

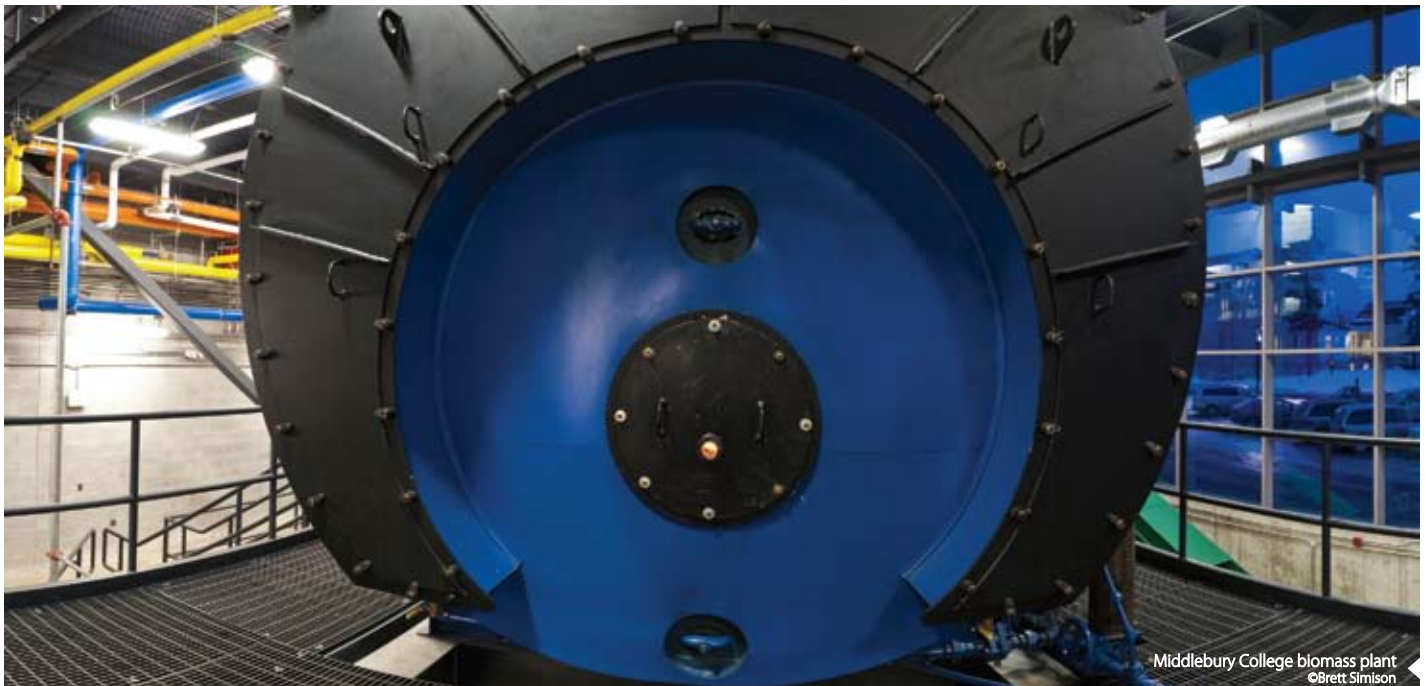
Committed to Leadership

The American College and University
Presidents Climate Commitment



Middlebury College biomass plant
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Middlebury College biomass plant
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On a planet that needs to become increasingly sustainable, designers and builders need a place to look for leadership. They may find it in the same places that have produced today's leaders—institutions of higher education.

"Our institutions are very visible and people look to us for leadership on important issues," says Jack Byrne, Director of the Sustainability Integration Office at Middlebury College in Vermont. "And the students who come through our institutions are going to take the lessons they have learned and the things that they have seen with them as they go on to their adult lives."

However, this presents the dilemma of standardizing a way to hold colleges and universities accountable. As leaders, it's clear that formal steps need to be taken to aid and promote growth in sustainability on campuses.

A joint effort teaming outside organizations with college and university presidents led to the creation of the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment (ACUPCC), outlining an achievable set of goals for colleges and universities to pursue carbon neutrality.

The result? Since December of 2006, 620 colleges and universities have officially lent their signature to the commitment, promising to exemplify the kind of green leadership that is needed now more than ever.

The ACUPCC outlines three main steps signatory colleges and universities can easily follow on their quests to carbon neutrality. Of course, as accessible as the three steps are, they truly encourage institutions to put in the additional effort needed to create a more sustainable planet—this isn't your typical three-step program.

Step one: develop a comprehensive plan to achieve climate neutrality as soon as possible. Signatories are asked to come up with a

structure to guide and develop this plan within two months of signing and actually have the plan developed in two years, plotting out interim targets or research expansions as needed.

Step two: initiate specific tangible actions to reduce greenhouse gases while the plan is being developed. This step allows colleges and universities to get engaged gradually, with easily achievable goals to choose from. Specifically, the commitment calls for two or more actions to be taken from a list of seven that include creating green building policies for future construction and encouraging the use of public transportation, among others.

Step three: make the action plan and progress reports publicly available. This allows peers to review and critique plans, assuring the action plans maximize the individual college or university's strongest assets.

The 620 signatories include schools in all 50 states representing 30 percent of the entire U.S. student population. The range of signatories include everything from tribal colleges, community colleges, four-year colleges and some of the most elite colleges and universities in the country. Middlebury signed in 2007 and its president's signature now sits beside those of presidents from such schools as Arizona State University, Rice University, Duke University, The New School, American University and Warren Wilson College, to name a few.

"The ACUPCC has helped us define our institutional responsibility to climate change in a measurable way," says Margo Flood, Chief Sustainability Official and Executive Director of the Environmental Leadership Center at Warren Wilson.

BETTER HARMONY

Anthony D. Cortese, Sc.D. is the President of Second Nature—an organization that serves and

supports senior college and university leaders in making healthy and sustainable living a priority in higher education. It is no wonder he was also a co-organizer of the ACUPCC.

The ACUPCC came into being as a result of three events, according to Cortese, with each event building on one another until higher education stood at the forefront of sustainability issues.

The first event was simply an intense and growing interest on campuses that has been building for the past 10 to 15 years to live in better harmony with the planet, laying a fitting backdrop for what came next.

Secondly, sustainability saw an explosion in understanding, beginning most notably with Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* and detailed reports from international panels on climate change. As a result, policymakers stepped up to agree that climate change was a serious issue.

"Suddenly, climate change flipped from being an issue that some people thought might not be a problem—with the seeds of uncertainty that were portrayed in the media for a long period of time—to an issue of urgency in all sectors," says Cortese.

The third event was the previously mentioned joint effort that led to the actual writing of the ACUPCC. Three separate organizations came together—Second Nature, the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) and ecoAmerica. The three groups found they were asking themselves the same question: "What if we do something to try and get the senior leaders at colleges and universities to focus on this issue?"

The task appeared achievable. At the time, colleges and universities were already enacting numerous green initiatives that included energy efficiency, recycling, locally grown food and multiple other activities that greatly reduced

environmental footprints. Many had even begun offering degrees for environmental specialists.

“But they were a bunch of distinct programs and they weren’t a part of the core mission of the institutions,” says Cortese. “So we thought that the challenge around climate change was so great that we would ask if some presidents wanted to work together to create a commitment—and become the leading sector on avoiding the most catastrophic impacts of climate disruption by being the first to go carbon neutral.”

The founding organizations tested the idea on several colleges and universities. By the end of 2006, 12 had stepped up to the plate.

GAINING MOMENTUM

Getting from 12 to 620 in a little over two years was a proactive process. A pyramid effect occurred almost immediately. The 12 presidents told their colleagues at other schools and word spread like wildfire. Yet it was the students that really solidified their decisions.

“When we ask the presidents who the most influential groups were in getting them to sign the commitment, they first say the students and then the faculty,” says Cortese. “The primary reason they made this commitment was because they understood that the most serious impacts of climate disruption were going to occur on the students and the students’ children—and that higher education has to be helping all of its graduates to have the opportunity to have a decent quality of life.”

In that same vein, signatories have committed themselves to tasks beyond the ones laid out in the ACUPCC. Numerous schools have made fundamental changes to the way they teach, so graduates will receive the knowledge and skills to help greater society achieve carbon neutrality.

“Signing the commitment and undertaking the effort that the commitment asks for creates some really great opportunities for engaging students in an important issue and giving them the opportunity to make a contribution to their institutions in meeting the commitment,” says Byrne.

For example, Middlebury is currently building a biomass facility that will reduce its carbon footprint by 40 percent. Students who were on the planning committee for the project four years ago are now graduating with a sense of pride and achievement as they are watching their hard work come to fruition.

“Having something that students can point to that they were a part of making will make such a big difference in how they carry themselves and act when they head out into their communities and their new professions,” says Byrne. “That effect cannot be overestimated.”

WHY SIGN?

The ACUPCC and its objectives are not free of skepticism and reluctance. While the commitment fits Warren Wilson and Middlebury’s campus cultures like a gardening glove, other institutions are not as gung ho.

The two greatest concerns held by institutions are the difficulty level of achieving carbon neutrality and the anticipated financial impact. However, some signatories had the same concerns but took greater interest in the larger problem.

“The presidents who have made this commitment have said, ‘Look: the scientists, most of whom come from our colleges and universities where the most credible science comes from, are telling us that it is ecologically necessary to get to at least an 80 percent reduction in our environmental footprint. It may take us 30 or 40 years to get there, but we see this as critical and therefore are going to do everything we can to try to get there,’” says Cortese.

Not only does the weight of the problem counter the skepticism, but the concerns are easily overcome in practical ways.

While Middlebury’s biomass plant reduces the school’s carbon footprint, it also reduces its use of residual fuel oils by half. According to Byrne, this will result in saving the college approximately \$900,000 annually in fuel costs.

“In a sense, the presidents are following the lead of John F. Kennedy when he set a goal to go to the moon in a decade,” says Cortese. “At the time, the scientific and engineering community did not think it was possible. But because Kennedy made it a national goal and was able to bring Congress and the general public behind the whole effort, we did it and we did it within nine years. If deciding to get there was based on whether or not the technology existed, it would have never happened.”

AFTER SIGNING

Warren Wilson’s signing of the ACUPCC did not overhaul the college’s policy or culture, but the effects of signing are evident. Even with Warren Wilson’s long history of sustainability—visitors there can find students tilling the school’s gardens or running the back hoes—the commitment enhanced campus culture.

“Now that these things we have been doing are in the form of a commitment, there are more teeth in them,” says Flood. “And it has helped to galvanize us into committee action and planning to take specific steps that were perfect in keeping with our commitments on campus to a greenhouse gas inventory.”

In addition, signing the commitment spurred Warren Wilson on to form a climate change partnership with the City of Asheville—one of 935 cities to sign the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement. Both committed to fulfilling their pledges, the school and city have teamed up on projects such as INSULATE!, which brings students, state and federal agencies, private partners, and municipal leaders together to assist homeowners below the national poverty level with updating their homes to reduce energy usage.

Middlebury saw similar results from signing, expanding its sustainable practices to continuously meet the ACUPCC’s goals.

In fact, Middlebury originally put off signing because it was in the process of developing its own goal—becoming carbon neutral by 2016. Yet it also saw the importance of the ACUPCC.

“The most important aspect of the commitment is that you are one more voice in a growing chorus that is saying climate change is a serious issue that we need to deal with as a society,” says Byrne.


Besides the biomass plant, some of Middlebury’s green initiatives include design and construction guidelines based on LEED standards, an analysis of roof surfaces to determine how much energy could be generated from solar panels and making some of its oldest buildings more energy efficient, among many others.

“It’s important that you’re establishing some accountability for taking action to address this issue, and I think you can do that in a way that doesn’t have to be drastic or extremely costly at the outset,” says Byrne. “There are a lot of ways in which you can get there by just being smart about the way you manage your energy and use your resources. Even if it is a couple small steps at the beginning, it’s important to take those steps and get the intellectual capital that’s so immense at our institutions to focus on finding innovative, creative and smart ways to do things at the least cost.”

The ACUPCC 2008 Annual Report includes a bevy of actions taken by signatory schools to reduce their ecological footprints last year. At Cornell University, students in 20 classes have investigated steps to achieve climate neutrality and student leaders held a sustainability summit. Dakota County Technical College in Minnesota built a new greenhouse from private funds. The University of Louisville launched an energy audit that will save the university as much as \$50 million in energy costs over the next 12 years.

“Climate change is a global problem and no one school can solve it on its own,” says Cortese. “We think it requires a level of collaboration that we haven’t really seen since World War II.”

On a broad scale, the ACUPCC helped get an amendment added to the Higher Education Act that would authorize up to \$50 million in money for education on sustainability at college campuses. The ACUPCC has also teamed up with the Clinton Climate Initiative to promote energy-efficient retrofits. An organization composed of college and university presidents is raising the bar for public policy, as it’s difficult to ignore over 600 presidents.

When it all got started, Cortese could hardly envision the ACUPCC becoming what it is today. “There’s a difference between hope and what you think is doable,” he says. “We hoped that higher education would step up to the table as it has. We had no idea it would happen quite as fast as it has, and we are delighted with where we are right now.” 

For more information on the ACUPCC and signing the commitment, visit www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org.

