



Photo Credit: David Phillips, University of California

RESEARCH BRIEF

Strategic Communication to Achieve Carbon Neutrality within the University of California

Background

The University of California has pledged to achieve net-zero carbon emissions from on-campus operations and purchased energy by 2025 through its Carbon Neutrality Initiative (CNI). The CNI's success requires engagement across the UC community of students, faculty, and staff and for carbon neutrality to be aligned with UC's core mission. Strategic communication is essential to developing the necessary knowledge and engagement.

To address this need, a team of diverse experts from across the UC campuses investigated ways to improve communications among students, faculty, staff, and administrative leaders and developed a plan to foster awareness of and participation in the CNI. The team was convened by the UC Santa Barbara Institute for Energy Efficiency and National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis as part of the TomKat UC Carbon Neutrality Project, funded by the TomKat Foundation and UC Office of the President.

Research Design

The research team undertook five methods to investigate communication challenges and opportunities: 1) analysis of campus news coverage of CNI; 2) interviews with administrative staff and managers; 3) surveys and interviews with faculty; 4) student surveys, workshop, and focus groups; and 5) data visualization testing. Because all research participants were self-selected, our findings are likely not representative of the views of the overall UC population.

Key Findings

1. Potential champions of the CNI need concrete and actionable information about measures to achieve carbon neutrality, including the pros and cons of each measure.

2. Administrative leaders are expected to take the first steps and to facilitate, but not mandate. The campus communities want to have a voice.

3. Significant tradeoffs that may compromise teaching, research, or patient care – such as inefficiencies, inconveniences, and diversion of resources – are viewed by many as unacceptable.

4. Local solutions are highly valued, including on-campus energy efficiency and renewable energy. Market-based mechanisms, such as offsets, are viewed with skepticism, especially if they divert resources from on-campus measures.

5. Decision-making needs to weigh organizational, psychological, and sociocultural considerations together with economic and technical factors to develop carbon solutions that foster engagement from the UC community.

Opportunities

1. Students, faculty, and staff were generally supportive of sustainability initiatives and thought UC should exert leadership. Even though many did not feel they knew enough about CNI or what next steps to take, they want to help make changes.

2. Many staff are already invested in achieving the CNI goal but feel the impact of their efforts is limited without stronger engagement on the part of campus leaders and the community, additional administrative support, or resources to help them advance toward the goal.

3. Linking carbon neutrality to themes such as social justice, health, responsibility, and leadership can be effective in tapping into what matters most to audiences on some campuses.

Key Recommendations

Create a campus-based, system-wide collaboratory

A central recommendation is to more closely align the CNI with UC's core missions of teaching, research, and public service through system-wide, campus-based "collaboratories," or living labs that actively develop inspiring, pragmatic, scalable solutions. The collaboratory approach would present carbon neutrality as an opportunity rather than a mandate. It would be a clear initiative with an applied-research agenda and opportunities for engagement through classes, energy-management projects, data management, communications, and other aspects of the CNI. In all cases, collaboratory projects would focus on

producing clear and measurable decreases in campus energy-related emissions. The collaboratory and associated projects could become the focus of a larger communication campaign that would aim to develop a foundational ethos for UC as an active, community-driven learning space that has impact.

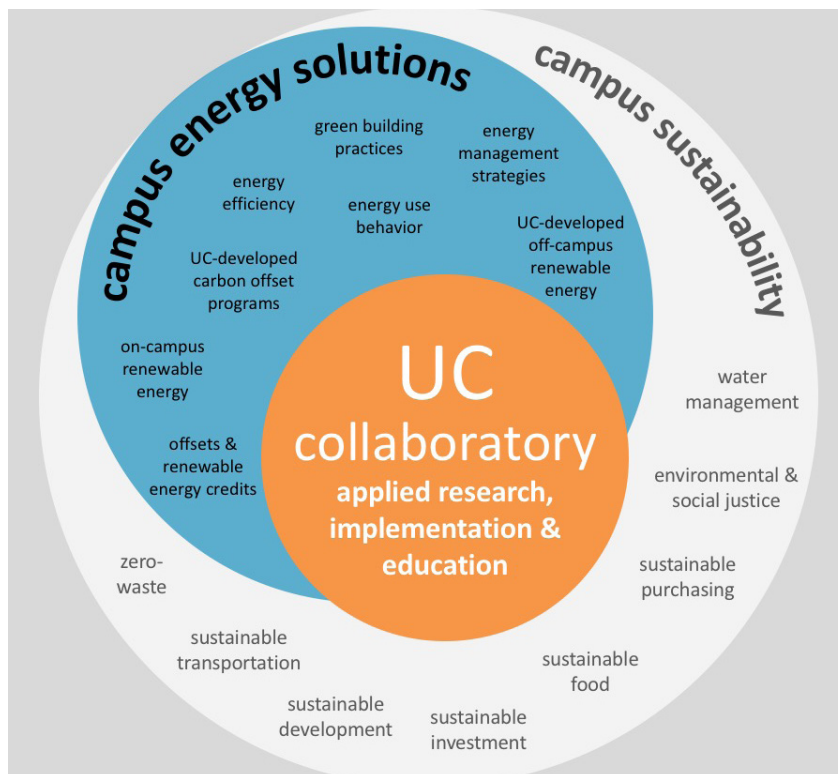
Develop information-rich communication resources

Campuses and UC Office of the President should adopt a standard of transparency with campus energy emissions and energy data, making freely available the fundamental information necessary to empower potential CNI champions. Beyond data transparency, potential champions need unbiased and complete information about how carbon neutrality fits within

the context of UC's mission, including acknowledgement of the challenges, costs, funding sources, budget impacts, and other issues. Champions empowered with this information will be key to grassroots and authentic socially mediated communication within the campus communities about carbon neutrality, UC's goals, and the strategies their campuses are pursuing.

Read the full report with additional findings and recommendations at this [link](#).

Figure: The proposed collaboratory will focus on campus energy solutions in the context of the broader sustainability themes across the university system.



Source

R. Bales, S. Rebich-Hespanha, L. Leombruni, H. Hodges, A. Heeren, H. Gelbach, N. Van Leuvan, J. Christensen. 2018. Strategic Communication to Achieve Carbon Neutrality within the University of California, Report of the UC TomKat Carbon Neutrality Project.. doi: 10.6071/H87D2S8W

Research sponsor

The TomKat Foundation provided financial support to convene this working group. Supplementary support was provided by the University of California Office of the President through the Carbon Neutrality Initiative.

TomKat UC Carbon Neutrality Project

The TomKat UC Carbon Neutrality Project was established in 2016 to fund expert teams from the UC community to develop solutions to two of the biggest challenges to achieving carbon neutrality: phasing out natural gas and communications to build support within UC. The project was initiated by UC Santa Barbara's Institute for Energy Efficiency and hosted by the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis.

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