



2010/2011 Series: Economic Prosperity in the Next Decade

chapter seven: **Sustaining Sustainability**



Sustaining Sustainability

Dr. Martha Dunagin Saunders: President of University of Southern Mississippi

I love the joke attributed to Joel Makower, editor/author of *greenbiz.com*:

Q: How is sustainability like teen sex?

A: Everybody talks about it. Nobody does it very much. And when they do, they don't do it very well.

Following the analogy, when it comes to sustainability at the University of Southern Mississippi, we are doing more than talking about it; and, doing at least some of it well. Like many of today's universities, we recognize our unique opportunity to become living laboratories for the development of a sustainability-focused culture. I hope others can benefit from our story.

The Times, They Are a-Changin'

In 2007, as the new president at Southern Mississippi, I very much wanted to understand the strengths, hopes, and dreams of my campus community. I tasked the consulting firm, ID Group, to develop Core Dialogue designs and engage a cross-section of stakeholders, including faculty, staff, leadership, alumni, businesspeople, and community members. The data gathered from these sessions produced four areas of strategic focus for the University. One powerful area emerging from the process was a focus on creating a culture of healthy minds and bodies. A subtheme of this area was a desire on the part of the campus to go green.

A few months later, I signed the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment for the second time. (I had signed it in my previous capacity as chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, shortly before leaving that position to come home to lead my alma mater.)

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Getting Started

I knew I needed an Office of Sustainability and was pleased to find a Department of University Housing employee with a phenomenal understanding and passion for the issue. That was an amazing piece of luck, considering the state of our budget at the time. I made the commitment real during my inaugural address by naming sustainability as one of the four overarching goals of my presidency.

With our direction set and the commitment clear, it was time to authorize our people on the ground to make it happen. My new director of sustainability was game. He said, “My job is to help you make sure this campus is viable 40 years from now. But, candidly, it’s hard to be a treehugger in a red state.”

We faced a general public with many misconceptions and misgivings about sustainability. (What do you mean global warming? It’s 30 degrees outside!!!)

A strong base of students and faculty joined the cause, planting seeds of change. A University Climate Commitment Committee (UC3) was formed and took the reins in setting policy and engaging the campus.

Mark Twain wrote:

“The secret of getting ahead is getting started. The secret of getting started is breaking your complex overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks and then starting on the first one.”

Our action team took on the task with a clear vision: to become a model of sustainable thought and practice within our state and region. One of the first steps in engaging the campus was to name and visually brand the initiative. The Southern Miss Green Initiative became the official name, while EcoEagle was adopted as the programming and educational portion of the initiative. The team, along with the University’s Office of Communications, did a good job leveraging the connections to the University’s mascot (Golden Eagle), while creating a strong and recognizable visual brand for the office and its programs.



From the beginning, we focused on engaging and educating the campus through programs and goal setting. Early goals included an expanded Earth Week celebration, completion of a greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions inventory, improvements to the website, curriculum development, and energy conservation, mitigation, and management.

Resulting programs included:

- Film series
- Lecture series
- Bike program
- Recycling program (created financial support for other initiatives)
- EcoEagle representatives
- Farmers market
- Newsletter

Lean, but Green

And then the bottom fell out of the economy, making it more important than ever to drop energy costs and create efficiencies; however, my dwindling “strategic initiatives budget” was barely covering operations. There was little hope of our visualized expansion.

“I’ve done all I can do with the resources we have now,” my sustainability director reluctantly shared.

It was decision time for me. Do I shelve the fledgling project for a better time? (Does that ever really happen?) Or, do I spend precious discretionary dollars to bring in needed expertise to help us bring our Climate Action Plan (CAP) to fruition? I opted for the latter, and the rest will be history.

Our consultant worked with the Office of Sustainability, the University Climate Committee, and several campus organizations to fashion a plan that will bring our University to carbon neutrality by 2050.

The first step was a GHG emission inventory, essential in developing a Climate Action Plan (CAP). The inventory established baseline emissions and demonstrated trends in the University’s emissions and energy usage. Data from fuel consumption, purchased electricity, transportation habits, and other categories were analyzed to determine the University’s carbon footprint.

Next, we developed emission mitigation strategies in order to keep emission reductions on track, engage and develop campus expertise, and strengthen campus-community relations. We developed strategies for energy use, transportation, landscaping and grounds, solid waste, refrigeration, food, green buildings, and renewable energy.

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These efforts will be matched with a green curriculum. We believe that attention must be given to increasing the environmental literacy of all students, creating opportunities for them to devise strategies that address challenging societal problems, fostering research on climate change and sustainability, and creating an intellectual environment and community where lessons are translated into action.

The University has developed EcoEagle, the programming and educational portion of the Office of Sustainability. Its purpose is outreach to the campus community and surrounding communities to effect change and involvement for the future. Planned strategies include:

- Sustainability in freshman and new student orientation
- Development of sustainability-related courses
- Development of sustainability-focused courses
- Development of sustainability undergraduate and graduate degrees
- Creation of a sustainability-themed semester or year
- Creation of sustainability-themed housing, where the focus is on creating a residential sustainability learning community
- Development of sustainability outreach publications

We will reach these goals through:

- Community involvement activities that encourage student, staff, and campus community participation to promote sustainable training, awareness, and policy development
- Conservation and optimization strategies that eliminate waste, conserve resources, and improve operating efficiencies
- Green building design and policy standards that are adhered to during new construction and major renovation projects
- Investment toward larger, capital-intensive strategies that generally offer more significant emission reductions

Our focus is to first implement no- and low-cost strategies. Upon completion of these strategies, the University will evaluate, prioritize finance, and implement energy conservation and renewable energy projects that require larger capital investment on the basis of resulting carbon reduction per operating dollar incurred.

Pushing a Snowball Uphill

The energy required to keep sustainability in the forefront is exhausting. We drive all interested parties to our Green Initiative website, our official storytelling site for the Office of Sustainability. It is clearly branded and popular. More importantly, it engages the University community to step up and get involved.

The CAP is a living document that can be adjusted in light of new challenges, missions, directions, and opportunities. As action is taken on campus and as technology evolves, new mitigation opportunities will be identified and considered for implementation. The CAP will be updated every two years to reflect those changes, allowing the University to adopt the best route toward achieving success. We have built in a rigorous review for tracking and reporting our progress. While many mitigation strategies will be implemented by campus operations, long-term sustainability requires feedback and coordination between all entities. Although the ultimate goal of climate neutrality has been firmly set, flexibility concerning the exact procedures and strategies necessary to realize these goals is needed in order to respond to community needs and new technology. By 2050, we will not only have eliminated or offset our full portfolio of emissions, we will have integrated educational programs into the campus community to create the next generation of leaders in the struggle to achieve a climate-neutral future.

The University of Southern Mississippi aims to emerge as the premier research University of (and for) the Gulf South—engaging and empowering individuals to transform lives and commitments. Just like a good marriage, our commitment to sustainability is solid. We're in for the long haul.



Dr. Martha Dunagin Saunders is the ninth president of the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. She took office on May 21, 2007, continuing an illustrious career of higher education leadership.

Dr. Saunders came to Southern Mississippi from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, where she served as its first ever female Chancellor. Prior to her appointment at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, she was Vice President for Academic Affairs at Columbus State University in Columbus, Georgia.

She previously held the position of Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of West Florida (UWF), where she earned the rank of tenured professor of communication. At UWF, she also worked as Director of the University Honors Program.

A native of Mississippi, Dr. Saunders earned her B.A. in French from the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg; her M.A. in Journalism from the University of Georgia in Athens; and her Ph.D. in Communication Theory and Research from Florida State University in Tallahassee.

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