Securing the Green When Going Green

During the past year, I've had the pleasure of serving on the steering committee of the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment, or ACUPCC, representing signatories from 667 higher education institutions throughout America. In June, I chaired a panel discussion in Washington, D.C., about practical ways to finance sustainability and renewable energy initiatives on college and university campuses.

The ACUPCC, according to its website, is "a high-visibility effort to address global warming by garnering institutional commitments to eliminate net greenhouse gas emissions and accelerate the research and educational efforts of higher education to equip society to re-stabilize the earth's climate." Given the worldwide scale of pollution and climate change, that may be a tall order. But we think it's a great idea to equip higher education institutions with resources not only to foster discussion about global environmental issues but also to develop action plans as practitioners of energy conservation and efficiency.

From the earliest Earth Day activism in the 1970s, colleges and universities have played a key role in raising environmental awareness. The protests and petitions of a previous generation have succeeded on many campuses by an institutional commitment to stewardship of resources. From recycling to constructing more energy-efficient buildings to commissioning environmentally smart campus master plans, higher education has gone green — or has plans to do so.

But good intentions cost money. As with heavy industry, retrofitting campuses to be environmentally friendly can be expensive. A working committee within the ACUPCC identified financing as a significant barrier to implementing sustainability on campuses. One of the goals of the Climate Commitment, therefore, is to identify available funding strategies for budget-sensitive institutions. A second goal is to encourage federal and state governments to increase support to signatories that practice or envision energy efficiency, conservation and renewable energy.

Ultimately, we hope to create a plan to help a specified percentage of the higher education community reduce on-campus energy consumption by 50 percent and achieve 100 percent renewable energy use by 2022. The Climate Commitment is designed to move colleges and universities away from the notion that efficient and renewable energy projects have to pay for themselves; rather, we urge our fellow institutions to allocate funding for sustainability initiatives as part of their strategic planning process.

There are many practical issues to be addressed along the way, of course. Among other topics, the Climate Commitment is examining the following: What mechanisms are in place, or should be put in place, to measure the costs and benefits of climate action plans and communicate with stakeholders? How can we quantify the economic benefits of greenhouse gas reduction and sustainability initiatives within existing accounting systems? Should sustainability-related debt be viewed differently than other forms of debt by accounting firms, creditors and ratings agencies?

As with reaching many lofty goals, real change comes slowly. Colleges and universities, which serve multiple constituencies, can be resistant to the kind of broad, comprehensive policy-making that underlies environmental success. But with the Climate Commitment identifying workable campus projects, gathering buy-in from governing boards and addressing issues of budget support, higher education can, in turn, serve as a resource model for other organizations.

In April the ACUPCC launched a web page intended to become a clearinghouse for ideas and information about identifying and securing financing opportunities for sustainability initiatives: www.principalclimatecommitment.org.

We look forward to finding answers to the complex questions related to environmental stewardship. Going green doesn't have to be a painful journey, but it is one that requires organizational commitment and financial planning to ensure success.

Scott D. Miller is President and M.M. Cochrane Professor of Leadership Studies at Bethany College.