A Gathering of Minds
From resource management to climate action planning, universities have been at the forefront of the modern-day sustainability movement. It has become clear that just as the academic, social, and administrative needs of universities continue to evolve, so must issues of sustainability and environmental responsibility. Therefore, it’s no coincidence that the evolution of the Smart and Sustainable Campuses Conference has paralleled the evolution of campus sustainability. In reviewing 10 years of conferences, a progression in the scope and scale of campus sustainability programs are reflected in the diversity of attendees, the presentations and workshops offered, and the breadth of knowledge and experience that attendees bring to this event every year.

**EPA-Imagined Conference**

More than a decade ago, the Smart and Sustainable Campuses Conference was first imagined by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), who saw colleges and universities analogous to cities that face their own microcosms of environmental challenges. Due to population growth and changing demographics, campuses were expanding outside of their traditional boundaries and into neighboring communities.

Curious about how issues of land use planning, transportation, and community development were playing out in college towns, EPA imagined a conference that would bring together leaders from planning, finance, facilities, and procurement with decision-makers from college and university towns. In addition, EPA was looking for a more collaborative relationship with stakeholders, rather than simply tracking environmental compliance. Thus, in 2005 at the University of Maryland, the first Smart and Sustainable Conference was born.

When the idea of creating a sustainability-focused higher education conference was first considered, few colleges and universities had organized sustainability efforts. The focus at that time was on the environmental performance of campuses. Conference tracks from 2005 included “Smart Growth,” “Transportation,” “Energy,” and “Finance,” and reflect a focus on campus operations and improving efficiency of the built environment. Conference sessions discussed peak oil, habitat restoration, and high performance facilities.

While climate change was a rising issue, few if any institutions were measuring their greenhouse gases. Current, well-known names in campus sustainability such as the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) had not yet formed, and campuses did not yet have the opportunity to show leadership by signing the American College and University President’s Climate Commitment. Therefore, that first conference, sponsored by EPA, the Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers (APPA), the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP), and the University of Maryland, centered on topics that were important and timely: smart growth and operational sustainability.

In the wake of a successful first year with approximately 200 attendees, the conference sponsoring organizations felt that a significant niche had been identified. Additional organizations joined the planning committee, including AASHE; the Campus Consortium for Environmental Excellence (C2E2); and Campus Safety, Health, and Environmental Management Association (CSHEMA). Through 2007, the conference remained mostly focused on smart growth and environmental compliance.

by Aynsley Toews

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Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., reflected similar environmental priorities of resources conservation and habitat protection in his 2007 keynote address. He arrived in College Park four hours before his 9:00 a.m. keynote address, and spoke for one hour without a single page of notes.

Besides Kennedy, notable speakers from the early years included Terry Tamminen, former chief policy advisor to the Governor of California; Anthony Cortese from Second Nature; and Leith Sharp from the Harvard Green Campus Initiative. Sharp spoke with clarity and inspiration about the issues facing sustainability programs. Sharp and Cortese were involved with conference planning and left their signature on the early days of the Smart and Sustainable Conference.

**NACUBO Takes Over As Conference Organizer**

In 2008, NACUBO took over from EPA as the primary organizing body of the conference. As a business officer association, NACUBO focused attention on the business case for sustainability and how to finance operational sustainability. Concurrent sessions over the next few years focused on financing green construction and energy retrofit projects. Achieving carbon neutrality and climate change were becoming bigger parts of the conversation, but many colleges and universities were still without staff dedicated to these issues. A concurrent session in 2008, “Why Your Campus Needs an Office of Sustainability,” addressed this early lack of leadership.

Parallel to the Smart and Sustainable Campuses Conference development, the President’s Climate Commitment was facilitating rapid change within many colleges and universities. Students were becoming better organized, educational opportunities were growing, and higher education was increasingly expanding sustainability reach within communities. These changes were subsequently reflected in conference sessions: In the 2011 program, for example, one-fifth of concurrent sessions were focused on connecting campuses with their local communities and the development of synergistic partnerships.

**The University of Maryland Becomes New Host**

In 2012, the University of Maryland became the official conference host after a transfer in management from NACUBO. At that time, the conference was at a crossroads. Attendance had fallen, campus budgets were limited, and conference sessions focused on broader sustainability issues and not simply financing strategies. The University of Maryland needed to make a decision about whether to keep the conference operating and how to meet the needs of its stakeholders. The conference planning committee, which still included APPA, NACUBO, Second Nature, AASHE, the United States Green Building Council (USGBC), and a number of universities, set out to discuss how to keep the Smart and Sustainable Conference relevant and fill a professional development need.

The committee agreed that the conference should remain small (300–400 attendees) to maintain an intimate nature with the opportunity to network, and should reflect a more in-depth agenda. Conference evaluations regularly reflected on how typical conference sessions often ended just as the discussion got interesting. The committee wanted the conference to become more dialogue-based rather than one-way communication. Therefore, for the first time, the 2012 conference program included lengthy 40-minute presentation and 80-minute workshop sessions to facilitate sharing and discussion. These sessions allowed deeper dives into content areas and allowed presenters and attendees to discuss challenges and opportunities together.

From 2012 onward, the conference focused on becoming an intimate, discussion-based networking opportunity for higher education stakeholders.
speakers have come from outside the higher education community. For example, the 2013 program featured Van Jones from Rebuild the Dream and Colin Beavan from the No Impact Project.

In 2013, the conference was growing again and needed a new home outside of College Park. After one year in Bethesda, MD, the conference traveled to Baltimore, where it has stayed for the past two years. Conference planning has also evolved to ensure a sustainable experience for attendees. While the conference has been carbon neutral each year, the planning committee also began working with the venue to ensure food was sustainably and locally sourced. This meant working with chefs on low-carbon menus and ensuring that the conference could report on local farms that were supplying food to attendees. For the past two years, leftover food has been recovered and donated to homeless shelters by the Food Recovery Network, a student-led organization founded at the University of Maryland in 2011.

10th Annual Smart and Sustainable Campuses Conference
The 10th annual Smart and Sustainable Campuses Conference was held this past March, and continues to meet the evolving needs of the higher education sustainability community. The diversity of the conference also continues to grow, with attendees hailing from the United States, Canada, Turkey, and Brazil. Small, two-year colleges, liberal arts institutions, and large research universities are all represented, their sustainability experiences as diverse and valuable as their institutional missions. The feedback and evaluations from these attendees continues to shape the conference every year, and will continue to influence the conversations surrounding campus sustainability. But, despite concentrated efforts over the years to develop this small conference into a large success, the mission of Smart and Sustainable has not changed: a dedication to the professional development and networking of the higher education community. 

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