

Green conference – 3/3/10 by Damon Sims, Vice President for Student Affairs

Thank you, Billie. Good morning and welcome to all of you.

When I was first told that I was being asked to open a conference on “the Green Challenge,” I thought we were going to be discussing what should be done about State Patty’s Day. You have no idea how glad I am to have been wrong about that.

I am pleased instead that we are collectively turning our attention to a very real and lasting Green Challenge – the challenge of ensuring that Penn State remains the national leader it has become in efforts toward sustainability.

It may be far too early in the morning to offer such a sobering observation, but I find it frighteningly daunting to realize that we live in a time that truly matters and that we face a challenge that may eclipse any the human race has yet endured. That challenge promises to become even more difficult in the months and years ahead.

Think about it. How often does a discussion topic at work actually include the possibility that what may result could contribute to saving the planet? Even if you doubt the overwhelming scientific evidence that human activity is warming the Earth’s atmosphere, you must admit that our society’s reliance on dwindling oil reserves in the world’s most unstable region presents immediate and significant security and financial challenges. How often do the choices we make at work impact national security, or billions of dollars in public expenditures, or the quality of life that our grandchildren’s children will enjoy?

Groucho Marx once asked: “Why should we care about future generations? What have they ever done for us?” But we come together today precisely because we must care deeply about what the world will become. We must learn how to demonstrate that concern in our personal and professional choices and actions, and we must show others why they must care about these matters, too.

When we drill to the center of what brings us together this morning, we see that no one among us can escape the obligation to engage the issue of sustainability as an essential personal and professional concern. This is not a moral dilemma. It is a moral imperative.

Beyond sustainability’s global and historic implications is its immediate impact on the University and each of us. We stand to gain directly from our efforts to do what is right in this respect. The University’s Strategic Plan adopted by the Trustees last spring expressly call upon us to establish and foster sustainable environments, and it does so in part because of our very real need to significantly cut our expenses.

Our obligation to keep tuition as low as possible requires that we find these savings. Our desire to remain a great university doing great things for the Commonwealth and the world requires that we find these savings. And our hope to continue productively employing as many of us as we can requires that we find these savings, too.

In other words, we may do the right thing to save the planet, or we may do the right thing to save my job and your and others like them. But either way, do the right thing we must.

In that sense, sustainability is green both environmentally and financially. Our university’s ambition to remain a good environmental steward fits neatly with its need to be fiscally responsible. Both objectives should commit all of us to this cause.

Today’s conversations are designed to help us see this challenge for what it truly is. We must take this occasion to look past the sideshow debates about small inaccuracies in scientific publications and instead seize hold of what may be the last best chance we have to do what matters. We must change our ways, both individually and collectively, and must do so now.

Even more to the point perhaps, you and I must lead others to do so, too. This conference, after all, is titled “*Leading the Green Challenge.*” It has been said that leadership is the art of getting other people to do what you

want done because *they* want to do it. Essentially, that is the objective that brings us together today – to discover how best to lead our university community toward a sustainable future.

At its core, Penn State is an education institution. We are in the business of shaping minds and changing behaviors. The character and conscience of our students, for example, matter greatly to us. And there is no clearer way to communicate values and expectations to our students than by way of our individual and institutional choices and behaviors.

In short, we must model the sustainability we seek for our colleagues and students. We must choose to act in ways that clearly express the serious implications of any failure to be sustainable. Playing at the edges of this ambition, tinkering with it half-heartedly or leaving it to marginal consideration only, simply will not do.

Fortunately, this challenge is precisely the kind that brings a community together. People find their community in shared objectives aimed at lofty goals. In that way, our ambition for a sustainable university and the difficult choices necessary to achieve that ambition may prove to be an adhesive that binds our university community as one. It's at least a nice thought.

Our goal is not to leave nature alone or to stop progress. Our goal instead is to use nature well and to understand the difference between progress and waste. For hundreds of years, we have sought to control nature, and now we find that we have been beating it to death.

I am confident that we at Penn State will do what we must. This university always has. And I am grateful to the leadership of the Campus Sustainability Office, the Human Resources Development Center, the Office of the Physical Plant, and the Finance & Business Stewardship Key Initiative Team for bringing us together today.

Last night, my youngest son read to me a line from Dr. Seuss, on the occasion of the good doctor's birthday. As soon as the words passed his lips, I knew they said all those of us here really need to know:

"Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better – it's not."

Keep that in mind. Have good discussions today. And thank you.