign up, send an e-mail request to Jennifer Hayward at [haywardj@lanecc.edu](mailto:haywardj@lanecc.edu).
6. The U.S. Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development—[www.uspartnership.org](http://www.uspartnership.org)
7. The AACC Sustainability page—[www.aacc.nche.edu/sustainable](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/sustainable)
8. The Consortium for Education in Renewable Energy Technology—[www.ceret.us](http://www.ceret.us)
9. The Advanced Technology Environmental and Energy Center—[www.ateec.org](http://www.ateec.org)
10. The Partnership for Environmental Technology Education—[www.ateec.org/pete](http://www.ateec.org/pete)
11. Campus Climate Challenge—[www.climatechallenge.org](http://www.climatechallenge.org)

## Community Partnerships

It's only natural for colleges and members of the surrounding community to work together on sustainability issues.

"Community colleges are in a unique position to help students and their surrounding communities move from feeling overwhelmed about societal

problems to understanding that solutions exist," says Debra Rowe, president of the U.S. Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development.

Schools are hosting workshops on such topics as energy conservation, participating in residential energy audits and light-bulb exchanges, and creating local internships. "One thing that a community college can easily do," adds Judy Walton, director of strategic initiatives for the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, "is invite the community onto campus to see its sustainability efforts."

In addition to educating the public, schools are working with businesses to help solve environmental problems. Butte College partnered with Chico Electric to develop a program that trains students in solar installations. BCC is in talks with the state of Massachusetts to purchase a nearby 300-acre farm and run it as a sustainable agricultural program. HCC is negotiating with the Houston Food Bank to help resolve some of its supply-chain challenges.

Colleges are getting involved in other ways, too—by improving downtown bike lanes or planting organic gardens at local elementary schools.

Gary Burbridge, director of sustainability at Grand Rapids Community College in Michigan, is part of the Community Sustainability Partnership ([grpartners.org](http://grpartners.org)), a group of community organizations in western Michigan that is working to restore environmental integrity and improve economic prosperity in the area. "I'm always surprised when I get calls from people who've heard about our involvement in the partnership, asking how we can work together," says Burbridge.

"We see sustainability as an integrated discipline, and we want the community to see us that way, as well," says Richland's Henry. "We believe that connections need to be made at all levels for sustainability to take the next step in people's behaviors."

*ELLEN ULLMAN is a freelance editor and writer based in Fairfield, Conn.*