

# The Case for Going Green

by Sherrie Negrea

WITH ENROLLMENTS CONTINUING TO rise, community colleges across the country are confronting one of the most critical challenges of the 21st century — the need to embrace sustainable, energy-efficient development as they expand or renovate aging campuses built during the growth spurt at two-year colleges in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the past five years, an increasing number of community colleges have incorporated sustainability not only into the construction of new classroom buildings and dormitories, but also into their curricula, mission statements, dining fare, energy usage and transportation plans. The upsurge of activity has brought two-year colleges into the forefront of the sustainability movement, transforming the way they serve as role models for a generation of students eager to see their campuses go green.

As the stewards of fiscal and administrative policy, trustees are integral players in advancing the development of sustainability at community colleges. Since many trustees come from the business community, they may have already been practicing sustainable principles and are familiar with the benefits they can bring to higher education.

“Sustainability should be a core value for everyone but particularly for community colleges, which are a focal point for community needs,” says Dr. Roger Hall, a radiologist and member of the board of trustees at Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon, a leader in the sustainability effort among two-year colleges. “They are able to act. They use public funds. For all of these reasons, they need to take the lead for others to follow.”



## Making the Investment

Sustainable development has been defined as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development. In community colleges, sustainable development initially focused on two key areas: energy conservation and green building practices.

While these issues have been part of the higher education landscape for several years, the sustainability movement on college campuses was jumpstarted by the American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment, an initiative announced by a cohort of 364 presidents of two- and four-year colleges last June.

Requiring campuses to establish target dates to become “climate neutral” by eliminating greenhouse gases, the commitment has since been signed by 478 college presidents, including 81 from community colleges.

Reducing energy consumption and waste is just one of many factors motivating community colleges, which rely heavily on public funding, to embrace green initiatives. At Dakota County Technical College in Rosemount, Minnesota, for example, energy costs last year fell by \$50,000 — an 11 percent drop — after the college installed automatic fluorescent lighting. “I think the payback is going to be huge over the next few years,” says Ronald E. Thomas, the college’s president.

That payback, community college

administrators and trustees acknowledge, can only be realized after an upfront investment. In 2006, Cape Cod Community College in West Barnstable, Massachusetts, constructed an \$8 million applied technology building, complete with a solar panel array on its roof, which qualified for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) gold certification, the U.S. Green Building Council's rating system for developing high-performance, sustainable buildings. Kathleen Schatzberg, the college's president, estimates the construction costs were between 10 to 15 percent higher to add the green features to the project, which is the first state-constructed, state-owned LEED building in Massachusetts. But she estimates the college will recover those costs in energy savings in less than seven years.

"It's definitely a long-term perspective," says Allen R. Larson, who served on the Cape Cod Community College Board of Trustees for 10 years until his term expired last fall. "There are no quick fixes with sustainability." The immediate benefits of using sustainable construction, however, are the environmentally positive message the college can adopt in raising money for the project and the "life-shaping example" it sets for students, adds Larson, who is president of the Cape Cod Center for Sustainability, a nonprofit community organization.

### Live It, Learn It

Along with incorporating sustainability in operations and construction, community colleges are also revamping their curricula to teach students about the importance of reducing global warming and to train them for the new "green collar" jobs emerging in their communities. While some colleges

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are adding degrees such as renewable energy technology, others are infusing sustainability themes into general education courses so students will be exposed to the issue in a variety of disciplines.

"If we demonstrate the importance of sustainability and then we put this in our college classrooms, our hope is that the students will take this as a way of life. Then when they build their own homes, they will give a lot of thought to the sustainability of their new living environment and they'll think about it when they buy a new car," says R. Thomas Flynn, president of Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York. "It's the education of the student that's just as important — or more important than replacing a building."

At City College of San Francisco, Trustee John Rizzo is advocating a green initiative to reduce waste by banning bottled water on campus. The board of trustees has already prohibited bottled water at its own meetings, and Rizzo has asked the entire college to follow suit. "It's a small measure but a symbolic one," says Rizzo, a writer specializing in computers and technology. "Only a small percentage of water bottles get recycled. The rest of them end up in

landfills or the ocean, and the water isn't any safer than tap water."

The sustainability movement at community colleges is not just driven by college presidents, students and trustees. The business community is demanding a new type of graduate who can tackle the issues global warming has generated in fields ranging from sustainable building design to hybrid automobile technology.

"All students need to learn not only the specifics of our sustainability challenges and the possible solutions, but also the interpersonal skills, the systems thinking skills and the change agent skills to effectively help create a more sustainable future," says Debra Rowe, a professor at Oakland Community College in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and president of the U.S. Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development. "The business community is looking for these sustainability-educated students as future business people, as employees, as consumers, innovators, government leaders and investors."

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Upcoming issues of *Trustee Quarterly* will address how community colleges are creating new job training programs to prepare students for careers in sustainability, and how sustainability saves money in construction and operating costs on college campuses.

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