More Sustainability: An Agenda for Increasing Environmental Awareness and Sustainable Practices at Mt. SAC

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Mt. San Antonio College is undertaking significant steps to increase sustainability on its campus and in its classrooms. One of the steps it has already taken is pursuing LEED certification of at least silver or better for the new School of Design building and for the new Child Development Center. In addition, the administration and Board of Trustees have made a commitment to seeking at least the minimum LEED certification standard for every new building that is built on campus in the future. Mt. SAC is also increasing its conservation of water by shifting its water supply back to its own water wells for purposes of irrigating its ball fields and wildlife sanctuary, which has reduced the use of water imported from the Metropolitan Water District by 10 percent, with a goal of 30 percent reduction. The college is also currently working with Three Valleys Water District to promote water recycling for irrigation on campus. Mt. SAC has also received a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to study building automation for sustainability and energy efficiency and it offers a certificate program in building automation for these purposes.

Under President Nixon the administration hired personnel to carry out an audit of the campus to determine the feasibility and cost of becoming members of the College and University President’s Climate
Commitment. According to Gary Nellesen, Mt. SAC’s director of facilities planning and management, the college has reduced its peak energy usage by 40 percent, saving it about $780,000. These savings were primarily achieved as a result of the school’s new policy of purchasing its power supply at night and storing cool air in underground facilities. Finally, there are plans to install solar panels on the new parking deck that the school is building on campus.

These are major steps in promoting greater sustainability at Mt. SAC that all of the campus community should be made aware of and should feel proud of. In fact one of the recommendations of this report is that the school do a better job communicating the positive steps that it is taking to the wider Mt. SAC family. In what follows I will present ideas for the direction that the author and contributors to this report believe our college should go to promote greater sustainability in the physical operation of our campus and within the classroom.

Mt. SAC Sustainability 2020 Agenda:

1. Some efforts to publicize what Mt. SAC is currently doing to promote sustainability to the wider campus community and to prospective students are already taking place. Yet, more could be done. Many people still do not know about sustainability programs that are already underway and measures that have already been implemented. This presents the campus with an opportunity since there are studies which show that students take environmental
awareness and efforts to promote sustainability into consideration when choosing schools. There are also studies which show that alumni, especially younger alumni, give at a higher rate when given an option of having their money go specifically to energy conservation or other sustainability projects on campus. There are also some studies that suggest that employees who work in more environmentally sustainable buildings and for greener companies have a more positive outlook on their jobs.

2. Mt. SAC should more widely publicize the fact that the school has recycling bins as well as where its recycled materials go and how much they save the school. The school should locate recycling bins in all faculty common areas and these should include bins for the disposal of bottles and cans as well as waste paper. Mt. SAC currently recycles food waste, but it should also study expanding recycling on campus. For example, Michigan State University bags and sells animal manure from its agricultural program to the public for use in gardens as compost. Rutgers University has negotiated contracts with the suppliers of its computers requiring the supplier to take back the old computers at the end of their contracted life cycles and recycle all e-waste. Finally, Michigan State University has a campus recycling center that collects all recyclables as well as surplus furniture and vehicles and sells them to the public or to
companies. Recycling at some schools contributes a significant revenue stream.

3. Mt. SAC should become an active participant in the SEED (Sustainability Education & Economic Development) Center initiative of the American Association of Community Colleges. This initiative aims to support community colleges in preparing their students for the green jobs that are being created with the transition to renewable energy and environmental sustainability throughout the U.S. economy. The SEED Center offers access to resources such as curriculum materials and it allows educators to exchange information using a wiki and topical discussion boards. In tandem with its involvement in the SEED Center Mt. SAC or relevant departments on campus should conduct a survey of area green businesses which would solicit information regarding the skills they need in employees and the kinds of research that the college could do that would be useful to them.

4. The college should promote the incorporation of sustainability into the curriculum across campus as widely as is feasible. As part of this effort Division offices and the administration for the campus as a whole should coordinate professional development workshops to train faculty on innovative ways to incorporate sustainability into the curriculum. In addition, occasionally it may be useful to bring presenters from other schools who can educate Mt. SAC faculty
and personnel on best practices for promoting sustainability in the curriculum or in other aspects of campus operations.

5. Inherent in the effort to involve the Mt. SAC family more broadly in accomplishing any goal is the necessity of reaching out to our students and giving them a real voice in and a sense of ownership in whatever changes we are trying to promote. The more we do to publicize what the school is doing on the issue of sustainability and what its goals are the easier it will be to get students involved. As part of the effort to encourage student involvement Mt. SAC should consider offering sustainability awards to students and faculty who make particularly noteworthy contributions to increasing sustainability on campus and in the community. The school should also consider adopting measures to promote more carpooling among students commuting to campus. (Programs such as RideShark.com are one option) Promoting more use of public transportation (buses) could also be done by more widely publicizing bus schedules and stops.

6. In keeping with its water conservation goals, Mt. SAC should promote more drought tolerant landscaping on campus. In implementing more drought tolerant landscaping Mt. SAC should draw on the expertise of its horticulture program and other relevant departments, perhaps asking them to design student projects to facilitate the transition to more drought tolerant landscaping.
7. Mt. SAC should publicize information about which classrooms are in use at what times and ask faculty to turn off lights and computers in those rooms that will not be in use for an extended period of time after they leave. The school should also replace all incandescent lights with compact fluorescents or light emitting diodes where possible. Taken together the experience at other campuses and in the private sector suggest that these measures could contribute to substantial energy savings. Additionally, as Professor Craig Petersen has suggested, the number of charging stations for electric cars should be increased on campus as more and more faculty are acquiring electrically powered vehicles.

8. Mt. SAC should consider joining the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). Membership entitles the school to discounts on all AASHE workshops and conferences and allows it to publicize its AASHE membership to incoming students and the wider community, giving Mt. SAC’s commitment to sustainability a higher profile and a recognizable imprimatur. AASHE membership also gives schools access to AASHE’s Online Resource Center, which provides a policy studies database and case studies as well as resources to support schools that join the American College and University President’s Climate Challenge. Annual AASHE membership dues for Mt. SAC would be approximately $550.
9. In tandem with its consideration of AASHE membership and becoming a signatory to the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Challenge Mt. SAC should consider joining AASHE’s STARS (Sustainability Tracking and Rating System) rating system. STARS is a broad measure of sustainability at campuses. The best analogy is LEED certification for the campus as a whole. It measures the extent to which sustainability has been incorporated into the curriculum as well as the extent to which the physical operations of the campus are sustainable. There is a discounted cost of about $700 for participating in the STARS rating system for AASHE members and it is not necessary to pay to have the campus rated every year. Every other year is suggested as a benchmark.

10. In the long run if Mt. SAC decides to become active in rating systems such as the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Challenge and STARS it will need to have personnel who can work on gathering the information and filling out the forms that these rating and certification systems require. For that reason the final recommendation is that the school consider providing faculty release time to assist with this process as Orange Coast College currently does and eventually hire a fulltime sustainability coordinator as schools like Cal State Fullerton, Cal State Northridge and others currently do. In the meantime, to support the transition to a more sustainable campus personnel, faculty and students
interested in supporting the transition should organize themselves into an advisory committee to consult with the administration on sustainability goals and monitor progress on achieving them.