



November 10, 2021

Sent via email to Dr. Heather Houser, Dr. Zoltan Nagy, and Dr. Miriam Solis

**Response to Letter to President Hartzell in Support of the Austin Climate Equity Plan (ACEP)**

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your engagement and interest in the sustainability efforts of the university. As a former chair and member of the President's Sustainability Steering Committee, I have held these issues near to my heart for many years before I stepped into this role. I, too, am proud of the steps the university has put in place to lower the campus carbon footprint and to support students and our academic and research missions.

I am pleased to announce that I have approved plans to increase funding to the Office of Sustainability, following the recommendation of the University Budget Council (UBC). These increased resources will create new student-focused programming and a new full-time position to ensure sustainability is a focus in our future construction and building efforts. In addition to moving the Office of Sustainability to core funding, with UBC's support, I have approved \$60,000 for program enhancements specific to increasing student leadership and peer engagement, \$100,000 for enhancing campus infrastructure standards and investments, and \$60,000 to restore staffing resources.

In early 2020, the President's Sustainability Steering Committee (PSSC) had just begun an effort to update the 2016 UT Austin Campus Sustainability Plan. Although the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted these efforts, the PSSC approved in April a set of values and an "equity lens" similar to that developed for the Austin Climate Equity Plan. They also approved draft goal statements for four focus areas: Academics, Engagement, Operations, and Emissions. The outlined values and goals align with the university's ongoing efforts and those that have identified as priority work for the future.

The increase in funding expands the capacity of the Office of Sustainability to pursue the goals of the updated Campus Sustainability Plan in collaboration with campus partners. This includes reducing our carbon footprint and further addressing greenhouse gas emissions in ways that align with City of Austin efforts.

The Office of Sustainability regularly coordinates with UT Austin Utilities and Energy Management to continue work to reduce campus emissions through reduction of campus energy use and identification and implementation of renewable energy sources. The PEER-certified campus district energy system is internationally recognized as one of the most efficient plants of its kind in the world. In 2015, the university set the goal of reducing campus energy use per square foot by 20% by 2020. We met that energy efficiency goal in 2018, despite adding over 1 million square feet during that same period. This reduction resulted in savings of over \$17 million in fuel costs – an indication of the magnitude of the reduced use of fuel and lower emissions, as well. In addition, Plant efficiency improvements have avoided \$122 million in fuel costs since 1996 while the campus added over 6 million gross square footage.

The university continues to look at ways to offset campus loads and implement renewable sources for future campus load. This past summer, the Utilities and Energy Management team replaced a 40-year-old chiller at the Pickle Research Campus with a new chiller that uses LEED-compliant refrigerant and will save power through optimized chiller operation. It is worth noting that reducing old refrigerant use aligns with goals in the Austin Climate Equity Plan. There is also an effort to conserve water use in the utility system to build on the 20% reduction since 1996 by increasing the use of non-potable water.

In addition to energy and emissions efforts in campus operations, sustainability has also been integrated into university curriculum. A partnership with the George and Cynthia Mitchell Foundation has increased

**JAY HARTZELL, President**



sustainability content in curriculum that has reached more than 10,000 students during the past seven years, and new sustainability degree programs in the College of Liberal Arts and Cockrell School of Engineering were launched during the past three years. We have also launched a new, cross-campus Global Sustainability Leadership Institute, led by the McCombs School of Business and Moody College of Communication. More than half of UT Austin's departments conduct sustainability research that is led in part by Planet Texas 2050 and the UT Austin Energy Institute.

And the work continues.

Recently, the Office of Sustainability, Faculty Innovation Center, and members of the PSSC coordinated to collate a comprehensive, institutional survey of students on campus. The survey, which was sent to students last month, will help the university understand students' attitudes, knowledge, and interests, and provide a baseline of understanding of student values across a wide range of sustainability items. Additionally, it will help inform future curriculum development and strategies for the Campus Sustainability Plan.

During this same timeframe, many of you and others from UT Austin participated in the City of Austin process to update the Austin Climate Equity Plan. This is a great example of the ways in which the UT Austin community supports local initiatives. The increased funding for the Office of Sustainability will allow the university to pursue more opportunities for alignment of campus sustainability goals with community goals.

This includes opportunities for increased student engagement. A highly successful component of the Austin Climate Equity Plan was a Climate Ambassadors program to elevate the voices of people who had been systematically left out of, misrepresented in, or ignored during climate change conversations and planning initiatives. A similar program could be built on campus, with students historically not represented in our sustainability conversations becoming representatives engaging their peers in academic and co-curricular settings on sustainability topics. Funding will also support new staff resources to sharpen our sustainability focus on building construction and operations, mobility mode shifts, transportation electrification, landscape/open space, stormwater management and other areas.

As mentioned above, the work of the PSSC in updating the Campus Sustainability Plan in early 2020 was interrupted by the pandemic. As you may know, one of the parallel drivers for the PSSC at the time was a charge from then-President Fennes to provide "recommendations on how to align the University's mission, current campus strategic plans including the Sustainability Master Plan, and legacy of resource conservation and stewardship to explore potential goals and strategies to address greenhouse gas emissions." Under the direction of the PSSC, which I was chair of at the time, the Office of Sustainability and Utilities and Energy Management had just begun an effort to educate faculty, staff and students about the challenges inherent with our campus emissions sources.

In response to your letter requesting the PSSC to restart this conversation, I agree. I will refresh the charge to the PSSC to review our campus emissions inventory and suggest a reasonable timeline to provide recommendations on further emissions strategies that account for technical and financial feasibility, as well as opportunities to reinforce our educational mission. I understand climate issues are critically important to our students and the future of society. I believe we can have a positive impact on these issues.

Thank you again for your passion and interest in sustainability and in how we can continue improving and growing our efforts to encourage innovation among our student body, within our curriculum and research pursuits, and in our operational oversight.

Best regards,  
Jay

**JAY HARTZELL, President**