

Case Study:

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Reaching beyond its borders, Furman University demonstrates new leadership in campus climate action

Introduction

A popular saying among campus sustainability activists these days is that, while higher education may only account for three to five percent of the national carbon footprint, it is responsible for 100 percent of the educational footprint. The imperative challenge to produce graduates across disciplines prepared for the 21st century, carbon-constrained global economy is increasingly driving colleges and universities to meld promoting sustainable practices, energy management, and environmental education in a way the strengthens the bottomline, makes the physical plant more viable, and enhances the curriculum.

Furman University, in Greenville, South Carolina, is a leader in this kind of integrated approach to climate action and sustainability education. On the cutting edge of sustainability since its adoption of the principle into its strategic plan in 1997, Furman promotes sustainability through academic programs, campus operations and construction practices, purchasing, and community research and outreach initiatives pursuant to a unanimous Board of Trustees resolution in 2001.

Furman earned its physical plant credentials implementing such standards as requiring all new and renovated buildings gain LEED certification, seeking third-party verification of sustainability efforts, and making improvements in existing buildings from a checklist including everything from direct digital control systems, variable frequency drives (VFDs) and compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs), to CO₂ sensors, more efficient appliances, and water-flow restrictors.

The institution involves students inside and outside the classroom through such opportunities as community partnerships and student service projects, and curricular initiatives such as summer workshops for faculty to create new courses focused on sustainability and to integrate sustainability themes into existing courses. Furman created special living spaces for students studying sustainability and includes cultivation of organic food products and a student-run “farm stand” as another among many experiential learning options.



All of this has strong administrative support, beginning with the leadership of Furman President David E. Shi, one of the first to sign the American College and University President’s Climate Commitment (ACUPCC) in the spring of 2007. He has since joined the organization’s Leadership Circle, is a board member of Second Nature, and is a tireless advocate for other schools to sign the commitment.

But Furman’s biggest contribution as a model for others interested in campus climate action came when it reached beyond its campus borders to involve other institutions in a broader discussion of how campuses can lead in developing action plans.



That process began in the fall of 2008, when the university reorganized its 24-person Sustainability Planning Group into a Sustainability Planning Council (SPC), comprising a diverse coalition of 124 administrators, faculty, staff, student members, trustees, and community leaders, to coordinate all of the school's sustainability efforts.

The new Council immediately set about drafting the Furman's Sustainability Master Plan, which includes the Climate Action Plan. A Climate Action Plan is a document that describes the strategies necessary to decrease GHG emissions; the Sustainability Master Plan provides the goals and strategies to infuse sustainability across every aspect of the campus from curriculum to community service and research to energy efficiency and conservation. It was the wisdom of the Council to look beyond the campus for ideas about how to create these documents – a move that created a model process for other campuses.

Climate Action and Sustainability Master Planning Process: Workshop as a Catalyst

To start the process, Furman worked with three sister schools (Davidson College, Duke University, and Johnson C. Smith University), which, with Furman, are all annually supported by the Duke Endowment, to plan and host a workshop designed to help the four colleges develop climate action plans and to better collaborate on issues related to sustainability.

The Duke Endowment funded the three-day Climate Action Planning Workshop at Furman University in January 2009. Those attending included an array of faculty, staff, and students in teams from the four campuses, as well as staff members and trustees from The Duke Endowment, Furman trustees and Furman's President Shi.



The unique workshop also benefited from outside expertise, including Jennifer Andrews, Clean Air-Cool Planet's Campus Program Manager, who delivered the keynote address. Also providing expert input in day one of the workshop were representatives from three schools that had already formulated or completed major elements of top notch Climate Action Plans (the University of New Hampshire, Middlebury College, Pomona College, and Cornell University), who described the processes they used to develop their plans. Next, these visiting guests served as facilitators in small group discussions of specific elements of a campus climate action plan.

Day two of the workshop centered on a conversation exercise moderated by Angela Halfacre, professor of Political Science and Director of the Shi Center for Sustainability at Furman, and Jack Byrne, director of the Sustainability Integration Office at Middlebury College (Vermont). Participants divided into small groups and visited different "conversation stations" set up around the conference center. Topics of conversation were energy conservation behavior; energy conservation-infrastructure; transportation; renewable energy; curriculum; co-curriculum; offsets and sequestration; neutrality target dates; and "burning questions."

Groups rotated through each topical station and built upon the previous group's work, focusing on: specific project ideas, time lines, information gaps, projected costs and funding/financing opportunities, potential Greenhouse Gas (GHG) reductions, campus-community behavior modification, research opportunities, positive and negative social impacts, positive and negative environmental impact, and opportunities for collaboration. A scribe assigned to each topic area compiled all the information and presented summaries to the entire group.

The workshop culminated in a plenary session in which participants from all eight colleges engaged in a lively dialogue about common questions, missing information, and next steps. The role of public utilities was a key discussion area. For most of the schools participating, the energy mix used by their electrical utilities has a substantial impact on the carbon footprint of the institution. For example, Furman's purchased electricity accounts for more than 60 percent of its carbon footprint. Working closely with utilities is therefore a crucial issue for any college.

Post Workshop: Next Steps for Furman

Experts at the workshop provided attendees with insight and advice about the Climate Action Plan writing process, as well as concrete examples of what a finished product should resemble. Alternatives, scenarios, and strategies for each possible approach were analyzed. Attendees did not draft full Climate Action Plans at the workshop itself, but much of the data and resources necessary to do so were concretely identified, and probable initiatives were considered. After the January, 2009, workshop, the research, recommendations, and ideas from Furman’s Sustainability Planning Council were organized into an online wiki, which a small group analyzed and used to encourage further discussion over a nine-month period.



The Council then drafted key elements of the Climate Action Plan and the Sustainability Master Plan. The focus of the planning process, Halfacre said, was “to involve a large and diverse group to create a living document with overarching goals for the school.”

The Sustainability Planning Council Core met twice a month (or more), and various committees met separately to contribute to the materials to be used for the Sustainability Master Plan Climate Action Plan. Over the summer, the Sustainability Planning Council compiled the Sustainability Planning Council research and recommendations into a draft document.

President Shi appointed an ad hoc group in August, 2009, to refine these recommendations and shepherd the plan through a campus-wide vetting process. In addition to campus presentations and open forums, an on-line comment site was also created for campus community feedback. As a result of this inclusive process, the master plan has garnered growing support and “ownership” among all of the key campus constituents. The Board of Trustees unanimously endorsed the Sustainability Master Plan at its fall board meeting.

Keys to Success

The fact that President Shi is sincerely committed to and excited about sustainability has been a key factor in the university’s emphasis on sustainability projects. He has taken an active role in climate planning, on campus and across the country, and has made it a priority for Furman. Many schools only have small sustainability committees to handle this work, which often cannot generate the proper momentum or grassroots support to make a difference; as Shi himself noted, “Over time, ‘top down’ leadership, if carefully crafted, can build momentum that can excite the broad-based engagement of an entire campus community.”

Halfacre also cites the growing and widespread interest across the Furman community as one of the biggest factors in the project’s success. “Students who have become interested in climate activism have come from other majors to de-

bate current challenges and issues. Sustainability has become a campus-wide dialogue, not a small group attempting to tackle a gigantic issue,” she said.



This dedicated dialogue between a broad array of experts and stakeholders made the initial planning workshop – and the broader planning process – a success. As Halfacre explained, “Discussing other Climate Action Plans in small and large group settings helped us piece together the elements of our plan. It gave us specific guidance and helped us chart our course. This process has been incredibly dynamic, and the willingness of campus members to discuss openly and collaborate effectively has been invaluable in perfecting our plans.”

Bowen Patterson Close of Pomona College, one of the visiting experts at the workshop, noted the value of seeing a similar institution go through the planning process. “It was in a way validating to see that, despite differences in the approach and in some characteristics of the school (climate, region, utility relationships, etc.) many of the same issues and questions are arising, and that together we can work through the hurdles,” she said.

“It was really valuable and rejuvenating to have a variety of schools together to work on this particular school’s plan,” Close continued. “I think it’s also fairly rare to have so much time dedicated to working on the plan. Furman accomplished more in three days than we’ve done in months, because the important stakeholders were gathered together to work on it.”

As far as the planning process itself is concerned, Halfacre notes that “schools engaged in this process should plan for it to take longer than originally anticipated. There will also be unexpected challenges. Listening and learning are crucial aspects of engaging interest, generating enthusiasm, and crafting a climate action plan that fits the distinctive culture, culture, and mission of an institution.”

The importance of the funding provided by The Duke Endowment to enable consultant and resource support for its four schools to brainstorm and collaborate cannot be overstated. That resource made possible the sharing across institutions, which assists in a multitude of ways:

- it provides a forum for sharing lessons learned;
- accommodates the need for neighboring schools to understand the role that their shared public utility plays in their carbon footprint;
- creates a collegial environment in which initiatives can be explored and adopted through collaboration;
- and encourages schools to promote their campuses as a microcosm for society – a literal learning laboratory for communities of all sizes.

Furman also has taken a lead role in encouraging other cross-institutional sharing. It hosted representatives from its 15 sister schools in the Associated Colleges of the South to share its approach to sustainability and climate action planning. In addition, at the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education’s September 2009 Greening the Campus conference, Byrne and Halfacre, assisted by CA-CP’s Carbon Accounting Coordinator, Claire Roby, provided a workshop for representatives from approximately 40 schools to share lessons learned about climate action planning.

Sustainability is one of the few areas of activity that actually encourages collaboration and collegiality among colleges that usually compete with one another for students and resources. As climate action planning spreads across the nation, schools do not need to act alone. The Furman experience reveals that collaboration is one of the great benefits of the sustainability enterprise. Furman’s Sustainability Master Plan and Climate Action Plan will be available publicly on the reporting site of the ACUPCC at <http://acupcc.aashe.org/> and on Furman’s sustainability website at www.furman.edu/sustain.



President David Shi, left and Rodney Smolla, incoming president, who takes office on July 1, 2010.

About Clean Air – Cool Planet

Clean Air-Cool Planet is the leading science-based, non-partisan, non-profit organization dedicated solely to finding and promoting solutions to global warming, providing hands-on assistance to companies, campuses, communities and science centers throughout the Northeast.

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