

# Campuses perfect place to practice what we preach

BY JOSHUA SKOV



What do you call someone who spends all of her time on campus, interacts with hundreds of students each year, provides valuable learning experiences in the form of work-study jobs, and contributes to the campus community's knowledge and awareness of environmental issues?

Stumped? Let's make this multiple choice:

- (a) Professor
- (b) Recycling Manager
- (c) Groundskeeper
- (d) Transportation Coordinator
- (e) Housing Director

If you said "all of the above," you picked what I had in mind. Yes, professors provide most of the conspicuous and official learning at colleges and universities. But the facilities and operations of higher education institutions represent a crucial and off-ignored opportunity for teaching sustainability.

## A microcosm of society

Ah, the energy and excitement of the campus — the learning, the research, the devotion to improving the world. The perfect place for learning how to operate an unsustainable economy and society!

Oh wait, that isn't what you had in mind — you enrolled in chemistry, history and psych. And now you're learning what? Throw away, don't recycle. Drive, don't walk or bike. Leave the heat and lights on — it's cheap or free! And when you shop, go for the lowest upfront price. And that's just for starters.

You see, institutions of higher education have many of the same needs as the rest of society, and many teach the same bad habits. We still use newsprint and paper towels made of Canada's boreal forest. We still serve food made with unnecessary and dangerous chemicals and with high embodied transportation energy. We still heat and cool mainly with direct and indirect fossil fuel use. And speaking of fossil fuels, we maintain our delicately manicured landscapes with petroleum-based fuel, fertilizer and pesticides.

So welcome to campus, indeed. At most of our country's 4,000 institutions of higher ed, we learn, in the words of David Orr, to become more effective vandals of the earth.

## Shining lights in the darkness

Of course, many institutions have begun to take a different path, and the Pacific Northwest has an abundance of examples.

The University of Oregon teaches that you can often get to work without an automobile — in fact, it's the only campus I've found with more parking spaces for bikes than cars! Portland State University teaches its students about healthier, greener buildings with two LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design)-certified student residences, and Oregon State will soon be teaching something similar with its engineering building, slated to open this year with the proud label of LEED Silver. Lewis and Clark has demonstrated that the Kyoto treaty is a worthy goal and within our grasp. With a hybrid strategy of energy efficiency, renewable energy purchasing and carbon offsets, the campus is the first in the country to become Kyoto-compliant.

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Unfortunately, campus sustainability still continues to lack the appeal of equally important academic efforts. But there are three big reasons we need to push for campus sustainability as a vital part of teaching sustainability in higher education and beyond. And the reasons are in fact our three great needs from education itself: new ways of doing things; leading by example; and more complete thinking.

First, we need new ways of meeting our needs. Many of our environmental and social challenges require research and innovation, and higher ed is widely recognized as a place for these activities. To take it to the next level, we need to see the physical campus as a place for some of this cutting-edge thinking and learning.

Research in sustainable agriculture or green chemistry or environmentally sensitive nanotech looks like research. But what about new ways of specifying and purchasing greener products?

Ways to comply with Kyoto without breaking the bank? How to have a beautiful quad without exposing people and habitat to persistent carcinogens? How to meet computer hardware needs with producing a costly and toxic waste stream?

## Gimme three steps

A dramatic benefit of this expanded understanding of the campus is a similarly expanded awareness of who has knowledge worth teaching. In my work, I have met many purchasing agents, recyclers, groundskeepers, master planners, IT directors and others whose professional knowledge matched the academic expertise of the official faculty. When staff are seen as a pedagogical resource, the campus can be used as a teaching tool on topics of importance to students' futures.

Second, we need more people to witness these examples close up. Campuses lead by example — or rather, they teach by example. Most obviously, the physical campuses teach our budding engineers, architects, landscape architects and planners. Less obviously, they teach everyone else: many more graduates go on to work for organizations that occupy buildings, buy paper and office supplies, use energy and water, manage a waste stream, and employ commuters.

These are not trivial examples. The viability of workplace sustainability strategies depends to a large extent on the receptiveness of individuals, which in turn depends on previous exposure and awareness. Colleges and universities are the first experiences that many of us have with these operational issues. That first experience can and should model the best ideas we've got.

Third, and most importantly, campuses need to cultivate clearer thinking about the world. We need to understand the systems that serve our basic needs. It is our obliviousness to the impacts of our mundane goings-on — food, shelter, transportation, etc. — that has gotten us into this mess.

It is no longer possible to maintain the illusion that education happens entirely in the classroom — this smacks of "Do as I say, not as I do." Instead of operations' being secondary or even peripheral, the physical campus is the new great place to learn. If we can make the ivory tower more sustainable, I think the rest of the world will follow.

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