

RESEARCH PAPER

Accelerating SDG Progress at Universities through Revisioning and Co-ordination

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how universities can accelerate progress towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through engaging and integrating efforts of multiple aspects of an institution.

DESIGN: The paper is both a conceptual and a case study that examines the impact of focusing on sustainability in only the curriculum and having multiple functions of the university engaging in socially relevant activities. The case study shows how one university involves multiple functions of the university in its sustainability efforts.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS: The paper focuses on the efforts of only one university and is based on the author's knowledge of early limited sustainability efforts prior to the instituting of a more comprehensive effort undertaken by the university in 2018.

FINDINGS: The active engagement of a variety of sustainability activities by many facets of the University has resulted in the university receiving many sustainability awards, grants and recognitions.

ORIGINALITY: This is an original paper based on personal experience and the many efforts by numerous individuals engaged in sustainability efforts at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM).

IMPLICATIONS: Other institutions may be able to adapt some of CSUSM's approaches to their efforts to accelerate progress towards their chosen SDGs.

KEYWORDS: *Sustainability; Universities; SDGs; Sustainability Strategies*

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of this conference is on ways to accelerate progress towards achieving the UN's Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As universities are one of the important targets in helping to achieve these goals, it is appropriate to examine how they are approaching this task and initiatives that may accelerate progress.

Means of Acceleration

There are different definitions of *accelerate* in dictionaries. One that appears to be most appropriate for the UN's desires related to the SDGs is 'to bring about earlier'. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2004). This is a time-related definition, focusing on the accomplishment of specified results and actions sooner rather than later. The university's role related to the SDGs is frequently associated with what we are teaching students and what we hope they are learning. 'Learning results in a change in behaviour' is a saying that was drilled into me during my time earning a degree in education. In this case, we would be thinking of behavioural change associated with actions related to one or more of the SDGs. However, there is frequently a time lag between what one is taught and when one is in a position to affect a behaviour change. Students, for the most part, are not in a position to integrate sustainability into the day-to-day decisions of businesses and other organisations. It may be some time before students will hold sufficient power in organisations to effect change in future practices that will bring the world closer to achieving relevant SDGs. For example, the Climate Legacy Commitment created by two MBA students at Cambridge University, Collin Janich and Peter Golding, recognises that some time will pass before students will be able to effect significant change in business practices (Khan, 2024).

The strategies available to a university in its quest to accelerate progress towards the desired outcomes could focus on ways to shorten the time between students learning about issues and doing something related to the issues, and/or it could focus on involving more individuals in the 'doing' processes.

Goals/Mission of the University

Michael Roth contends that the means and ends of education have always changed to reflect their time and place (Roth, 2024). According to Roth, in the US today, most universities follow one of two business models: a research and development focus in concert with the private sector, or one that attempts to advance programmes of indoctrination inimical to most Americans. The recent emphasis of many US institutions on DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) is reflective of the latter model. While there has been some pushback on universities' DEI efforts, generally, many universities see this emphasis as appropriate.

More universities have also begun to focus on other aspects that are consistent with today's societal concerns such as climate change (Climate Action and Sustainability Center Proposal CSUSM Faculty Proposal Spring, 2024), sustainability, gender equity, or other areas that relate to one or more the UN's Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Looking historically at the missions of universities, we find that the earliest universities were focused on training religious leaders and creating 'good' citizens. The emphasis was focused on teaching. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century that research became a co-focus with teaching. Now many universities have a mission statement emphasising both teaching and research. With teaching and research as their primary missions, societal concerns have been addressed through curricular (teaching) and research, both of which are faculty-based activities. Faculty members design and deliver their courses and faculty members design, execute and report on their research activities.

It is not surprising that some of the earliest evidence of universities addressing environmental and social concerns, particularly after the 1970s, shows that it was faculty members who began integrating various social and environmental concerns into their research and course designs. As time passed, more and more faculty members were engaged at least somewhat in sustainability research and teaching. For example, in the early 1990s, I developed a new course labelled 'Business Environments'; the course included many topics related to what became the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, and were the forerunners of the current 17 SDGs that were adopted in 2015. The environments course I developed continues to be a required course for all business majors at CSUSM. In the early 2000s I began including social and environmental concerns topics in my various marketing courses. I documented my efforts in a paper 'Approaches to the Greening of Marketing Education' (Anderson, 2007) presented at the 2007 World Marketing Congress. There were many others at CSUSM who also introduced topics related to future SDGs in their courses during this time period.

In 2011, the university (CSUSM) approved an interdisciplinary programme named Environmental Studies, within the College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral and Social Sciences. The nascent programme was the first to recognise that moving forward in these areas required an interdisciplinary approach. The programme currently has two dedicated faculty members, several lecturers, a steering committee and affiliated faculty from a broad variety of academic disciplines.

While our university was working to integrate multiple disciplines in sustainability work, a colleague and I examined the conference topics of 119 professional and

academic events in 2013, looking at the different ways organisations approached sustainability. The results prompted the following lament:

‘What is worrisome about [our findings] was that practitioners and academics working through their respective associations and events continue to view sustainable development as a concept to be appropriated within the confines of a disciplinary silo. Our writing continued’. ‘Not achieving interdisciplinary integration leaves the door open for conflicting understandings of sustainable development in real world applications’. (Ratiu and Anderson, 2014)

Understanding the Role and Impact of Faculty

For the most part, University faculty members believe they ‘run’ the university. The essential role of faculty in a university fulfilling its mission is the focus of accrediting organisations and other academic organisations. Academic Freedom, espoused by the American Association of University Professors and many other organisations, gives faculty the freedom to determine which areas of knowledge they seek to pursue, which to teach, and how to teach/research.

These activities (teaching and research) are ones that will bear fruit when their students implement what they have learned, and when others implement the findings of their research for the betterment of society. The time lag previously mentioned exists between when the faculty member imparts certain knowledge and when the student recipient of that knowledge is in a position to take actions consistent with the knowledge learned. There is also a time lag between when faculty research on sustainability issues is reported and when someone or some organisation acts based on the findings of the research. The importance of this time lag is crucial in the UN’s desire to have universities accelerate their progress toward the 2030 SDGs. There is a question as to how the gap between learning and doing can be minimised. One possible approach is to integrate learning and doing. This, however, needs to be considered within the context of a university. Instructors can have students engage in some activities related to sustainability inside and outside the classroom. A university also has many departments that ‘actually do’ things on a daily basis. The doers are the many invisible departments unrecognised by many faculty as central to the university – distribution services, food services, energy management and utility services, planning, design, construction, etc. These departments are the ones that can more quickly implement new procedures and processes that have the potential to accelerate progress towards relevant SDGs within their purview.

Gaining Understanding of Interrelated Departments

A lack of recognition and understanding of the many interrelated parts of a university was a major issue at CSUSM in 2004 when a new President was appointed. During several meetings of the new president's transition team, composed of individuals from across the university, the lack of awareness and interrelationships among departments became evident. In response to this situation, the new President Karen Haynes instituted a programme called Campus Connect in 2005. The programme objectives are:

- *Instill a deeper understanding of the CSUSM Mission, Vision and Values.*
- *Increase awareness of job functions across divisions and departments to highlight the interdependent nature of everyone's work.*
- *Develop an appreciation for the complexity of the institution.*
- *Create a cadre of 'ambassadors who will share insights, clarify misconceptions and communication information about how the university works'.*

The programme was limited to 30 individuals per year and has been in continuous operation since its inaugural class in 2004. The participants attend class sessions to engage with colleagues and to learn about the interconnectivity of the university. After graduation, they join an alumni culture that is a major resource for collaboration and work across departments within the university to achieve university goals and fulfil its mission.

Early Sustainability Effort

One of the current University goals of 'zero waste' began in 2004 and focused exclusively on recycling. The '**Reduce, Reuse, Recycle**' campaign led by a member of the facilities services department involved the entire University and encouraged everyone to recycle paper, corrugated cardboard, bottles and cans, and organic food waste. The campus-wide efforts resulted in the University winning its sustainability recognition, the first of several RecycleMania Titles. Encouraged by this result, other sustainability programmes were developed that involved cross-departmental co-operation and co-ordination.

Recent Efforts

The University created an interdisciplinary advisory committee to lead its sustainability efforts (see Table 1). This committee had representation from all departments of the University, including faculty members from six departments as well as representatives from Graduate Studies and the Library. All "doer" departments of the University were represented as these units had direct impact on decisions and actions that relate to the University's sustainability goals.

Table 1 Sustainability Advisory Committee

Department	Number of Representatives
Faculty – Environmental Studies – Anthropology – Physics – Biology – Liberal Studies – Kinesiology	6
Energy Management and Utility Services	3
Safety, Health and Sustainability	3
Association of Students	2
Office of Communications	1
Event and Conference Services	1
Office of Community Engagement	1
Dining Services	2
Planning Design & Construction	2
University Student Union	2
Facilities Services	1
Distribution Services	2
Student Housing (University Village)	2
Procurement Services & Accounts Payable	2
Office of Inclusive Excellence	1
Graduate Studies	1
Library	1
Institute of Palliative Care	2
CSUSM Corporation	1

Source: Constructed by authors

The advisory committee saw that the UN’s SDGs provided a robust and aspirational framework for a way to connect CSUSM’s sustainability goals to the larger world’s goals and priorities. The SDGs were seen to also connect to the social justice, basic needs and graduation initiatives recently adopted by the University. CSUSM’s sustainability goals show the intersectionality and connections across the departments and divisions with the broader global goals of the 17 SDGs (Figure 1).



Figure 1 California State University San Marcos Sustainability Goals and the 17 SDGs

Source: California State University San Marcos, Sustainability Master Plan

The Sustainability Framework

The Master Plan's framework identified four key components, related to the University's culture, its operations, the administration and the faculty areas of responsibility and sustainability participation.

Inclusive Excellence, Community and Culture: CSUSM embraces the human aspect of diversity, cultures and the diversity of the natural world. Desiring a better quality of life for all, the goal is to create an equitable and just learning environment.

Operations: Recognising changing climates, CSUSM is working to reduce energy usage, minimise the use of hazardous materials and reach zero-waste goals while continuing to provide the campus community with easy sustainable options.

Sustainability Leadership and Administration: It is important to ensure we are recognised for our sustainability efforts as well as our outstanding academic programmes. We desire to ensure sustainability is at the forefront of all decision-making and connected to campus-wide planning efforts as we expand and serve our region.

Teaching, Research and Service: CSUSM strives to provide innovative curriculum and research to engage students and the wider academic community. We can help ensure students are prepared for careers of their choice and understand the importance of sustainability within all career fields.

The programme currently has a Director of Sustainability and Climate Justice, a specialist in zero-waste and sustainability, two student assistants and occasional student interns. There is a Sustainability Project Fund that supports student sustainability projects. The funding source is from Associated Students and awards are on an annual basis. Prior to 2019, there were a variety of clubs that focused on different components of Sustainability and Environmentalism. In the fall of 2019, the existing four previous clubs (Environmental Club, Garden Club, Ocean Conservation Club and Sustainability Club) decided to merge into one, the Environmental Stewards Association. There are various meetings, events and activities related to sustainability around campus. A newsletter is also published (electronically) on a monthly basis, informing the campus community of all ongoing meetings, events, activities and opportunities.

The sustainability efforts and activities of CSUSM have resulted in numerous awards and recognitions throughout the region and the nation. The University received a Gold Star rating for its Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System in 2020 and 2024. Five of the University's buildings received the United States Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Efficiency Design Sustainability (LEEDS) recognition. Only through the combined and integrated efforts of all departments across campus is the University able to achieve its ambitious sustainability targets.

All universities have the potential to accelerate their progress towards sustainability goals if they choose to do so. While each university is unique in its culture, character, students, emphases, location and resources, all should be able to identify one or more of the current Agenda 2030's 17 SDGs as appropriate and meaningful to its mission and constituents. No two universities will probably approach sustainability in the same way. The example of California State University San Marco's Sustainability programmes may serve as a model for one or more universities. If a university desires to participate in activities that are related to all 17 SDGs, understanding that the CSUSM experience

shows that to accelerate progress in any or all 17 SDGs a university will benefit from engaging the ‘doers’ as well as the ‘learners’. Through working together, much can be accomplished.

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BIOGRAPHY



Professor Beverlee B. Anderson received her PhD in Marketing from the Ohio State University. She currently serves as Professor Emerita at California State University, San Marcos. She has held a variety of teaching and administrative positions at universities in the United States. She is the past President of the Marketing Educators Association and has taught in graduate programmes in Mexico and India.