



# Higher Education's True Role: Creating a Healthy, Just, and Sustainable Society

by Anthony D. Cortese, ScD  
President, Second Nature

**H**umanity is at an unprecedented crossroads. Despite all the work we have done on environmental protection, all living systems are declining at an increasing rate, we are severely disrupting the stability of the climate, and there are huge social, economic and public health challenges worldwide. This is happening with 25% of the world's population consuming 70-80% of the world's resources. The crucial question for all of humanity is: How will we ensure that current and future humans will have thriving communities and economic opportunity in a world that will have nine billion people and that plans to increase economic output 4-5 times by 2050? This is arguably the greatest challenge human civilization has ever faced. It is bigger in scope than the Manhattan Project, the Marshall Plan for Europe, the Apollo Project and the War on Cancer combined.

The cultural operating instructions of modern society are that if we just work a little harder and smarter and let the market forces run society, all these challenges will work themselves out. We need a transformative shift in the way we think and act. As Einstein said, "We can't solve today's problems at the same level of thinking at which they were created." We currently view the array of health, economic, energy, political, security, social justice and environmental issues we have as separate, competing and hierarchical when they are really systemic and interdependent. For example, we do not have environmental problems, per se. We have negative environmental consequences of the way we have designed our social, economic and political system. We have a de facto systems design failure.

Unfortunately, the current educational system is reinforcing the current unhealthy, inequitable, and unsustainable path that society is pursuing. Most of tomorrow's engineers, business leaders, architects, policy-makers, product designers, etc are being trained in higher education where they are learning unsustainable ways of operating society.

## Hope and Possibility in Higher Education

What if higher education were to take a leadership role, as it did in the space race and the war on cancer, in preparing students and providing the information and knowledge to achieve a just and sustainable society? What would higher education look like? A college or university would operate as a fully integrated community that models social and biological

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sustainability itself and in its interdependence with the local, regional, and global community.

The content of learning would include a focus on sustainability in all disciplines and majors. The process of education would emphasize active, experiential, inquiry-based learning and real-world problem solving on the campus and in the larger community. Higher education would practice sustainability in operations, planning, facility design, purchasing, and investments. Schools would form partnerships with local and regional communities to help make them sustainable as an integral part of higher education's mission and the student experience.

Exciting environmental studies programs are abundant and growing. Progress on modeling sustainability has grown at an even faster rate. Many in higher education have embraced programs for energy and water conservation, renewable

energy, waste minimization and recycling, green buildings, alternative transportation, local and organic food growing and ‘sustainable’ purchasing - saving both the environment and money. The rate of increase is unmatched by any other sector of society. The student environmental movement is the most well organized, largest, and most sophisticated student movement since the anti-war movement of the 1960’s.

Even with all of these efforts, however, the overwhelming majority of graduates know little about the importance of sustainability or how to lead their personal and professional

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lives aligned with sustainability principles. There is a tremendous amount more to be accomplished –and fast.

### **The American College & University Presidents’ Climate Commitment**

In December of 2006, 12 college and university presidents working with the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), ecoAmerica, and Second Nature, launched The American College & University Presidents’ Climate Commitment (ACUPCC). The ACUPCC is a high-visibility initiative to address global climate disruption through actions to reduce and eventually neutralize greenhouse gas emissions, and to develop the capability of students to help all of society to do the same.

The participating presidents have committed their institutions to create a comprehensive institutional action plan to move towards climate neutrality by: conducting an institutional greenhouse gas inventory; developing a climate action plan to reach climate neutrality; taking immediate steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; making sustainability an integral part of the curriculum and educational experience of all students; and making the action plan, inventory, and progress reports publicly available.

More than 600 colleges and universities in all 50 states and the District of Columbia have made this unprecedented commitment. They represent millions of students – about

33% of the college student population and include every type of institution from community colleges to the biggest research universities.

### **Courageous Leadership**

The ACUPCC is an example of courageous leadership by college and university leaders. It is the first effort by any major sector of society to set a long-term goal of climate neutrality. The presidents believe that leading society to a low carbon, less auto-dependent economy fits squarely into the educational, research, and public service missions of higher education. Presidents can best provide the strategic direction and convene all the parts of a college or university to lead the cultural shift to embrace the education, research, and operational changes needed.

Separate individual action in will not work and is what has gotten us to where we are now. The ACUPCC has fundamentally shifted higher education’s attention on sustainability from a series of excellent, distinct programs to a strategic imperative of presidents, academic officers, business officers, and trustees – becoming a key lens for measuring success. The participating presidents in the ACUPCC believe it is impossible to be a leader in higher education without thinking a great deal about the future.

Some have argued that achieving climate neutrality and sustainability is too hard or impossible and that the ACUPCC is not practical or possible. What we must do is make the impossible inevitable. The earth does not recognize how hard it is for us humans to change. It doesn’t have the cognitive ability to decide to wait for us to figure out how we can change to preserve our way of life and ourselves.

When President John F. Kennedy set a goal for man to reach the moon in a decade, our country had no way of knowing if it could be done. But because it was a goal we shared and to which we put our minds, hearts and our backs, we achieved the goal in nine years and unleashed the scientific and technical revolution that led to so much innovation – from the Internet to materials science to breakthroughs in medicine—that are the basis of life today. We need that kind of leadership today from the great leaders in society, especially in higher education, who must push the limits of knowledge to go beyond what is possible now.

*Anthony D. Cortese is the founder and president of Second Nature, a national nonprofit organization working to accelerate movement toward a sustainable future by serving and supporting senior college and university leaders in making healthy, just, and sustainable living the foundation of all learning and practice in higher education. Second Nature is the lead supporting organization of the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment and of the Higher Education Associations in Sustainability Consortium. Dr. Cortese has spent the past four decades working for sustainability and environmental protection, including his time as Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection as a Dean at Tufts University. For more information, see [www.secondnature.org](http://www.secondnature.org) and [www.acupcc.org](http://www.acupcc.org).*