

1 Educating the Environmental Stewards of Tomorrow: Presidential Leadership and Climate Change

By Dianne F. Harrison, Ph.D., President, California State University, Northridge

As a society, we face numerous challenges that universities seek to address as part of higher education’s central mission to educate students and serve the community. Among them, and one that I care about deeply, is the threat to our future and the clear danger we all face due to climate change. As educators—and leaders of universities essentially equivalent to “small cities” with a direct impact on the environment—I believe we are compelled to address these threats and do everything in our power to counter global warming.

University faculty and researchers conduct much of the science and research related to rising temperatures, sea levels, and weather-related disasters impacting people around the globe. In November 2018, a Congressionally mandated report by 13 federal agencies found that climate change is already being seen across the United States in the form of increasing temperatures, rising sea levels, worsening wildfires, more intense storms, and other conditions that are doing harm to our ecosystems, infrastructure, and society. This warning echoed an October 2018 report from the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), made up of scientific working groups charged with reviewing peer-reviewed literature and other sources, which similarly described in great detail the dire environmental changes that are underway and will worsen if we do not take action now.

The movement for action in this area is particularly strong among youth and Gen Z students now entering college. With expectations that their institutions be socially responsible, particularly in the area of sustainability, they are often driving efforts on campuses. For example, the Masdar Gen Z Global Sustainability Survey presented to the 2016 United Nations Climate Change Conference identified climate change

as the top priority of more than 5,000 members of this generation spread across 20 countries.

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This increased awareness must also encompass social and environmental justice. As we move forward in implementing sustainable practices, we must ensure no one is left behind. As we see all too often, those who are least responsible for climate change and other social challenges are usually the ones who suffer its most serious consequences.

University presidents can play a large role in this movement by demonstrating leadership and taking concrete steps that involve campus facilities and operations, academic program offerings, student activism, and community partnerships extending beyond the boundaries of a campus. Given the broad support and engagement around this issue, and the willingness for people to change for the sake of the planet and their communities, university leaders have the responsibility and opportunity to harness people's passion into positive action.

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Great challenges can lead to great opportunities. Paul Hawken, Executive Director of Project Drawdown, and editor of *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*, and his colleagues present 100 existing climate solutions with the greatest impact on reversing global warming and potential to generate trillions of dollars in economic growth. Hawken speaks compellingly about possibility and opportunity and how climate solutions depend on community, collaboration, and cooperation. These values align with the higher education environment and prompt us as leaders to consider what more we could do on our campuses and in our local communities.

Valezquez et al defines a sustainable campus community as "A higher education institution, as a whole or in part, that addresses, involves and promotes, on a regional and global level, the minimization of negative environmental, economic, societal, and health effects generated in the use of their resources in order to fulfill its functions of teaching, research, outreach and partnership, and stewardship in ways to help society make the transition to sustainable lifestyles."

As a diverse campus of nearly 40,000 graduate and undergraduate students located on more than 350 acres in Los Angeles, California and a leading employer in the region, California State University, Northridge (CSUN) strives to serve as a responsible steward of place, acting as a role model and laboratory for the broader community. We are integrating sustainability into our curriculum beyond majors, minors, and graduate programs. Sustainability and resiliency (the ability of a system or community to survive disruption and to anticipate, adapt, and flourish in the face of change) are truly cross-disciplinary, as well as cross-departmental and cross-divisional on our campus. Working collaboratively and horizontally, we are able to achieve our sustainability goals and make progress on our climate action plan, while giving students opportunities to contribute, show leadership, learn and grow, and even discover new career and educational paths.

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University presidents cannot do it alone. The backbone of any successful campus sustainability plan is strong partnerships both on and off campus that are empowered to develop and flourish. When I arrived at CSUN in 2012, I was pleased to learn the University had an established tradition of such efforts. CSUN's Campus Recycling Center was established in 1991, and later, a "green core" team organically developed as a volunteer group to facilitate sustainability progress. Then in 2008, CSUN's Institute for Sustainability was established with stakeholders across campus, charged with integrating sustainability into all aspects of the University, from operations and infrastructure to outreach, education, and research.

Shortly after my appointment at CSUN, sustainability was formally recognized as one of the University's eight strategic priorities, further raising the profile and importance of this issue. I signed the Presidents' Climate Commitment, publicly committing to reducing and ultimately eliminating our carbon emissions, having also signed in my previous role as president of California State University, Monterey Bay. In 2015, I signed a Resilience Commitment, which is particularly important to a region and state subject to drought and fires like California.

Our campus efforts are managed through the Institute for Sustainability, its advisory committee, and our student government (which appoints its own sustainability officer and senator), all collaborating with faculty, staff, students, and administrators to move us forward. To guide this work, the Institute developed a 10-year campus plan for 2013–2023. Today, sustainability efforts are spearheaded collaboratively through Facilities Planning and the Institute. For accountability, a status report is published on the progress of the 10 working groups focused on the following areas: Administration, Dining Services, Education, Energy and Buildings, Environmental Quality, Organics, Purchasing and Consumption, Transportation, Waste and Materials, and Water. As this shows, these efforts touch all aspects of the University.

At the operations level, CSUN has achieved measurable results. Since adopting the formal Sustainability Plan in 2013 and a Climate Action Plan in 2016, the University has decreased its total greenhouse gas emissions by 29 percent from our 1990 baseline, decreased water consumption by 31 percent (199 million gallons) annually since 2013, and reached a 15 percent waste reduction from 2013, all while increasing campus square footage and enrollment. Additionally, CSUN has converted over 350,000 square feet of grass to drought-tolerant and native vegetation. In an effort to reduce waste, the University installed water bottle refill stations in all



campus buildings, offers discounts for using reusable coffee mugs at campus coffee shops, and launched a Zero Waste Plan with a goal of achieving zero waste by 2040. We have gained recognition for our efforts locally and nationally through various ranking systems and awards (e.g., AASHE STARS Gold campus, AACSCU Excellence Award for Sustainability, and Bee Campus USA and Tree Campus USA designations).

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Sustainability is part of our curriculum and service learning efforts: faculty have created the Principles of Sustainability General Education paths group, a program where faculty from multiple disciplines and departments have integrated sustainability principles and content into their classes; the Institute for Sustainability offers service learning opportunities which engage hundreds of students from different classes across multiple colleges every semester; and students have collaborated with facilities and

grounds workers to create an outdoor classroom space for sustainability learning on campus. We also offer a minor in sustainability and anticipate launching an interdisciplinary Master's in Sustainability in 2021.

Students and our student government leaders are a major partner and driver of this priority—the Associated Students opened a new 10,000 square-foot Sustainability Center in fall 2017, the first net-zero building on campus. It serves as an expanded collection facility for campus reusables and recyclables, the administrative hub of Associated Students sustainability programs and services, and the administrative offices of the Institute for Sustainability. It has received Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum Certification, the highest mark of quality and achievement in green building. (We now have four LEED-certified facilities.)

As part of our commitment to partner with and serve the local community, we provide resilience classes and education to our neighbors. CSUN offers garden workdays to teach local residents regenerative urban agriculture, food processing and preservation, composting, and concepts related to sustainability. We have two well-established food gardens and a bee pollinator garden, all of which serve as a place of education for our larger community.

In addition to education, our faculty, staff, and students support the community through projects like the CSUN Food Recovery Network, which collects unsold edible food from campus dining facilities and donates it to local organizations and student groups involved in combatting food insecurity. The CSUN Food Pantry serves our food-

insecure students, complemented with fresh produce from our campus food gardens. We have shifted our food purchasing practices to buy local as much as possible and to use ecologically conscious vendors.

Of course, to succeed, support and buy-in are necessary at many levels. We are fortunate in California as both the former and current governors have shown leadership and commitment on sustainability issues. At the city level, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti developed a climate plan and recently launched an ambitious “L.A. Green New Deal” for the city’s sustainable future, which we also support. The California State University Board of Trustees, the governance body for the 23-campus system of which CSUN is part, has also made sustainability a priority, developing and approving policies related to energy, water, and purchasing. Such commitment provides further motivation for our work on campus. Our results to date demonstrate what can be accomplished with the alignment, collaboration, and courage of leaders.

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It is an understatement to say that colleges and universities cannot solve global warming alone, but we have the potential to do more. I serve with other dedicated higher education leaders as a board member of Second Nature, an organization focused on climate action in higher education and that oversees the President’s Climate Leadership Network with 440 active signatories. Network members strive towards climate-neutral operations, 100 percent renewable energy use, and preparing students to live sustainably.

To grow our collective impact, we need to ensure that other national higher education associations are involved, including those not specifically focused on climate change (e.g., the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, American Council on Education, and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities). We should create a global model of climate commitment in higher education. We should join with industry and corporate partners, with elected officials, with our vast alumni networks and together take action and realize the tremendous potential we possess.

Our campuses are educating the next generation of leaders and global citizens, and together we can make an enormous difference. Imagine the exponential impacts if the approximately 4,500 institutions of higher education in the U.S. that are collectively educating 16 million students committed to making sustainability and resiliency priorities. There is still time, but we must not delay. The alternative is simply not an option.

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Dr. Dianne F. Harrison is the fifth president of California State University, Northridge and began her appointment in June 2012. Before her appointment, she served as president of California State University, Monterey Bay, a position she had held since 2006. Prior to CSU Monterey Bay, she worked at Florida State University, where she served for nearly 30 years in various capacities, first as a faculty member, then as dean of social work, associate vice president for academic affairs, dean of graduate studies, and vice president for academic quality and external programs.

Known for her commitment to students, academic excellence, and strategic leadership, President Harrison has a reputation for building strong partnerships with public and private organizations, enabling students, faculty, and staff to cross institutional boundaries and engage in innovative instruction.

Since her appointment, Dr. Harrison has overseen eight key priorities for CSUN: 1) advancing student success; 2) focusing on employees for success; 3) fostering diversity and inclusive excellence; 4) increasing the visibility and reputation of the university; 5) planning for a future less dependent on state funding; 6) expanding research activity and sponsored programs; 7) supporting sustainability; and 8) using athletics as a tool for engagement.

Recognized for her leadership and service in higher education and other fields, Dr. Harrison has served on more than 80 boards and committees of national, state, and local organizations. She currently serves on the board of the American Council on Education (ACE), American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and Second Nature. She is the board secretary on the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU) and chair of the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) Advisory Board at the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU). She also serves on the educational leadership boards of the CSU Council on Ocean Affairs, Science and Technology, the CSU

Technology Steering Committee, the CSU Commission on Online Education, and the CSUPERB Presidents' Commission. She is the 2019–20 chair of AASCU's Committee on Sustainability Development. A former member of the NCAA Board of Governors and the Division I Board of Directors, her current appointments at the NCAA include service on the NCAA Division I Committee on Academics and chair of the NCAA Board of Governors' Committee to Promote Cultural Diversity and Equity. She recently completed the Fulbright International Education Administrators Seminar in France. She has been appointed three times, most recently in October 2018, by former California Governor Jerry Brown to serve on the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, having been initially appointed in 2011 and served in 2014 as chair of the Commission. She completed two terms as a commissioner for the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) in 2018.

As an active civic leader, she serves on the boards of directors for the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, the Valley Economic Alliance, and Valley Presbyterian Hospital. She is a member of the Los Angeles Cleantech Incubator Leadership Council and the Los Angeles Coalition for the Economy and Jobs. She also serves on the Advisory Council of BizFed and as vice chair of the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation (LAEDC) Board.

In March 2019, Dr. Harrison was honored as Woman of the Year for California's 18th Senate District and included in the *Los Angeles Business Journal's* "LA500" list in July 2018, as one of the 500 most influential people in Los Angeles.

Dr. Harrison holds a Ph.D. in social work from Washington University in St. Louis and a master's of social work and a bachelor's in American Studies, both from the University of Alabama.