

Going For the Green: Sustainability Benefits in Higher Education



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Sustainability delivers a host of significant business and financial benefits to higher education. In addition to offering tremendous educational and environmental advantages to a college or university, it also makes sound economic sense — especially with resources tightly constrained for the foreseeable future.

At the University of Washington (UW), we've implemented many conservation projects over the years that have embraced smarter processes and technologies for irrigating our grounds and powering our infrastructure.

Last year, we saved \$12 million as a result of our water and energy conservation efforts. We also saved \$1.2 million in 2012 by diverting waste from landfills — and recycling and composting. That's hard money it would have taken to dump trash. These savings from sustainability can have an impact on the affordability of our education. If it comes down to spending \$12 million more on utility bills versus student scholarships, for instance, the choice is pretty clear-cut. And, if saving \$12 million on energy and water outlays can help us keep tuition costs in line, that's good business sense.

Sustainability can affect college affordability in another way, too.

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When we cost out the development and construction of our facilities, for example, we recognize that sustainable building features — like gel in the walls that either holds in heat or pushes it out, depending on the temperature — will ultimately save energy and money. This means that we can hold down costs over time.

Our sustainability programs transcend hard-cost savings.

Being committed to sustainability has helped us attract research dollars and a high-quality faculty that is bringing in those research dollars. One reason research sponsors are willing to invest in the UW is because they see an environmental leader with rock-solid societal values.

A good example is the way we were recently invited to participate in a regional smart-grid project funded by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). Bringing together our facilities services organization and engineering school as partners, the project helped us to recruit a

nationally acknowledged smart-grid expert as part of our faculty. In addition to assisting us with attracting the best engineers and smartest researchers, the smart-grid project enables our students to participate in a groundbreaking sustainability experiment that includes monitoring our building energy use through metering.

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Sustainability offers a wonderful training ground for good student decision-making. The UW has a student-run and student-financed sustainability fund, and each year students decide what sustainability projects they will support on campus, weighing the investment trade-offs in the process.

The UW Farm, which sells organic produce to the UW dining rooms, is financed in part by the student sustainability fund. So, not only do students get hands-on learning and business experience here, they also get the opportunity to deliver a healthy menu and diet for their on-campus peers through sales of their produce to the University — a virtuous circle all the way around.

Another powerful financial impact stemming from our sustainability efforts is the admissions advantage this gives us when it comes time to competing for the best and brightest students.

Many smart, passionate and caring students — the regional and national leaders of tomorrow — come to the UW because of our 21st century environmental programs and curriculum. Our green reputation is also a magnet. And, in terms of brick and mortar, our LEED

buildings and residence halls are a major draw as well.

Millennial students are deeply engaged in sustainability today — in much the same way as the Baby Boomers were focused on the Vietnam War. But the difference is that the students of the 1960's and 70's were at odds with their colleges and universities, while those of 2013 are in sync with the many green faculty, staff and administrators they encounter on campus.

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If there's an argument, it's how — not whether — to generate the best possible sustainable outcomes.

Looking at the whole picture, the bottom line is that sustainability helps higher education save money, contribute to educational affordability, attract research dollars, and recruit top-tier faculty and students who will add considerable long-term value to society. That's a terrific return on an eminently reasonable investment.