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Our Students Lead

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Our Students Lead : University of Dayton, Ohio

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Wednesday June 7, 2017

Our Students Lead

By Eric F. Spina

Some have asked why I joined a coalition of nearly 200 other university presidents and hundreds of business leaders, mayors and governors in signing a pledge to continue to reduce carbon emissions and make strides toward clean energy.

What I find compelling — and the reason for my signature — is the fact of our warming climate and the clear social justice issues related to it. We commit to do our part in teaching and learning about sustainability, performing research to advance the clean energy economy, and making reasonable modifications of our operations to contribute less carbon to the atmosphere. Our students and our Catholic, Marianist charism motivated me — and inspire me daily.

Indeed, long before Pope Francis issued “an urgent challenge to protect our common home,” University of Dayton students were deeply concerned about caring for the environment and the world’s most vulnerable people. I’m proud that this generation recognizes that environmental stewardship is a social justice issue that extends beyond reducing greenhouse gases to building sustainable communities. In labs across campus, they’re working with scientists on wind, fuel cells and batteries, algae, and other clean, alternative energy research. They’re working to help build a clean economy for the world.

As an institution, we do remain deeply committed to the carbon-reduction goals outlined in the Paris Agreement because this cuts to the heart of our efforts as a Catholic and Marianist university to advocate for social justice. We know that global warming disproportionately affects poorer and already disadvantaged communities. As Pope Francis expressed so eloquently in the sweeping encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, “Today we cannot fail to recognize that a true ecological approach must be a social approach, that must integrate justice into environmental discussions, and to listen not only to the cry of the earth but also the cry of the poor.”

Through the cross-disciplinary work of the Hanley Sustainability Institute, we are integrating sustainability into the curriculum and educational experiences for all students.

Through the forward-thinking action of the Board of Trustees, we are divesting from fossil fuels and coal in a thoughtful, phased way that respects the current need for hydrocarbon-based energy as we invest in renewable energy.

Through the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment, signed by my predecessor Dan Curran, we have pledged to take steps to make the campus carbon neutral by 2050. As part of our efforts to decrease our carbon footprint, we're seeking bids this summer for solar arrays for the lawn of River Campus and the rooftop of Fitz Hall as well as two electric car chargers at each building.

Through the Green Revolving Fund, we're seeding energy-saving ideas and reinvesting the savings in future sustainability projects on campus. Across campus, we've upgraded lighting systems, turned food waste into fertilizer, and taken an eco-friendly approach on all new construction.

As we look to expand our energy and environmental research, we are paying special attention to opportunities where sustainable energy and human rights researchers can work together to advance the common good, preparing students to be leaders in improving standards of living and creating a more sustainable environment.

Our commitment to the common good will not waver.

We know the climate challenge cannot be solved by governments alone and requires collective action across our world. I'm heartened that so many of our researchers, faculty, and students are focused squarely on the greater good as they work to advance science, protect the environment, and provide a voice to the voiceless.

In the pope's words, "Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home."