The United Nations has declared a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development from 2005 to 2015. The American Association of Community Colleges’ Board of Directors recently passed a resolution to support education for sustainable development in its member institutions and affiliated councils (see box 1.) This article addresses several significant questions in terms of the implications of the AACC resolution: What is education for sustainable development and why is it so important? How can sustainable development increase access for all? Finally, what are the multiple ways community colleges can get engaged in ongoing local, national and international activities in education for sustainable development?

From the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), sustainable development’s most well known definition is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition arose from international recognition that ecosystem protection must be integrated with global socio-economic issues of poverty, unnecessary human suffering, and economic development. “Sustainability is achieved when all people on Earth can live well without compromising the quality of life for future generations” (Jucker 2003). For information on the extent of human suffering and environmental degradation caused by unsustainable practices, visit the State of the World publications at www.worldwatch.org.

The U.N. draft framework for the Decade (2004) describes education for sustainable development. “The international community now strongly believes that we need to foster - through education - the values, behavior and lifestyles required for a sustainable future. Education for sustainable development has come to be seen as a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long-term future of the economy, ecology and equity of all communities. Building the capacity for such futures-oriented thinking is a key task of education. This attitude represents a new vision of education, a vision that helps people of all ages better understand the world in which they live, addressing the complexity and interconnectedness of problems such as poverty, wasteful consumption, environmental degradation, urban decay, population growth, health, conflict and the violation of human rights that threaten our future. [The goal of education for sustainable development is] to empower everyone, young and old, to make decisions and act in culturally appropriate and locally relevant ways to redress the problems that threaten our common future.” Non-formal and formal educators as well as participants from other societal sectors (e.g. business and government) are joining forces to create the United States’ involvement in the U.N. Decade though the U.S. Partnership for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (www.uspartnership.org).
Higher education must and can play a central role in preparing students to become informed and responsible citizens in a global 21st century context of inequitable economies, diminishing natural resources and environmental degradation. In the context of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, AACC will work with the Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF). ULSF is a leading international non-profit organization devoted to strengthening higher education’s capacity to make sustainability and environmental literacy a major focus of teaching, research, service, and operations. ULSF also functions as the secretariat for signatories of the international Talloires Declaration (1990), a 10-point action plan for incorporating sustainability into university and college life, which has been signed by over 300 presidents and chancellors worldwide (including Blue Ridge Community College, Cape Cod Community College, Christopher Newport Community College, Grand Rapids Community College, Harford Community College, and Northern Virginia Community College, to name just a few.) The Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF) will be providing information to AACC member institutions and affiliate councils about databases of resources, projects, sustainability tools, case studies, and opportunities for engagement in education for sustainable development.

Although many community colleges have been including education for sustainable development (hereafter abbreviated as esd) for decades, in the past 10 years there is a growing trend to make esd a new norm in college education. This trend has supported the development of both regional and state networks for esd throughout the U.S. (see www.ulsf.org for a listing and www.efswest.org for a North American listserv.) ULSF and the state and regional networks help faculty in all disciplines as well as operations staff make sustainable development a major academic and organizational focus, disseminating and utilizing sustainability related knowledge within teaching, general education, student life, facility operations, purchasing, and strategic planning and policy-making. (See the diagram – Box 2).

Examples at community colleges abound. Broward Community College and Oakland Community College include sustainability components in their general education outcomes, so that all graduates will be engaged in sustainability. Broward CC is offering “Connecting the Curriculum Using Sustainability as a Theme” for faculty and administrators this year as part of their ongoing professional development in esd. Some states, such as Minnesota, have general education requirements that reflect sustainability concepts (Rowe 2002.)

As Mary Spangler, Chancellor of Oakland Community College, describes, “When I was President of Los Angeles City College, we modeled for the community how to reduce our pollution for a sustainable future by designing several LEED certified, green buildings. From my current position as Chancellor of Oakland Community College, it is my belief that our General Education outcomes for all students include increasing a commitment to social responsibility and understanding the global environment, both essential components of sustainability. We have also reduced our pollution via energy management and have shown our commitment to the social side of sustainability by having a bookstore request that none of the merchandise come from factories with
sweatshop working conditions. We continue to grow in our understanding and commitment to education for a sustainable future.”

Some colleges have specific courses and degrees about sustainability. Through the Partnership for Environmental Technology Education (www.ateec.org/energy), a national model curriculum in energy efficiency technologies has been developed for community colleges. Many colleges are including courses in renewable energies (www.irecusa.org). Greenfield Community College has had a Human Ecology program for over 20 years, including courses entitled “Strategies for a Sustainable Future” and “Sustainable Technologies.”

On the operations side, many colleges have had students conduct sustainability reviews and report back to the administration on energy consumption, pollution reduction, purchasing and other sustainability opportunities. Colleges have included green design and construction into the college master plan for all new constructions and renovations; chosen native plantings and integrated pest management over pesticides and herbicides; purchased socially and environmentally responsible paper, cleaning and other products, and increased energy and water conservation and waste recycling measures, often with substantial dollar savings.

Grand Rapids CC is building community partnerships for sustainable development, working with local city planners to create a stronger economy through sustainable design, helping the local high school integrate sustainability as a theme throughout the curriculum, and cosponsoring conferences with local businesses to foster a green and fair trade manufacturing and consumption economy.

Lane Community College’s sustainability web page reflects their commitment: “…Every staff member takes personal responsibility for creating and using sustainable practices and principles in our daily work, We integrate sustainability into our relationships and the social fabric of the college” (http://www.lanec.edu/sustainability/). Portland Community College at Rock Creek is opening a Center for Sustainable Practices. Oregon has created a system-wide (seven-campus) “sustainability plan” to coordinate activities and network people on all of the campuses around projects and programs relating to sustainability.

It is critical that higher education institutions understand and accept their responsibility to teach their students not only to be literate about the sustainability challenges of today but also to develop the skills and attitudes essential to engage in developing solutions to these societal problems. From this brief recounting above, it is clear that many activities at community colleges around the county already support sustainable development, including diversity, civic engagement, and service learning initiatives. Combining these constituencies within a sustainable development paradigm will move all of these issues forward.

Community colleges are in a crucial position to help people learn the skills we all need to help build democratic societies and a sustainable future. As Bill Christopher, president of Portland Community College – Rock Creek said, “We see our new Center for Sustainable Practices as one way for the college to be able to work with our local community and the
business sector to cooperatively implement sustainable practices in a wide variety of arenas. It is our belief that community colleges have the flexibility, connections with their communities and experience in applied technologies to spearhead sustainability education and training.” The great news is that sustainable development will build healthier communities with stronger economies that value education. The outcome of these efforts will support even more people being able to afford higher education, thereby increasing access even further.

Education for sustainable development recognizes that our choices as consumers, investors, workers and community members affect the quality of life of people around the world. By fostering educated choices, we can create sustainable development, which means simultaneously creating flourishing ecosystems, healthy communities and stronger economies. (see Box 3) The leaders of higher education have the opportunity to utilize the extensive networks, projects and available resources to engage their institutions in creating a sustainable future for all. Find out more about the AACC partnership and the opportunities for engagement by visiting the AACC website at http://www.aacc.nche.edu/sustainable.

Work Cited


RESOLUTION
in Support of the
United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development

Whereas,
The United Nations has declared a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development beginning in January 2005;

Whereas,
The U.S. Partnership for the Decade of Education is convening, catalyzing and communicating among sectors of society to engage in the Decade;

Whereas,
The Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future is facilitating the engagement of higher education institutions for the U.S. Partnership;

Whereas,
AACC is a leading organization representing community colleges;

Whereas,
AACC’s programs would be enhanced by available materials and new projects focusing on education for sustainable development;

Be it resolved by the Board of Directors of the American Association of Community Colleges:

That we support this effort in concert with the U.S. Partnership for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, and

Be it further resolved that AACC will collaborate with the Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future to promote programs for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development among AACC member institutions and affiliated councils.

Approved by the Board of Directors, American Association of Community Colleges, November 13, 2004.
Box 2

For education, Sustainable Development can be integrated into:

- Curricula
- Research
- Operations
- Purchasing
- Mission and Planning
- Community Outreach and Partnerships
- Student Life
- Professional Development

Box. 3 Sustainable development is often depicted visually as the following: