

PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



A HIGHER EDUCATION
PRESIDENTIAL THOUGHT
LEADERSHIP SERIES

2013-2014 Series:

Elevating Sustainability Through Academic Leadership

CHAPTER

6

The American College
and University
Presidents' Climate
Commitment:

*Not the End but
Rather a New Way
of Thinking*

aramark 

The American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment:

Not the End but Rather a New Way of Thinking

Dr. Jonathan Gibraltar: President of Frostburg State University

For those who think that the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment has run its course, I believe you are viewing this from the wrong perspective. I say that because a heartfelt commitment to reducing carbon emissions is not an end, but rather the means of creating a new beginning. The core principles of the climate commitment are about much more than carbon footprints and the use of coal and oil. It is about taking greater care of the resources we have, including our own human resources, and embracing those things that we perceive to be infinite.

I have to admit that on some level, being a university president is like being a kid in a candy shop. So many of the principles I have always believed in are converging under the umbrella of sustainability. Typically, colleges and universities are the places where great ideas are born and presidents can have enormous influence in paving a way to our future. It is not just the steps we take to reduce our carbon emissions and focus our communities on the importance of conservation. It's also about defining human sustainability and just what that means.

As president of Frostburg State University, I signed the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment in 2007. I then convened a University-wide Learning Green, Living Green committee of faculty, staff, students, and community members to develop and coordinate programs and projects that create solutions to environmental, social and economic needs. Of course, we developed a Climate Action Plan to mitigate carbon emissions and ultimately reach a goal of being net-carbon zero; however, signing the Climate Commitment meant much more to Frostburg State University and its future.

“*Creating Healthy, Informed, and Lasting Lifestyles (CHILL)—... interventions ranged from nutritional and exercised programs to actually contacting physicians, so students could be placed on medication for high blood pressure, diabetes, or dangerously elevated cholesterol, in the most severe cases. We were shocked to find how many young adults are at risk for later-life health problems.*”



PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

Signing the Commitment meant developing a Sustainability Studies minor, by which we can provide an interdisciplinary view of the environment. It also meant engaging our students in an annual RecycleMania tournament, by which they work incredibly hard to recycle as much as humanly possible, weigh what they have collected and then submit their results. Last year, FSU scored seventh out of 233 schools in the paper-recycling category. What is most important here is that this was completely student-driven. They took ownership of the process and the results. Students in our Sustainability Studies minor took ownership by writing, designing, producing and editing their own publication about sustainability. This publication, called *#Sustain – Trending Topics in Sustainability*, is in the fourth year of production and a tribute to our students and their beliefs. We believe it to be the nation's only completely student-produced publication on sustainability. It, too, addresses sustainability in much broader context than the amount of carbon being released into the atmosphere.

Another project we embarked upon was the construction of a Sustainable Energy Research Facility that is 100 percent independent from the power grid. This facility is powered through a combination of solar power, wind power, hydrogen fuel cell, and passive solar. In the event of a storm or other disaster bringing about a major power outage, it would remain as an operating "island" in an area that would be otherwise dependent on the electrical grid. This facility has put FSU on the map as a national leader in sustainable research.

Because we are an institution of higher learning, our approach to sustainability will always have an educational goal. One of the highlights of each year is a sustainability conference called Focus Frostburg. This daylong event brings an extensive array of opportunities and activities focusing on the environment. Students, faculty, staff, and community members come together to share their ideas about sustainability, offer scientific presentations and hands-on workshops covering topics as wide-ranging as fracking in the Marcellus Shale, identifying medicinal plants, or sustainable burials. Science, culture, the arts, politics, and community engagement all have a place in this exciting and enriching day.

We are also partners in a local project called Frostburg Grows, in which six greenhouses are being built on five acres of a reclaimed strip mine that has been made unarable because of previous use. The program trains community members in creating and maintaining these greenhouses, which will grow tree seedlings to be used in reclaiming the strip-mined land that can be found throughout our Appalachian region. They will also grow produce to supplement that being purchased for the University's dining hall.

We have made a concerted effort throughout our campus' physical plant to steadily replace equipment with environmentally friendlier fixtures, for example:

- We replaced lighting in the Physical Education Center main arena with more energy-efficient fixtures and bulbs. This project was done in-house with a cost of \$35,000 for materials. Energy savings are \$16,000 per year, so payback for the project came in approximately 2.2 years.
- Our library was retrofitted with lamps and new ballasts for a savings of \$17,000 a year in energy. We received \$13,000 from Potomac Edison, our local power company, in matching funds.
- The lighting system of our Performing Arts Center has been replaced with high-efficiency LED lamps, resulting in a 50 percent reduction in electrical energy usage for lighting.
- We installed low-flow showerheads in all residence halls. The University is using 100,000 fewer gallons of water every month as a result, saving both money and the precious resource of water.



PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

- We are in the process of constructing a new building on campus, the Center for Communications and Information Technology (CCIT). When this building opens, the building will generate greater emissions temporarily. To offset those emissions, as part of our Climate Action Plan, we have established a goal to ensure that all new buildings are constructed to LEED-silver specifications or better, based on the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System. The recent renovation of the Lane University Center, our student center, earned LEED Gold certification, and we are shooting for the same rating for the CCIT.
- FSU adopted an Energy Star purchasing program, which requires us to choose energy-efficient products and equipment, meeting either Energy Star or other nationally accepted standards of energy efficiency, whenever financially feasible. Any department choosing non-energy-efficient equipment must justify the purchase.

As a result of all of the above, Frostburg State University has been recognized by a number of organizations that support sustainability in higher education:

- We were named a Cool School by the Sierra Club's *Sierra* magazine because we're helping solve climate problems and making significant efforts to operate sustainably.
- We were honored as a Tree Campus USA, a national program of the Arbor Day Foundation and Toyota Motor North America Inc., for promoting healthy trees and engaging our campus in the spirit of conservation.
- Twice, in 2010 and 2013, FSU was listed in the *Princeton Review's Guide to Green Colleges*. This recognition reflects the University's strong commitment to sustainability in the areas of leadership, academics and infrastructure, and gave us national prominence.
- In 2011, FSU was recognized for its commitment to sustainability and environmental education with a Second Nature's Second Annual Climate Leadership Award for Institutional Excellence in Climate Leadership.

All of these designations bring enormous pride to our University while also helping us recruit students. Many young people today express an interest in attending Frostburg State University because of our commitment to sustainability and the environment.

While we are gratified to receive all this recognition as a result of our actions, we found ourselves asking the question of how we could focus upon the importance of environmental sustainability without also focusing on the human sustainability of our students, faculty, staff, and those who live in the surrounding community. Among the initiatives we created to take a look at human sustainability was a program called, Creating Healthy, Informed, and Lasting Lifestyles (CHILL), funded from private sources. Through this funding, we conducted comprehensive health screenings of our students, mostly freshmen, and then, based upon health risk factors; decide upon the necessity for intervention. These interventions have ranged from nutritional and exercise programs to actually contacting physicians, so students could be placed on medication for high blood pressure, diabetes, or dangerously elevated cholesterol, in the most severe cases. We were shocked to find how many young adults are at risk for later-life health problems. We also gained national attention for this effort.



PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

It would be impossible to examine the health of college students without addressing the issue of alcohol abuse and high-risk drinking among this population, a truly unsustainable situation. Frostburg State University has made great strides in mitigating this issue among our students, with significant data to show for it, including a reduction in binge drinking from well above the national average to below it in the space of six years. I have been working to encourage my fellow college and university presidents to take similar leadership on their campuses; I am now the co-chair of the College Presidents Working Group to Address Harmful Student Drinking of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA).

Likewise, we could not focus only on human sustainability within our campus circle without seeing the need in our surrounding community. For many years, Frostburg State University has served as a cultural, educational, and economic development hub for our Appalachian community. More recently, we have increased collaboration with those in our community to solve problems. A group of meetings held in the town of Frostburg and on the FSU campus called Sustaining Campus and Community Dialogue Series for the past two years gathers students, year-round residents, local officials, and University leaders to discuss a variety of issues and create new opportunities for collaborative problem-solving and coalition-building in Frostburg. Four action groups created through the series have begun to focus on managing conflict and preventing violence; improving relationships and race relations; managing off-campus housing tensions; and discovering Western Maryland, Frostburg, and FSU pride. Likewise, a growing Frostburg Community Coalition, made up of member of the FSU campus community; Frostburg community leaders; government officials; business owners; parents; and concerned citizens, is building on Frostburg State University's success in addressing high-risk drinking. This group has expanded its focus to decrease the harms associated with this dangerous activity among youth in our community ages 12 to 25.

Being president of a college or university is incredibly rewarding. I get to meet so many people as I set out to secure resources for our University—both public and private. I have opportunities to serve on boards where I get to know national leaders in higher education and in our community. I have the opportunity to interact with incredibly talented faculty who are educating the next generations of our workforce. I also get to see how deeply committed our faculty, staff, and students are to creating a more sustainable future—in all areas of human endeavor—for all the right reasons.

I don't believe that the focus on sustainability is dead. Quite the contrary, we are just at the beginning of refocusing our national priorities, as we educate the generation that will be our lawmakers and policymakers, heads of agencies and educators, business leaders, architects, and physicians. As we make sustainability our priority, they, in turn, make it their priority. In time, we will have the ability to completely transform our nation and the impact we have every day on our planet.

PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



Dr. Jonathan C. Gibraltar joined Frostburg State University as its 14th president in 2006, bringing a solid record of educational and community leadership. Since he arrived, his collaborative approach to higher education has engaged faculty, staff, students, alumni and friends in planning for the future. Dr. Gibraltar's focus on sustainability extends beyond the traditional focus on the physical environment to the well-being of the students in his charge and the community that is home to the University and most of its 5,400 students. Under Dr. Gibraltar's leadership and directed by an institutional strategic plan, FSU has aligned itself with the issues of climate change and sustainability, reduced binge-drinking among students by 24 percent to below the national average over the course of six years, and engaged its neighboring community in a broad range of efforts designed to break down "town-gown" walls that have grown up over the years.

Dr. Gibraltar earned a bachelor's degree from the State University of New York at Binghamton, a master's from New York University, and a doctorate from Syracuse University. He worked in the mental health field before entering higher education, where he has served for over 25 years as a faculty member and administrator. Dr. Gibraltar is the Maryland delegate to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' Council of State Representatives and a member of AASCU's Professional Development Committee.