

Livewell Interview, Matt St. Clair

Wed, May 31, 2023 2:36PM 33:56

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

students, uc, university, campus, uc campuses, activist, sustainability, greenpeace, research universities, years, leed, building, campaign, goals, live, work, health, matt, lead, people

SPEAKERS

Dr. Wendy Slusser, Matt St. Clair



Matt St. Clair 00:03

Only by working as allies toward in an intersectional way towards collective goals, are we likely to not just get piecemeal progress but progress in advancing justice and wellness for all.



Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:21

Hi, everyone, welcome back to live well Podcast. I'm Dr. Wendy Slusser, Associate Vice Provost of the Semel Healthy Campus Initiative Center. Make sure to tune in for our next episode, where we do a special behind the mic episode, where my Podcast Producer amazing Kayleigh interviews me about my work and my position can't wait. But today, we have a wonderful and informative episode about student advocacy and making our University of California system greener. Our guest today Matt St. Clair is the first Chief Sustainability Officer for the University of California's Office of the President has been leading sustainability efforts across the 10 campuses of the UC system since 2004. He's a lecturer Director of Environmental nonprofits, and as advise the US House of Representatives on the formation of an Office of Sustainability. Aside from these accolades, back in 2003, Matt was a UC Berkeley grad student activist who spearheaded with other graduate students across California, in collaboration with Greenpeace, the UC go solar campaign to improve green building infrastructure in the university system. With that, let's get to the interview. I hope you enjoy it. Welcome, Matt. Thank you. It's a real honor to have this chance to talk to you today in our podcast, and I've known you for a while and preparing for this podcast made me even admire you more than I did before preparing for it just in so many different ways. And I wanted to begin with a story of yours as a student advocate bringing us back to 2003. And you were working towards new standards in green buildings and renewable energy, as I understand right across the UC system, and called the UC go solar campaign. You started with a quote, which was, it's the dollar that drives our decisions. Oftentimes, our students are our conscience. They're part of our conscience, and they play a very important role in keeping us focused on the bigger picture. I think we need to listen more. So tell me, how did you come to choose that quote, to start really at paper that is a textbook case study for student activism in a large bureaucracy?

M

Matt St. Clair 02:52

Well, as you can imagine, when I was a graduate student activists, when I wrote that that paper about our UC go solar student campaign, I loved that quote, because it said to university leaders, hey, listen to me, I'm a student, and I can be the university's conscience. So I like to use that when I was a student activist, because it was a quote coming from an administrator who is reflecting on his experience working with student activists at a college that ended up buying renewable energy as a result of the student campaign. So I found it helpful as a student activist, and then I made the transition to being a university administrator myself. And I've found it useful as a reminder for me, because I can easily get bogged down in the day to day constraints of the organization. And it's, it's limited resources. So it reminds me of me, Matt, the administrator of math, the student, and that I need to make sure to continue to listen to the student voice, so that they can be a conscience for the university on where we need to go. And make sure I don't start getting bogged down and into limited by the day to day, budget driven, reality driven decisions and keep our focus on that bigger picture.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 04:12

There are other examples that we can look at right in 1993 UCLA hunger strike, that was central to creating our Department of Chicano Studies, the grassroots advocacy over the murder of George Floyd and racial injustice, and more recently, the graduate student strike. Why do you think we see such resilient changemaking from the student level?

M

Matt St. Clair 04:34

Well, I think one reason is that students have the luxury of idealism. They won't lose their job or the means to support their family, because they're speaking truth to power. Students are in the midst of learning and being exposed to all sorts of ideas and are not dealing with constraints. And so they're able to imagine what's possible knowing what the current problems are and the potential solutions are and advocating for that. I think one thing that I learned from my experience working as an environmental activist between college and graduate school, I worked with an environmental activist group in the Czech Republic. That's part of the Friends of the Earth International Network. And when I arrived in 1998, less than 10 years from the after the fall of communism, I was working for the most influential environmental group in the country. And there was not one person on the staff of 25 or older than the age of 30. And my conclusion for why that was the case is that anyone over 30, had lost their ability to imagine something new and different as they've gotten older and been exposed to the dangers of asking for something to change. So I think that's one thing that students they don't know better, they don't know what shouldn't be what should be impossible, they think shouldn't be impossible, and are willing to ask for it and push for it.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 06:07

Such a testimony to how important our youth are in so many different ways, right? And this is one of them. Could you give a little bit more detail on this UC go solar campaign, and why it was so important also not to focus just on energy efficiency, which is something that everyone

was sort of drawn to from it, but also the energy sourcing and reduction in energy usage. Why the trifecta?

 06:36


The motivation for Greenpeace was organize this student campaign and connected with existing student groups that were already interested in promoting green energy, and the university committing to green energy. So that was the goal was to get UC to go solar. But in order to do that, the Greenpeace brought their organizational campaigns strategy, knowledge and experience to the, to the students to us that had the passion and voice within the university to ask for, for things. And what the university was most interested in was energy efficiency, because that would save the money. They weren't interested in renewable energy, because they perceived that that would cost money. So the campaign talked about both and didn't reject the interest in energy efficiency from the university leaders embrace that as part of a clean energy approach. So and then green building was the third part of that, because there was some interest in momentum within the university to and eventually adopting the LEED green building certification standards, the university leaders at that time decided to adopt a green building policy that wasn't only reliant on LEED, but went above and beyond on an energy efficiency as a priority in a way that built on UCS own research from our energy efficiency researchers that were trying new strategies on UC campuses, and basing an additional energy efficiency goal based on UC research as well.

 Dr. Wendy Slusser 08:18

I love that it's like, you know, we have all these experts, but often we don't translate the expertise to our own backyard. So you were able to help accelerate that translation through this campaign. Where do you think Greenpeace brought to the table, this collaboration and mentorship that really supported the work that you did?

 Matt St. Clair 08:39

Yeah, they brought several things, they brought technical assistance. They also had more persistence, or sustainability over time, then it's been students who change year to year quarter to quarter semester to semester. And then in terms of the campaign strategy, so there are professional campaigners, and we students are not I happen to have activist experienced. But one thing that I've observed after years as an administrator, the students can have a tendency, because the students are the conscience and know what's right, can tend to get into a black and white, adversarial and even demonizing or other rising interaction or relationship with university leadership and Greenpeace as a professional advocacy organization knew how to teach us to work with the administration and push the administration at the same time.

 Dr. Wendy Slusser 09:35

And you clearly had the skills to work with administration based on one of those emails that you that you sent to one of the higher ups in the campus and you said rest assured that I'm advising the other students not to approach the BCS with demands, but rather as partners who

have the same goals in terms of figuring out how each campus can best implement this policy. So what have you learned and framing your goals this way, as you move forward in your work?

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Matt St. Clair 10:05

I got really helpful feedback from one of the people, an energy efficiency researcher within the UC office of the president. When there was a statewide conference hosted by UC Merced, I was invited to be a student plenary or Keynote panel as part of that conference, and shared my demands with the audience of university leaders and staff, as part as the spokesperson for the UC go solar student campaign. And afterwards, this UCOP, energy efficiency researcher came up to thank me for my comments, and said, Thank you for working with us and pushing us at the same time. And that's something that I've reflected a lot since then, and have encouraged student activists when they've invited me to come talk to them to do that, hearing from him that pushing him without working with him. And the other university leaders would not have been received as well as working with him in partnership, and pushing him while while partnering with him. It's something that also aligns with my personal Quaker values are Quakers believe that there's everyone has an inner light or that of God within them. And you should treat your enemy as your neighbor as yourself. And I found that just personally to be a more effective way of changing to find ways to make what I'm asking for in the interest of the person, I'm asking where that's possible, and not just expecting them to do something that's going to make their job harder. So that partnership means how can I propose what I want in a way that helps a university leader or whoever I'm approaching to do their job, can because it's going to be in more in their interest to help me and work with me than if I came in and told them to do things that threatens them. And they feel like I'm an adversary rather than a partner.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 12:16

That really explains why you were such an incredible supporter with our work with healthy campus network and how we were trying to find a home for the Healthy Vending policy, and you really conceived it a solution that is going to be long lasting, where there's a health and well being part of the sustainability policy for all of you see, and I want to thank you for that.

M

Matt St. Clair 12:38

You're welcome. Thank you for working in partnership with with me on that.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 12:42

That was a great solution. And also, I think will bring a lot to the whole sustainability policy, having a section thinking about the health and well being in addition, I wanted you to share what the lessons learned were from your UC go solar campaign so that others could take that as an inspiration to be a student advocate, or also an administrator to support the students in their activism.

M

Matt St. Clair 13:09

I think for the students, what I one of my lessons learned was that students have a very powerful voice, we are the students are still use the we after 20 years, because you're getting me to think like a student again, that the students are the customer or the client. And so the leadership needs to listen to their customer. So if the customers are saying this is very important to my education, and I am here for my education, you are here to give me my education, then the students are able to have an impact in that way. I learned that the people within the UCS the president who ended up hiring me and creating my position had been trying to do the same thing that Greenpeace and the student activists were asking for from the inside, and not making very much headway or progress because they had to work within a hierarchical bureaucracy. One of my lessons learned is that the students have that access and voice. But if we had gone to the board as students, and asked for something that the board and the President then turned to the subject matter experts at the UCs, the President and the campuses and said, the students are asking for this wild, crazy thing. Does it make any sense? Is this possible? And the internal subject matter experts and staff had said no, that is crazy. It's not possible. That would have been the end of the story and the student advocacy would have gone nowhere. But because there were staff who had been trying to do this on their own, but couldn't get access to leadership to make it a priority. They said, Yes, that's a pretty good idea. It is very reasonable. Here's some analysis that we've done and we're happy to work with the students to figure out appropriate feasible but aggressive goals. Either one without the other would not have accomplished the policy if the given the student voice then access, combined with the internal staff expertise and willingness, that's what made made it possible, I think, really important lessons learned. And then some of the things that I've already mentioned of the student activist being the conscience, very important to listen to that that voice of what should be so that we on the inside can expand work to expand the possibilities of what can be to get it closer to what the way the world should be.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 15:28

But I think that leaves us with so much hope because you prove that it can happen. And since then, I know I've been seeing you give advice to others who have other ideas of what could be or should be. And, you know, one area that has been very effective in that is, you know, addressing basic needs of our students. And we're working hard on supporting staff basic needs, as well. So, so that work was only the beginning for you, right? I mean, now you've served for 20 years as the director of sustainability for the University of California's Office, the President, you're on many boards for sustainability and Strategic Energy Innovations. And you even advised the US House of Representatives on the formation of an Office of Sustainability for the US Capitol mean that that's pretty extraordinary. And these various leadership roles, what approaches do you take to see your goals come to fruition?

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Matt St. Clair 16:29

Well, first, I think is to know what I can bring to any any potential goal, figure out what my role and what how I can contribute, because I have some strengths, but many things that I'm not good at. And so change can only be made and in coalition. So part of it is finding allies, and working with those, those allies in a mutually empowering way to achieve collective goals. And I think that's back to your your mention of bringing a health and wellbeing section to the UC policy on sustainable practices, approaching problems in silos just perpetuates the systems and

structures that created the problems in the first place. So I do believe very strongly in taking an intersectional approach that looks at the root causes of health, environment, social inequity, they all have very, very similar the same root causes. And only by working as allies toward in an intersectional way towards collective goals are we likely to not just get piecemeal progress, but progress and advancing justice and wellness for all. In my current role in the UC system working in a system office. In one sense, my job is easy. My job, in part is to identify best practices on one or more UC campuses, and then help spread them to other campuses. My job and the way I achieve goals is by finding or identifying amazing leaders amongst the staff, students and faculty on each UC campus and doing whatever I can to support them in advancing the work on their campus and getting recognition and support to help spread that best practice across the whole UC system and use that power of 10. Like we like to talk about, and quickly move the whole system forward than any individual campus wouldn't be able to do if it was acting on its own in isolation

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 18:39

It's music to my ears. I mean, identifying strengths, and then mobilizing them and leveraging them for others is such a catalyzing way of making change. And you've done this in 20 years. leading this effort, you worked with President Napolitano to launch the university climate change coalition and have now to what 21 universities in US, Canada and Mexico. Tell me a little bit about that.

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Matt St. Clair 19:06

That was President Napolitano. Those requests wanting to do something above and beyond what we were already doing when former President Trump announced the intention to pull the United States out of the Paris Climate Agreement. So there was at that time, something called the we are still in coalition, which was a cross sectoral response to show that the business community, the higher education community, the health sector, community, all felt within the United States all felt that the US needed to stay in the Paris Climate Accords and not leave. Is there something we can do with other research universities, it's above and beyond just signing this commitment that we as a university will still meet the Climate Accords, even if the federal government isn't and so we explore heard that idea with other research universities that had strong climate commitments for reducing their own operational emissions as well as a strong climate solutions related research program. And there was interest in connecting on this since that was, that was the origin of the university climate change. Coalition is a coalition of within the US r1 research universities, MMA equivalent in Canada and Mexico, who wants to work together collectively, to share best practices, so that we can spread them across North America, the way we spread them within the UC system, but also to explore things that can be done as a collective community of r1 research universities that are working on climate in research, education and action that we couldn't do as individual universities. An initial focus, a unique, an additional contribution was to focus on universities, especially large research universities, as community anchors, and conveners. So each member of UC three, as we call it, organised a place based convening of local or regional leaders, from governments and business community, to give them access to knowledge from within the within the university on climate solutions, and to think collectively as a as a local region on how to move everyone's climate goals forward.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 21:38

So another great example of your strength base, asset mapping, mobilization effort, and how universities really can be anchor institutions for their community. And that's just a great role for all of us to think about and different subject areas, in addition to sustainability. It's not surprising, then that in 2020, you got the lead, which is the Leadership and Energy and Environmental Design, fellow ship, or fellow recognition and just 25 professionals around the world that are honored every year in this fellowship, or at least that year. And it was recognizing your work helping to ensure buildings and spaces are healthy, resilient, and sustainable for all of us to enjoy. I'm circling back to the subject of health, because I'd love to know when did you start thinking about health and integrating it into your work as a priority?

M

Matt St. Clair 22:33

I think health has just always been part of my understanding of doing environmental work. So I grew up in Ontario, in Southern California in the Inland Empire. For me, that air pollution, which some view as an environmental issue, for me was a personal health issue. And so it's always been intertwined. And I care about environmental issues, because I understand the interconnected nature have of all life, and even non non life forms, in our physical geography. Because I understand that human life cannot exist without a functioning ecosystem and biosphere. So for me, health is cannot be separated from environmental work. And that's how I've always approached it.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 23:19

It;s such a powerful story that you're telling because one thing leads to another in your lifetime is the it appears understanding of this sort of interconnectivity with the environment that led you to your activism. It's interesting how many things as you grow, can impact your trajectory in your life. And one of your initiatives that you've done through the UCS is that you've really catalyzed the number of LEED certification buildings in all of our campuses, which impact the lives of so many people, hundreds of people, 1000s of people since 2004, you've helped lead over 350 LEED certifications on our campuses. Is that about right? And counting? Yeah, yeah, and counting. Exactly. So tell me, you know, what, how does that make you feel? Or what does that mean to you having that many buildings so far?

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Matt St. Clair 24:17

I feel very privileged, as an environmentalist to get to do work where I can see the tangible results of what I do. So many of my colleagues who are environmental advocates work for years just to stop bad things from happening. So I feel very proud of that. I think we're our current count is over 400 LEED certifications now as of the end of last year. Wow. And, and now the team of five of us in the DC office, the President that I lead for people on myself, we support a network of over 60 Full Time sustainability staff across the system. And that's not just testament to the work that I and other UC sustainability lead. But that's been happening at universities across the country. So we were able to ride that wave and help lead that wave. It's helpful for you to even ask that question and need to stop and reflect because I'm too busy day to day trying to keep up with everything and pushing everything forward. even think about the

fact of how many people gets to work in or visit or study in or live in the buildings. And one thing that I don't think it's talked about enough that I like to remind people of that UC Merced be committed to every building being LEED certified. And I think that, to my knowledge, UC Merced is the only university in the country, possibly the world where every single building is LEED certified.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 25:46

Wow, congrats. That is I mean, that's extraordinary. That means 10s of 1000s of people, just on that campus alone. And what a gift because, you know, we hear horror stories about people having spent their work days in places that ultimately, you know, are determined not only to be non promoting of health, but unhealthy, right? You just mentioned at least one point of why you get some gratification or you feel good about you can see results like what you just described with Merced. What other things grounds you and your mission?

M Matt St. Clair 26:24

That's a good question. I think the grounding part is remaining connected to students. And, and to the amazing work that staff and faculty are doing on UC campuses every day, helps ground me getting out to the campuses, to remind me why I'm doing the work that I'm doing. And in a bureaucratic headquarters, lots of emails and zoom meetings, that helps to ground me and energize me, seeing that the work that I do is helping them to do the real work on the ground, that grounds me, and really energizes me to to continue doing the work that I'm doing.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 27:02

That's great advice to all of us, we have to keep giving our touch points, to remind ourselves of why we're doing what we're doing and who we're doing it for. The other thing that happens in all of our work, and especially yours, because it's it evolves quickly, what are you thinking in the future that we need to be thinking about?

M Matt St. Clair 27:23

I think one thing that has kept me in this job for 20 years, and that I feel fortunate to have is that things are constantly evolving standards goals, the understanding from science of what the problems are, and the urgency around the climate crisis in particular. And that that keeps it exciting and feeling relevant. So then the exciting new thing that also keeps me up at night, because like everything that I've done for 20 years, it's very challenging is on making UC fossil free. And it's its operations. So we have a pathways to a fossil free UC taskforce that is meeting regularly to try to figure out how we can phase out fossil gas consumption and combustion on UC campuses. And that's no easy task. There's a good reason why climate change action is not happening fast, happening faster, so intertwine with the way we do and produce everything and very complex and very expensive to change. So it's going to take a lot of money and a lot of time, and a lot of will to decarbonize UCS campuses. So that's an exciting new challenge that

we're working on through this possibly Taskforce. We're very fortunate that the university has made this a priority and got funding from the state of California and this year as you see budget for each campus to complete a decarbonisation study to examine what it would take.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 28:54

Sounds like you're gonna have to dust off that case study you just had talked about from 2003. Right. Sounds like that's a perfect way to apply all the lessons learned from that one. And so maybe before we ask her final question, what kind of advice would you give to the next generation of student activists?

M

Matt St. Clair 29:18

Well, when I was a student activist, I took inspiration from generations of activists before that's why I got involved in the UC go solar campaign is because I had heard of the stories of change that students have been able to make in the past. So that gave me hope that my involvement and they see the solar campaign could actually accomplish something. And then what I did, it was found my my passion and where I could make my unique contribution. So I would encourage students to try different things until you find the one that that you're most passionate about where you feel like you can make make contribution when I came back from those two yours in the Czech Republic, I had really been radicalized and made into this activist that thought that anything was possible, could change anything based on what I learned from my amazing mentors and colleagues there. And I really had a hard time finding my place in the activism community, or in the environmental community back in the US, until the UC go solar campaign. And it finally stuck in and I found my voice there. And part of that is also then finding mentors, I always encourage students to find mentors and ask people for advice and ask them to be your mentors. And I've certainly found that to be the case, and I've tried to pay it forward.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 30:50

Such great advice. So one last question, what does it mean for you to live well?

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Matt St. Clair 30:56

To start it, I want to acknowledge that a lot of people on this planet in this country in the state even don't have the luxury of trying to live well, we're just trying to survive. So for those of us who are not in a day to day survival mode, I think living well means finding the things that value most in life. And having lived and worked in Europe for a couple of years, I reflected a lot on what Europeans like to say that Americans live to work and Europeans work to live. And I've tried to hold on to that European value that I don't live to work, I work to live, and life is more than my work. And what I have heard from, from many wise elders is that what's more most important in life is connecting with people with friends and family, for me with nature, as well as their basic universal meet needs that we all have. And living well means identifying your personal needs, and pursuing them and doing so in community or in relationship with others to help you live well yourself in ways that you can help them live well also.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 32:15

Matt, thank you, that's a great way to end this conversation with the hope of not just living well for ourselves, but also to recognize how there are others that are in that we need to continue to support them in pursuing that opportunity or, or offering that opportunity for them. To thank you so much that it was just a great conversation. And I always learned something new from you in so many different ways.

M

Matt St. Clair 32:46

Thank you for having me. I really enjoyed the conversation with you.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 32:51

I'm amazed by Matt's dedication to his passion and his ability to be a source of action for both students and administrators. I found it important to lean into this collaborative approach that Matt describes to make real and lasting changes on campus. Thank you, Matt, for chatting with us today. And we hope you all have learned something new. We look forward to talking to you next time. If you've been inspired by this episode. have ideas for new guests or want me Wendy to be a guest on your podcast. Visit our podcast page on our website healthy.ucla.edu. To contact us, follow us on Instagram at healthy UCLA and of course subscribe if you haven't already. We'll talk to you soon. This episode has been brought to you by the Semel Healthy Campus Initiative Center at UCLA.