Introduction

Climate change is a global justice issue that has the potential to impact all aspects of society but disproportionately impacts marginalized groups, and is estimated to cost approximately $143 billion per year (Newman & Noy, 2023). In particular, students at community colleges are more likely to belong to marginalized populations that experience greater impacts of climate change; being ill-equipped to address climate issues in their personal lives and careers will further amplify these threats in their communities. The United Nations and United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (hereafter UNESCO), in addition to other international conferences and organizations, have spearheaded efforts since the 1970's to streamline curriculum and programming for sustainability in higher education (Eby & Rangarajan, 2023; Filho & Pace, 2016; UNESCO, 2014). Over 170 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the US have signed the Talloires Declaration, an international statement of commitment to implement a sustainability action and environmental literacy plan at their institution to help address climate change and equip students and employees to improve sustainability in their own lives and on campus (ULSF). The creation of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) in 2005, the first professional organization for sustainability in higher education in North America, helped advance this goal by providing inspiration, accountability, and guides to HEIs to grow their institutions in sustainability and address climate goals (The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, n.d.). In addition to sustainability becoming a greater focus within education at an international level, institutional environmental commitment is increasingly important to college applicants, with greater than two-thirds of prospective college students indicating that sustainability at an institution would impact their decision to apply to or attend that school (Krizek et al. 2012, The Princeton Review, 2022). Though the typical MCC student may not be able to make college application decisions based on environmental choices, sustainable

campuses are clearly increasingly important to students. As one of my environmental science students reflected towards the end of the course, “humans have a vital role in the sustainability of our natural world. It's about learning how to live in harmony with the environment by recognizing the interconnectedness of all living things and the consequences of human actions” (Environmental Science 1301 Student, 2024). There is clearly increasing interest and demand for HEIs to incorporate sustainability into the college experience, and students are aware of the “role of education and collaboration in addressing global environmental challenges” (Environmental Science 1301 Student, 2024).

Despite the importance of integrating sustainability into HEIs to equip students in addressing climate goals and improve sustainability education, a majority of HEIs have not developed sustainability plans, including McLennan Community College (Eby & Rangarajan, 2023). MCC does have a sustainability policy (Policy C-I-A) and a sustainability committee to help meet goals within the sustainability policy. Policy C-I-A states that “sustainability in curriculum design and conservation activities will become part of the core of campus strategic planning,” though with limited time that the sustainability committee members have, it has been challenging to advance sustainability in these areas (McLennan Community College 2022). In addition to MCC’s sustainability policy and activities, there is increased demand within the community to address sustainability and environmental impact concerns. The City of Waco, in collaboration with other local groups, has grown considerably in sustainability and sustainable education in the last decade. The City of Waco now utilizes a 100% renewable energy plan, has hired two staff devoted solely to sustainability, maintains sustainable development as the guiding principle of the City’s 2040 Comprehensive Plan, and has been a strong partner in the annual Green Communities Conference.

Because of increasing public demand to address sustainability concerns, both locally and at the national level, and the goals of MCC’s sustainability policy, I would like to request a sabbatical leave to study campus sustainability plans at colleges and universities to develop a

framework of best practices for consideration by the senior leadership of the college. This will help advance the goals of Policy C-I-A and develop strategic and actionable recommendations to improve environmental education on campus, reduce the environmental impact of campus activities, and equip and empower students to address environmental issues in their personal lives and in their future careers.

Educational Objectives

This sabbatical opportunity will help me achieve several goals included in my professional development plan: service on MCC's Sustainability and Tree Committees, updating curriculum in environmental science lecture and lab courses, and improving my understanding of HEI sustainability initiatives as I pursue my doctorate in higher education leadership. Throughout my employment at MCC, I have served on the Sustainability Committee and Tree Committee on campus. The last several years, I have also been a part of the Green Communities Conference planning committee, which has put together an annual sustainability conference in collaboration with multiple local partners. My time serving on these committees has demonstrated the value of having a concrete framework when striving to accomplish goals and objectives. Currently, the MCC Sustainability Committee does not have a long-term plan; all members are full-time employees with other responsibilities to manage, so developing and implementing a long-term plan is a time-consuming goal that has been out of reach. Developing a campus framework of best practices will expand my service on the MCC Sustainability Committee, and will help me grow my knowledge of student and employee sustainability priorities on campus. This will help hone my teaching in the classroom to better address topics of interest to students, and will also help direct long-term efforts of the MCC Sustainability Committee "to develop a culture of sustainability on campus by engaging college personnel, departments, college partners, and students in environmentally sustainable practices and education" (McLennan Community College, 2022). Additionally, I am pursuing my Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership at Tarleton State University and am interested in looking at

sustainability initiatives on campuses for my doctorate. Developing a campus sustainability framework for MCC will not only have immense benefits to MCC, but through the course of my research to develop this work, will help me narrow down my scope of research for my doctorate.

Proposed Sabbatical Leave Activities and Projected Product

This sabbatical opportunity will require several phases. These phases will be conducted over the course of an academic year, as the sabbatical proposal request is for Fall 2025 and Spring 2026. The split-load sabbatical request over two semesters will allow for the time required to conduct each phase and will minimize the burden on other geoscience faculty that would be required to offer the regular number of environmental science classes. The phases of this sabbatical leave will include:

1. Research into sustainability plans present at other HEIs.
2. Meetings with interested stakeholder groups on MCC's campus to gauge interest in various activities and ensure stakeholder buy-in.
3. Developing a framework of best practices for sustainability at MCC based on feedback from stakeholders and research from other HEIs.

To start this project, I will need to first conduct research of other HEIs to see what components are typically included in successful campus sustainability plans, and what items have been feasible and attainable. This will most likely focus on Texas universities, but I am interested to see which community colleges in Texas have sustainability plans and what successes and challenges they have experienced. This will require conducting internet searches and reaching out to the various HEIs to learn more about their sustainability programming and campus sustainability plans.

After conducting this research to determine what is generally included in successful campus sustainability plans, I will need to conduct stakeholder meetings with various groups on campus, including staff, faculty, and students, to determine which components from my prior research would be most important to our specific campus community. In particular, meeting with

MCC's Leadership Team, Sustainability Committee, Physical Plant, and Food Service areas will be critical to providing feedback on interest, engagement, and potential challenges with any proposed initiatives to include in the framework. I will also design an online survey to solicit feedback from faculty, staff, students, and other community stakeholders who may not have the time or interest to attend a meeting in person. These stakeholder meetings and surveys will provide valuable information to help craft the framework and will also start to develop stakeholder buy-in, which is critical in order to implement any type of change within our community and has been shown to be an essential component of successful campus sustainability plans (Eby & Rangarajan, 2023).

After conducting initial research and soliciting feedback from campus stakeholders, I will start to develop a proposed framework of best practices for campus sustainability plans for submission to the Sustainability Committee and Leadership Team. The end product of this sabbatical project will be a framework of best practices that can help direct the efforts of the entire campus in reducing their environmental impact moving forward. Main components of the framework will likely include: waste management strategies, energy efficiency, water conservation, emission reduction strategies, and environmental education opportunities. This framework will be a proposed roadmap for the leadership team and Sustainability Committee to help further sustainability initiatives on campus and will include specific goals that are measurable and achievable.

Benefits to Applicant, Students, and Institution

This sabbatical opportunity would have clear benefits for me, students, the institution, and our community. As previously mentioned, I am pursuing my Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership at Tarleton State University and am interested in looking at sustainability initiatives on campuses for my doctorate. Developing this framework through the course of my research, would help me focus on my topic of interest to study for my dissertation. Additionally, developing a deeper understanding of what sustainability concerns impact our

students will help me shape what is taught in my environmental science classes, ensuring relevance to students and increased engagement in the content.

Developing a campus sustainability framework would also benefit our students. As previously mentioned, there is increasing interest by students in general to attend campuses that have sustainability initiatives. For our students in particular, who are disproportionately impacted by environmental concerns due to their socioeconomic backgrounds, having a sustainability framework would help address increasing student interest in sustainability and would better equip students to tackle climate and sustainability issues in their personal lives and in their future careers. In addition, the information collected from students regarding their perspectives on environmental concerns and sustainability initiatives can also be used to help shape discussions and content within environmental science classes on campus, which will help improve student investment in learning. Other courses on campus may also consider how to incorporate some of these issues and topics into their course content, helping to improve integrated sustainability curriculum on campus and offer this content to students who may never take an environmental science class.

This plan will also help MCC as it will develop a clear framework for reducing environmental impact on campus and will truly help make sustainability “part of the core of campus strategic planning” as outlined in Policy C-I-A (McLennan Community College, 2022). A campus sustainability framework will also benefit MCC’s Sustainability Committee - it will provide a long-term plan with specific actions and goals that the committee can follow and help implement. Maintaining a campus sustainability framework helps address MCC’s core value that people matter - we all deserve access to a clean and healthy environment and all need environmental resources, so by taking better care of our planet, we are taking care of people - both in and beyond our immediate community. This framework will also align our institution’s goals with the increasing desire for improved sustainability within our community, and will enhance partnerships and collaboration with local sustainable partners.

Implementation

As previously mentioned, the end product of this sabbatical leave will be a proposed campus sustainability framework that could be published on the MCC website and shared with employees and students through multiple forums. This framework will need to be approved by the Sustainability Committee and Leadership Team, and any policy changes would require support by the Office of the President and senior leadership. I would like to lead a professional development course to help employees become familiar with the framework and how they can participate in achieving its goals. I will also need to meet with key stakeholder groups whose participation will be instrumental in achieving framework goals, including the Sustainability Committee, the Physical Plant, Leadership Team, and Food Services. These meetings will help share the content of the framework, goals for each area, and discuss how we can achieve the goals within the framework.

Conclusion

This sabbatical leave proposal will have immense benefits to the college and students in addition to helping me grow in my career, cultivate my courses, and help me narrow down my scope of interest for my doctoral research. This project would be most effective if spread across an entire fall and spring semester; this schedule will also minimize the impacts on other geoscience faculty. Thank you for considering this proposal. Please reach out if you have any additional questions.

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