9-19-2013

The Leadership Climate

John M. Dunn
Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dunn

Part of the Higher Education Commons

WMU ScholarWorks Citation
Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. This is a classic example of someone preaching to the choir. Each of you has signaled your personal commitment to sustainability. You get it. And there's power in growing numbers of campus leaders like you willing to put your credentials behind the need to protect our future. There is, however, power and influence that have yet to be harnessed.

As presidents of our nation's college and universities, we have the privilege of using a strong platform to both illustrate the value of sustainability and inculcate sustainability as a value for the next generation of leaders. It's a task that takes:

- Personal commitment to the sustainability,
- The ability to leverage the power of a committed campus community, and
- The willingness and ability to combat politically motivated misinformation about science.

I'll touch briefly on all three areas.

Personal commitment/philosophy

We all arrived at our views on sustainability and commitment in very personal ways. My personal journey to commitment is tied up in how I view everything we do as educators and citizens. Sustainability, for me, is about making the absolute best use of every resource we are given to work with. It is:

- Making sure every one of our students succeeds,
- Ensuring limited dollars are stretched to their maximum, and
- Making sure our physical facilities and our environment are used in such a way as to preserve and conserve them for use by future generations.
I have simply never thought we have the luxury of letting any resource--human, physical or financial--be used at less than its optimal level. Once you go down that road, it is easy to see how deeply connected all of those resources are and how important it is to use them wisely. That personal philosophy has only been enhanced by my experiences as an educator, administrator, parent, elected school board member and appointed member of a number of governing boards. Regardless of the setting, it's all about maximizing potential.

**A community with the same values**

In 2007, I became the president of Western Michigan University. It was a community full of people whose values matched or came very close to those I've just outlined. Presidential searches are all about finding leaders whose values match that of an institution. That certainly happened in my case, and I suspect it is the same for each of you.

*(Slide #3)*

By way of background, I need to tell you that Western Michigan University has 151 buildings on 1,200 acres and serves 25,000 students in an academic setting that is classified by Carnegie as a high research university. Our energy conservation efforts play out over 7.8 million square feet of building space.

One very important piece that has helped make campus conservation possible was put in place many years ago. It's a quasi-green revolving fund has been in place at WMU since 1981, making us the first campus in the nation to adopt that important tool. That mechanism allowed the university to continuously capture the savings from energy conservation efforts and build a fund that was, in turn, funneled back into additional sustainability efforts. We still use that funding model, and since the 1990s, a number of other universities have adopted their own versions of a green revolving fund.

*(Slide #4)*

When I arrived on campus, the University was already quietly amassing a reputation for energy conservation and for being a leader in a number of sustainability initiatives.
Here's what we've accomplished in the years before and after I joined this committed community.

- In a 17-year period, we increased our campus building space by 19 percent and reduced our energy consumption by 17 percent.
- A power plant conversion resulted in an 87 percent reduction in CO2 emissions, and
- We were able to reduce water usage on campus by 50 percent.

(Slide #5)

When I arrived, I found a strong environmental mission statement adopted in 2003 as well as a level of energy and commitment that informed our next steps. Our campus sustainability commitment has been organized and energized over the past six years, and we're reached out to the broader community to leverage our efforts.

- A Presidential Universitywide Sustainability Committee--PUSC--developed a set of recommendations that we began implementing in 2008. In 2008, I signed the Talloires Declaration. In 2009, I became a signatory to the ACPUCC and we began our campus inventory of what we needed to accomplish.
- 2010 was a signature year in which our students initiated and passed a sustainability fee that is used to both fund operations of our new Office of Sustainability and a fund student-led research and service projects in the area of sustainability.
- Sustainability has been added to our University mission statement, and we have purchased and repurposed a new building to become the Office of Sustainability and provide work space for student initiatives.

(Slide #6)

- We've joined with communities in our region to form the Southwest Michigan Regional Sustainability Covenant devoted to the development of an area-wide infrastructure based on social, economic and environmental sustainability principles. We've also established a community garden, sponsored a Sustainability Speaker Series
and embarked on a number of campus and community research and communication initiatives.

• And of course, we developed and submitted, in 2012, our Climate Action Plan.  

(Slide #7)  
How are we doing on that plan? Here are our projections.

(Slide #8)  
And here is just one of the very visible symbols of our work on campus. This is our College of Health and Human Services. It is one of seven LEED certified buildings on campus, having earned LEED Gold in the very difficult Existing Building category.

(Slide #9)  
Responsibility opportunity, challenge  
I started these remarks by saying I know I'm preaching to the choir. I think we all recognize the possibilities there are to make a difference on our campuses. And we all realize the fundamental wisdom of using resources wisely--especially at a time when some of those resources are shrinking.

I think our larger responsibility, however, is to the national conversation about climate change. We're living in a time when the very substance of what we do--conveying new knowledge--is under attack. Scientists who have devoted their lives to amassing the kind of information we need to keep our planet healthy are under attack. The attacks are political and largely employ a fundamental lack of understanding of scientific method in the general population. Somehow, the doctrine of equal time has evolved to the point where the professional judgment of some 97 percent of climate scientists is artificially counterbalanced by the views of a small minority of scientists in other disciplines who are willing to lend their views to those opposed to any kind of proactive corrective measures.  

The scientists being attacked are our colleagues. They work on our campuses, teach our students and are citizens of our home communities. We know them and we know the quality of their scholarship. They are an enormous resource in helping us
accomplish our responsibility to our communities, states and nations. This is a responsibility and an opportunity to do what is right.

- We need to be vocal in supporting their work in our communities and active in encouraging them to reach out to nonacademic audiences. They understand the political nuances, and sometimes just need to know their president is behind them when they share their expertise and views. If you doubt the general populace is interested, just try offering a lecture series on climate change. I can testify from personal experience that the turnout will amaze you. People want information. Sometimes they want to argue the facts, and that's a good thing because our colleagues are incredibly adept at responding to myths and misinformation.

- And we need to be proactive in reaching out to the many college presidents who aren't here with us today and have not yet become signatories to the ACUPCC. As of last weekend, the number of signatories was 673--a strong number, certainly, but one with incredible room for growth. Our ability to network and engage our colleagues can play an enormous role in growing that critical mass of higher education leaders who have publicly signaled their commitment.

We've all committed to reducing our global footprints. but there is one area in which we need to maintain and grow the size of our footprint. That is in our role as educators. Let me borrow this great observation by Marion Blakey, CEO of the Aerospace Industries Association and former chief of the FAA. She said:

"You can't leave a footprint that lasts if you're always walking on tiptoe."

These issues are too important for us to walk on tiptoe. We need to bring our full influence to bear in our climate commitment.

(12 minutes)