

The Heart of the Matter: Infusing Sustainability Values in Education

Experiences of ESD with the Earth Charter



Celebrating the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair on Education
for Sustainable Development
and the Earth Charter



Prepared by Earth Charter Center for Education for Sustainable Development at UPEACE

Edited by: Alicia Jimenez and Douglas F. Williamson

Copy-editing: Melanie Gracy and Stephanie Hickel

Translations: Melanie Gracy, Andrea Zubialde, Gloriana Lara and Stephanie Hickel

Layout: Adriana Molina V.

I.S.B.N: 978-9977-925-85-1

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H436h The Heart of the Matter: Infusing Sustainability Values in Education: Experiences of ESD with the Earth Charter [publicación digitalizada] / editado por Alicia Jiménez Elizondo y Douglas F. Williamson. – San José, C.R. : Universidad para la Paz, 2014.

1 recurso en línea (106 p.) : pdf ; 2 Mb

ISBN 978-9977-925-85-1

1. Educación. 2. Desarrollo Sostenible. I. Título.

This publication is developed under the UNESCO Chair on Education for Sustainable Development with the Earth Charter, coordinated by the Earth Charter Center for ESD.

Earth Charter International and Center for Education for Sustainable Development at UPEACE C/O University for Peace

P.O. Box 138 - 6100

San Jose, Costa Rica

Email: info@earthcharter.org

Website: www.earthcharter.org

October, 2014



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Experiences of the University of Coahuila with the Earth Charter

Norma Yolanda Mota Palomino and Martha Elena Sosa Bocardo

“War is a defeat for humanity because, in addition to questioning the goodness and intelligence of people, it manifests the failure of human beings: their inability to understand each other, to put themselves in the other’s shoes.”
Ryszard Kapuscinsk

Introduction

We would like to start this article by giving thanks to two individuals who made this story possible: Mateo Castillo and Enrique Pert. They introduced the Earth Charter to the University of Coahuila and helped the University’s administration commit to the values and principles of the Charter and to sustainability, and to consider them as cornerstones of the University’s education and social responsibility activities.



In 2002, we represented, on behalf of the University, the academic sector of Coahuila at the Consultation Councils for Sustainable Development organized by SEMARNAT (Ministry of Environment of Mexico). It was at this Council’s meetings that we heard about the Earth Charter for the first time. Thereafter, we continued the efforts to disseminate this document nationally and even internationally, and we also decided to internalize it both as individuals and at the University, our workplace.

Enrique Pert, who was the Planning Director of the University until 2006, saw the possibility in the Earth Charter’s principles and values to transcend the utilitarian objectives that have influenced many public higher education institutions, especially now in the present globalized era. He said, “This is what we need. The Earth Charter can make us distinct from other institutions. It should be our hallmark.”

He argued that, alongside the technological projects that the University had, it was important for this institution to develop its own identity as a way to strengthen the institution internally. However, he also stressed the importance of externally sharing these principles with the surrounding community.

The next step was to pave the way for the University’s endorsement of the Earth Charter, and it was Enrique Pert (RIP) who made this possible.

Who We Are

Coahuila is the third largest State of the Federal Republic of Mexico in terms of area. It has 2.75 million inhabitants (2.4% of the total national population), approximately half of who are in the workforce. Due to its geographic and climactic conditions, Coahuila has important biological richness in terms of endemic species representative of Chihuahua’s desert.

The demographic dynamics and economic expansion of recent years are putting a lot of pressure on natural resources like water, which is very scarce. There has also been an increase in the amount of wastewater, gas emissions, and waste that are polluting the air and affecting the soils. In this scenario, it’s important to prevent degradation of natural resources and use them wisely in order to promote sustainability. Caring for the soils, water, and air is an obligation for all of us, and education is key to achieve this.

The University of Coahuila is a public higher education institution, with 34,685 students and three campuses: Saltillo; Torreón; and Norte. There are 57 departments and institutes, 14 of them are undergraduate and 43 graduate, along with three research centers. In the year 2000, the Rector José María Fraustro Siller decided to create the Environmental University Agenda to fulfil the institution's sustainability commitments. The Agenda had 3 specific objectives:

- a. Improve the environmental performance of the university
- b. Incorporate the environmental component in all aspects of the university activities
- c. Establish a training program for youth

Through the Environmental Agenda, which is part of the Planning Department, we've been able to include a course on sustainability in all engineering programs, and developed a social work project where we train students as environmental agents, in addition to giving support to different departments to improve their environmental performance and represent the Rector's office in different events and multi-stakeholder processes that the University is invited to.

Participating in different national networks (like CECADESU¹⁷, CCDS¹⁸ and Complexus¹⁹) that bring together different organizations that work on environmental issues has been very helpful for us, because it opens up opportunities to train ourselves and share good practices, tools, and ideas to promote sustainability. The Earth Charter endorsement is an example of our involvement with a network that is helping us to move towards achieving our commitments to the vision of sustainability.

In 2002, we started a process to train ourselves with the Earth Charter and to disseminate it to our colleagues from the Environmental Agenda with workshops and other communication campaigns. It was four years later that the Rector of our university, Eng. Jesús Ochoa Galindo, signed the Earth Charter endorsement, which was ratified in 2008. The importance of this was not the endorsement per se, but the process of sensitizing the University's authorities about generating an institutional commitment to incorporate the values of sustainability into the education process.

The following are some activities developed under the framework of our university's commitment with the Earth Charter:

- Incorporation of "Sustainable Development" and "Professional Ethics" courses in all engineering programmes. In both courses there is a session on values and the Earth Charter. (Started in 2003)
- Development of training workshops for environmental agents, which highlight the topic of sustainability values
- Signing and ratification of the institutional endorsement of the Earth Charter (2006 and 2008)
- Development of a training workshop for university staff members called "The Earth Charter and holistic higher education" (2009)
- Organization of the II National Conference of Universities working with the Earth Charter, where we started the drafting of the Earth Charter adaptation for Mexican youth (2001)
- Organization of the I Contest of Values for Sustainability Posters (September 2013)
- Participation at the International Forum "Ethics for sustainability, new approaches to leadership, decision making and education" in Costa Rica, where we presented the experience of Complexus and the University of Coahuila (2014)



Signing the Earth Charter endorsement

17 CECADESU: Center for Education and Training on Sustainable Development of the Ministry of Environment, Mexico
18 CCDS: Consultation Councils for Sustainable Development
19 Complexus: Network of Universities for Sustainability

Implementation

There are many details that we could share about our experience with the Earth Charter, but for this article we'll focus on two successful actions:

1. Workshop: "The Earth Charter and holistic higher education"

Target group: University professors

Duration: 8 hours

Facilitators: Earth Charter affiliate in Mexico

Objectives:

- Introduce the Earth Charter as a declaration of fundamental principles and an ethical framework to build a global society that is just, sustainable, and peaceful in the XXI century
- Sensitize the University's authorities and decision makers about the importance of the Earth Charter to help the University to consolidate its commitments with the least favored sectors of society through approaches that are coherent with our educational objectives
- Raise awareness about the University's commitment to adopt and disseminate the Earth Charter at the national level with the government and other higher education institutions, as well as incorporate its principles internally in the professional and daily actions of the University
- Identify focal points in each department that would create work plans to follow up the commitments generated in this workshop

This was a historic event for the university, because it allowed the University's decision makers to be more open to participating in the environmental and sustainability actions that the institution undertakes. The participation of students who are also environmental agents was very important in this workshop, since they brought a lot of good energy, spontaneity, and good humor, which facilitated a good attitude with all participants and, in the end, allowed the achievement of the workshops objectives.

It was not possible to identify focal points, nor was the systematization of the actions that have been organized with the Earth Charter achieved, mostly because people are overloaded with work and decision makers rotate every three years.

2. Values for sustainability Contest

Using the "Ethics and values for sustainability" theme proposed by the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, the students of the School of Information Technology who were taking the course "Professional Ethics" decided to organize (without professors' help) a contest to develop posters related to values for sustainability. They developed the criteria for participation, disseminated the call to participate, found the prizes, and were also the judges.

The basis of this contest was the promotion of an ethics for the common good that tries to inspire values and promote reasoning and feelings that guide collective actions towards building sustainable societies. It aims to promote an ethical position that asks for unlimited responsibility towards all that exists and lives. In this sense, the contest's objective was to introduce and transmit the values for sustainability and their importance in today's globalized world, a world that many say is "in crisis" but in which not many people actually do something about it.



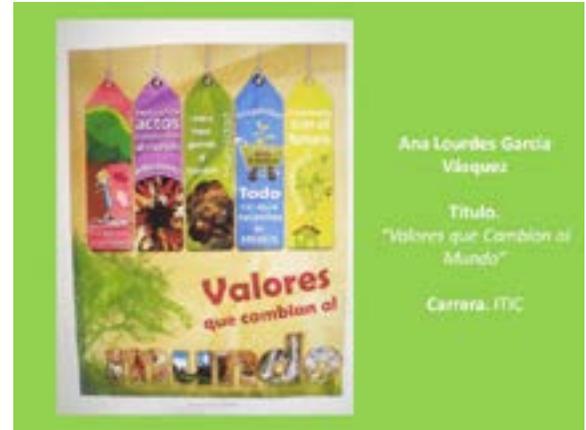
Contest call banner

The target group for this contest was university students, specifically those studying Information technology. An exhibition with all the posters was organized during a cultural week, and participants had the opportunity to explain their posters and which values they considered when creating them. Some participants used their personal experiences as inspiration for their posters and several of them became emotional when presenting their posters in public. Others used their educational experiences as inspiration. Many of the organizers were so thrilled with the contest that they decided to create their own posters outside of the contest.

The jury of this contest consisted of two students, one professor of the School of IT, one administrative staff member, and an external invitee, and they used the criteria defined by the organizers.

In total, 21 posters were created, 17 were entered in the contest and 4 were only for exhibition. As mentioned above, the idea was to exhibit the posters during the cultural week, but the Dean of the School of IT decided to permanently exhibit these posters in the administration area of the building. Now they're also considering printing these posters in a publication, including explanations for each poster.

Here is the winning poster with the theme "Values that change the world",



Winning poster: Values that change the world.

Lessons learned

The endorsement of the Earth Charter was not easy to accomplish. It required a long process of reflection and analysis about the personal and institutional implications, especially for the Rector, whose signature meant taking on an important commitment that we were all willing to accept, implying mutual responsibility, sharing tasks, and exerting effort to practice the principles of the Earth Charter in our daily actions. This endorsement was recently ratified at a ceremony within a workshop for staff members (August 2014).

The current Rector, Mr. Blas José Flores Dávila, decided to include an institutional commitment towards sustainability as a crosscutting theme in the Development Plan of the University. This is not an easy commitment, on the contrary, it could be very complex and will demand a lot from the university community, which is why we decided to organize a second workshop for staff members, called "Reflection and analysis about the implications of an institutional commitment for sustainability", using the Earth Charter as the basis for discussion.

The objective of this workshop was to identify elements that would allow us, as members of this university, to support and take on this institutional commitment. In this way, we were encouraging administrators and decision makers to reflect and realize that the achievement of this institutional commitment in the long term starts with their own introspection and personal actions.

The workshop was quite successful, around 85% of staff members, including the Rector, participated. It was possible to establish a committee that conceptually defined the values that define the *raison d'être* of the university, using the Earth Charter values as a reference.

The Earth Charter has also contributed to promoting a sense of leadership among the youth who are involved with the institutional plan development, as well as to engaging other young people that normally are not interested in getting involved with institutional matters of sustainability, like with the posters contest.

The current university administration aims to advance this work with students as part of an institutional policy, and it will be mandatory for all students to take at least one workshop on values for sustainability with the Earth Charter. This is our way forward!

Contact Information

Norma Yolanda Mota Palomino.
Professor and Environmental Agenda Coordinator
University of Coahuila, Saltillo, Mexico
52 - (844) 438-15-43
52- (844) 438-17-66
nmota@uadec.edu.mx

Martha Elena Sosa Bocardo
Professional Assistant of the University
Environmental Agenda
University of Coahuila, Mexico
marthasosa@uadec.edu.mx

Links

- Universidad Autónoma de Coahuila: www.uadec.mx
- Agenda Universitaria Ambiental de la UAdeC: www.agendaambiental.uadec.mx

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Development at UPEACE C/O University for Peace
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