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The First Climate Action Plans Are In...

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September 15, 2009, was the deadline for submitting climate action plans for the charter signatories of the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment. The reports on the site provide a reality check on sustainability efforts within higher education. The proposed climate-neutral dates confirm that this endeavor may be more challenging than some institutions initially realized. In many cases, the reports show that IT is not a major partner in campus sustainability planning; however, some notable exceptions do stand out.

Scanning a few dozen of the reports provides some examples of IT sustainability strategies:

- Best practices surface most often in terms of requiring Energy Star, EPEAT, and other energy-efficient equipment purchases, as noted by the University of Florida and College of the Atlantic.
- Broad campus implementation of PC power management software was noted in a few reports, including the University of Arkansas and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The latter institution also plans to use thin-client computers and duplex printing as part of their near-term portfolio of greenhouse gas reduction practices.
- Arizona State University has a demand-side energy reduction plan to eliminate server rooms. Constructing or outsourcing the development of a single data center is also part of their plan.

Sound practices all, but most climate action plans did not mention IT in terms of projects or even membership on campus sustainability committees. Perhaps this isn’t a surprise, as sustainability and green IT did not make it into the 2009 EDUCAUSE “top ten” list of IT issues compiled from a survey of CIOs of member institutions.
Does Green IT Matter?

So if green IT is not on the typical college or university CIO’s short list and is not a key component in many climate action plans, how important is it?

Energy efficiency and conservation continue to play a major role in climate action planning whether IT sits at the table or not. Sub-metering buildings is included in the University of Pennsylvania report, including server farms and labs for the first phase; Central Connecticut State University is working to install electricity sub-metering on all campus buildings and exploring the concept of relaying the data throughout campus through a building energy usage dashboard.

General management practices have focused on goals that are measurable, and these institutions are on a path to provide metrics to those who manage day-to-day operations. Taking this a step further, it makes sense to include sustainability practices in managers’ performance reviews, particularly in those areas with large and growing carbon footprints — such as IT.

Projecting into Mid-Century and Beyond

Among the charter signatories’ plans, the most common climate-neutral date committed to is 2050. We in IT have difficulty projecting beyond 3–5 years for strategic and operational planning, yet in this area some campuses are making plans and commitments for 40 years or longer.

Clearly, this journey will extend well beyond our personal timeframes. Campus sustainability, and green IT in particular, is all about changing our culture. We know that related projects need to be cost effective or at least cost-neutral when all benefits, including an emerging tangible value for carbon, are weighed against the dollars invested. Therefore, we also need to start looking at longer term projects to match longer term environmental investment goals.

Maybe we in the higher education IT community should roll up our sleeves and invite ourselves to the table, becoming active participants in our campuses’ sustainability planning efforts. And — start providing the same kind of leadership that we’re doing for the technology issues in our “top ten” lists.

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