

**State of the Environment at West Chester University
and in West Chester Borough
Remarks by WCU President Greg R. Weisenstein
Sykes Ballroom
6:30 p.m., Tuesday, April 20, 2010**

Forty years ago—4.5 billion years after the birth of our planet—we human beings finally created Earth Day. What happened 40 years ago to bring us to action? One catalyst was a photograph, but hardly an ordinary one. Humans had reached the moon, and along with that feat came a view of our Earth as we'd never seen it before. The amazing full-earth image conveyed a powerful symbolic message: We are not simply individual countries and communities; we are one earth, one environment, one people.

Viewed from the Earth's surface rather than the moon's, the picture is not so unblemished. According to the Clean Air Council, "In the U.S. [alone], 4.39 pounds of trash per day and up to 56 tons of trash per year are created by the average person." While the Earth is suffering across the length and breadth of its surface, "Each American exerts three times as much pressure on the natural environment as the global average."¹

To change the view again, we can look from today into the future, and this time we have a choice about what we will find. I choose to see an Earth where fossil fuel is nearly obsolete—its place taken by energy

¹ <http://www.cleanair.org/Waste/wasteFacts.html>

sources such as hydrogen fuel cells, wind, solar and geothermal energy, and yet undiscovered sources. I foresee a place where we universally value the reuse and recycling of products and have set aside our 20th and 21st century “build in obsolescence” philosophy. In this future, when products *are* replaced, they will have been engineered to be recycled, and recycling will be economically beneficial and expected. Finally, in this future, we will see new and well-paid jobs right here in the U.S. that support our new culture of energy, sustainability, and environmental care. These jobs will grow out of our current chief assets in the global marketplace: our technology and our entrepreneurial spirit.

Meanwhile, here during Earth Week 2010, the concerns of Earth Day 1970 continue in force. These concerns can be summarized in one word: *sustainability*. To explain more fully, *sustainability* is the process by which natural, social, and economic concerns are brought into balance, providing a fulfilling and worthwhile life for everyone—now and well into the future. Sustainability comprises two interconnected questions, one environmental and the other economic. The environmental question is, “How should we use our economic and technical ability to avoid undercutting the natural systems on which people everywhere depend?” The related economic question is, “How can we learn to value our human and natural capital and

Earth's ecological services to avoid diminishing and degrading them over time?" Answering these questions is critical for the wellbeing of the Earth and for the preservation and prosperity of all life, present and future.

As has been said, "We are the first generation to recognize our influence on the environment and the last to escape the consequences."² While the world's nations cannot yet collaborate sufficiently to solve our environmental challenges, we can help to do so as an institution of higher learning and as a community. In fact, the route to sustainability is through education and collaboration. The students in our classrooms are not simply the next stewards of our environment; they are also a generation at the tipping point. Will humanity move forward or back? We now have research and technology available to help heal our environment, but do we have the commitment? Are we willing to make the necessary sacrifice?

Sustainability is, should be, and will continue to be a core commitment for West Chester University, and we are joined in this commitment by the Borough of West Chester. Sustainability is a guiding principle for planning and action. The University's current strategic plan, the *Plan for Excellence*, includes as a goal encouraging environmental awareness through training, curricula, and co-curricular programming;

² J.R. Pegg, "The Earth is Melting, Arctic Native Leader Warns," Environment News Service, 16 September 2004, <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/sep2004/2004-09-16-10.asp>.

assessing and reducing the ecological impact of the University; and promoting research and service that foster regional and global sustainability. We are acting vigorously on that goal, and this year, the University began moving toward a new strategic plan through a shared visioning process. The new plan, which will begin taking shape next year, will expand and emphasize our institutional orientation for sustainability and foster a sustainability ethos.

As we develop our next strategic plan and further develop sustainability at West Chester University, we will assess our efforts and establish priorities for the future. We expect, for example, to draw heavily upon the sustainability assessment process developed by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. This process is known as the STARS program—the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System. Information about all segments of the University will give us a baseline in three component areas: education and research; operations; and planning, administration, and engagement.

Neither sustainability itself nor progress in the STARS areas is new to WCU, and we intend to build on our accomplishments and our commitment to multiply our achievements. Reflecting education and research, for example, we have the Gordon Natural Area for research and teaching; the

Merion outdoor classroom, which was dedicated on Earth Day 2009; certificate programs in environmental education; and our work with the ACEER Foundation, which supports research and conservation in the Peruvian rainforest. We take great pride in these areas and will work hard to preserve and enhance each as cherished resources well into the future. We will also continue to explore ongoing sources of funding that allow our entire community to benefit fully by expanded programming related to each. As we move forward, we will increase the scope and reach of sustainability education across the curriculum, adding degree programs that formally prepare our students to advance research and best practices. We will also work campus wide to infuse sustainability education in our students' general education courses, professional preparation, co-curricular activities, and volunteer and internship experiences.

WCU's achievements in the area of operations include energy efficiency upgrades, storm-water management, and recycling. We are also implementing one of the nation's most ambitious energy-conversion projects with the goal of heating and cooling our buildings with geothermal energy and reducing our output of harmful emissions by more than 100 tons annually. WCU is already heating and cooling 15 of its academic and residence-life facilities using geothermal technology, including an

innovative “district” geo-exchange system that only a few schools have developed worldwide. In the third STARS category—planning, administration, and engagement—WCU has taken the highly meaningful step of appointing both a sustainability coordinator and a Sustainability Advisory Committee.

In spite of our success in meeting sustainability goals, we know that much still remains to be done. The STARS assessment model will give us a basis for objectively considering our overall accomplishments and for defining and prioritizing areas for improvement. Collecting assessment information and using it fully will require a strongly coordinated effort across the University, and so we all will depend heavily on the guidance of our new sustainability coordinator and the Sustainability Advisory Committee, who will report directly to me.

Some may question why the University is placing such emphasis on sustainability and on programs in support of its goals, especially during difficult economic times. A few may ask, “What will all this gain us?” I would answer by referencing the big picture and a hard truth: Around the globe we see enormous environmental, economic, and social crises, and climate change is one of the most striking. Although as individuals and as an institution, we are only a small part of the problem, we can become a big

part of the solution through our educational mission, sustainability research, and engagement with the larger regional, national, and international communities in which we live.

Part of educating for sustainability is giving WCU students international experience at home and abroad, including understanding global environmental issues. As I noted in my inaugural address, we must work together so that all WCU graduates are prepared to champion our environment in their personal life and through their professional practice. Sending our students into the world with a firm commitment to and knowledge of sustainability will be among our finest contributions—to the students themselves and to our communities and planet Earth.

While our reach will be wide, the most noticeable changes will probably be right on campus. The University will continue to reap the environmental and economic benefits of reducing our ecological and carbon footprints. At the same time, we will prepare to *sustain* sustainability by investing some of our savings to fund the future. I am directing my administration to find ways of preserving a portion of our revenue streams coming from sustainable development so they can nourish sustainability initiatives.

In the final analysis, we must rely heavily on our current and future generations of students to fulfill the emerging commitment to our environment. With a true demonstration of that commitment, I believe future generations of college students will be even more concerned about sustainability and a good deal more prepared to begin undoing the damage that has been done by our generation and previous generations. According to the Princeton Review, which began giving environmental scores to colleges three years ago, 26 percent of students have indicated that information about a college's commitment to the environment would "very much" impact their choice of college. That number is likely to grow, and we want those concerned students to join us here. Increasingly, even more students will choose West Chester University because our sustainability ethic matches their own.

Promoting sustainability in our area is not a West Chester University initiative alone. I am delighted that WCU has joined Mayor Comitta and the Borough of West Chester in a Joint Task Group on Sustainability. This dedicated group of borough and university representatives will work together to promote environmental sustainability and supporting best practices. The Joint Task Group members are committed to making life in our community even better through such means as reducing emissions and

expanding recycling as we move toward a carbon-neutral status. My good friend and colleague, Mayor Carolyn Comitta, will tell you more about our new partnership in service of the environment.

In closing, I want to go back to July 1965, four years before we humans reached the moon and saw the view of our Earth from there. Speaking in Geneva at the end of his life, American statesman Adlai Stevenson seemed to see the whole-Earth image in his mind's eye. "We travel together," he said, "passengers on a little space ship, dependent on its vulnerable reserves of air and soil; all committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and I will say, the love we give our fragile craft. We cannot maintain it half fortunate, half miserable, half confident, half despairing, half slave to the ancient enemies of man half free in a liberation of resources undreamed of until this day. No craft, no crew can travel with such vast contradictions. On their resolution depends the survival of us all."³

³ Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development, Illinois State University, <http://stevensoncenter.org/about/stevenson.shtml>.