

The Environmental Leader:

How Sustainability Offers A Competitive Edge In Enrollment

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"In a crisis, the best thing to do is the right thing. The worst thing to do is to do nothing," President Theodore Roosevelt famously said.

His advice could have been written about today's environmental challenges; doing nothing is not an option for our campuses. We cannot wait to model ways to minimize the crisis of global warming emissions and to foster environmental protection. Today's colleges must, therefore, add yet another hat, that of "environmental leader," to their plethora of roles.

There is another compelling reason for encouraging sound environmental practices: green initiatives can offer a competitive edge among prospective students. Curbing emissions and using clean, renewable energy sources will not only stabilize and reduce long-term energy costs, but also attract budding young environmentalists while fostering new opportunities for student research and synergistic relationships with external organizations.

Although the financial impact of some environmental initiatives is a significant concern, many cost little or nothing. Even small, incremental steps, such as recycling cooking oil and scrap metal, reducing food and paper waste, and purchasing sustainable products, can achieve measurable results--and appeal to a young generation concerned with leaving this world better than they found it.

The non-profit Second Nature (secondnature.org) constitutes an important nationwide commitment to stabilizing the climate. In addition to signing on to this effort as an institution, we recommend the following to build your sustainability profile:

Lead by example. Institutions must demonstrate through deeds, not just words, a commitment to good stewardship of the environment. Consumption habits, for example, can include recycling efforts, utilizing hybrid vehicles, offering a bicycle-sharing program on campus, and reducing paper waste. Universities can ensure new campus construction meets LEED-certification standards or the equivalent, and that all new appliance purchases are ENERGY STAR-certified. Campus dining services and other vendors often have a financial stake in reducing waste and lowering energy consumption; they can set a good example for students and faculty.

Gain strength in numbers. More than 600 colleges and universities in every state and the District of Columbia have committed to Second Nature's Climate Leadership Network to take action on climate and to prepare students through research and education for the challenges of the 21st century. These institutions report on their yearly progress, publicly sharing their climate action plans, greenhouse gas inventories and more.

Engage prospective students and the campus community. Green campus initiatives offer an ideal vehicle for involving current and prospective students in achieving progress while fostering relationships. We envision, in accord with Second Nature, "humanity thriving through healthy, just, and sustainable living within a dynamically changing earth system. We see higher education playing a prominent leadership role in shaping research, learning, and communities that inspire and operationalize this positive future."

Set measurable goals. Institutions signing on to the Climate Commitment show dedication to establishing concrete plans for reducing greenhouse emissions within two years. These include, but are not limited to, completing an energy inventory within one year of signing. In the words of the organization's pledge, "Campuses that address the climate challenge by reducing global warming emissions and by integrating sustainability into their curriculum will better serve their students and meet their social mandate to help create a thriving, ethical, and civil society. (In so doing) they will be providing students with the knowledge and skills needed to address the critical, systemic challenges faced by the world in this new century and enable them to benefit from the economic opportunities that will arise as a result of solutions they develop."

Sustaining the environment in which we educate students is an active process that must continually go forward, change with the times, but also foster and preserve valued traditions. Our current and prospective students in environmental studies represent the real hope for all of us. They have embraced the cause of a cleaner, healthier environment that will enrich our lives and those of generations to come.

As visionary conservationist President Theodore Roosevelt might have said, there is no better time than now to act to preserve our natural heritage, sustain our resources as a nation and inspire our youth to work vigorously for their own future. We encourage colleges and universities to lead the way--strengthening their own financial and environmental future in the process.

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