

The Movement towards Sustainable Campuses in Canada: Processes and Experiences

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Panelists

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This workshop shared the experiences of two campuses in Eastern Canada, one in Ontario and one in Quebec, in becoming more sustainable. Also discussed was the unique role of a youth-led Canadian NGO, the Sierra Youth Coalition, in driving the campus sustainability movement across Canada. In the discussion, parallels and differences between campus sustainability approaches in the USA and Canada were considered.

BROAD ENGAGEMENT FOR SUSTAINABILITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

The University of Toronto is Canada's largest, with 65,000 students and more than 250 buildings. It is the largest non-profit land owner in Toronto. The university has a dedicated Office of Sustainability (SO) with eight staff. Within its overall mission of creating a culture of sustainability reflected in all university operations, the immediate aim is to reduce energy consumption to curtail greenhouse gas emissions. In the medium term, the goals are to integrate energy conservation, waste reduction and campus greening in all university decisions, practices and procedures.

Many SO projects engage students and are driven by them. The SO can offer academic credit, work-study positions and part-time employment as well as volunteer opportunities. The SO is perceived as a valuable resource for sustainability research and operations on campus. The office builds alliances between faculty, staff and students; provides access to training; performs research; drives operational improvements through in-house resources, and in general harnesses student energy and enthusiasm for sustainable ends.

Many projects and initiatives are under the purview of the SO, including energy audits, curriculum review, advocacy efforts, and capital project planning support. One example is the inventory project. Inventories of electricity usage and heating are complete and ongoing for transportation, waste and water. Another initiative is a three-year, C\$16 million lighting and chiller retrofit program, calculated to save 11.6 GWh and 3,100 tons GHG annually for C\$1.3 million annual savings over 12 years.

“Rewire” is a major campus campaign to motivate students, staff and faculty to adopt more sustainable behaviors via: energy use reduction, particularly at peak times; heat and water conservation; Reduce, Reuse, Recycle; and, in the future, alternative transportation. Launched in 2005-2006, students pilot tested energy conservation techniques at one college. The pilot’s success persuaded the SO to pick up the project. A Community-Based Social Marketing approach was taken to broaden the scope. External funding was secured and further pilot tests in a different residential college were implemented. The program was expanded to include offices and more residential settings and more than 4,000 people in 2006-2007. An evaluation of the 2006 pilot suggests that sustainability awareness has been heightened. In addition, electrical energy demand declined by 5 percent after the pilot. Other outcomes include financial savings, expanded deployment of the approach to other settings and institutions, and further community and capacity-building on campus.

In 2007-2008 the goal is to expand the program to all three campuses; develop a program specifically for common areas, classrooms and laboratories; and integrate paper reduction and reuse. In addition, Rewire will reach out to building operators and managers and examine opportunities to deploy the program more broadly beyond the university.

THE SUSTAINABILITY EXPERIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SHERBROOKE

The University of Sherbrooke, an hour east of Québec City, is less than half the size of the University of Toronto and has no dedicated sustainability office. Instead, the approach to sustainability has relied on student interest and drive, which was successful in persuading the university to form a multi-stakeholder advisory committee in 2005. Twenty-one objectives were identified in four areas: research and curriculum; communication and involvement; environment; and social and economic issues. The committee formulated an Action Plan built out of a prioritized wish list. A Sustainable Development Policy was signed in partnership with the municipality and other institutions in the city.

The biggest focus has been on sustainable transportation, including the following elements: a car-sharing system; a “U-Pass” for students to take municipal transportation for free; a bus-ticket reduction for staff; a bike-leasing service and a dedicated bike lane through campus.

Besides these sector-specific approaches, students have been very engaged with the “Sustainable Campuses Project.” This involves them with campus sustainability policy and refinement of the Action Plan. In addition, the project provides tools for communicating sustainability and opportunities to include sustainability in the curriculum. The Project has also been the impetus for a dialogue process among student unions and groups on sustainability. The main challenge that has emerged is coordinating with the administration.

SIERRA YOUTH COALITION’S SUSTAINABLE CAMPUSES PROJECT IN CANADA

Sierra Youth Coalition’s (SYC) mission is to “*engage* youth in Canada to become active members of their community; *educate* about the interconnectedness of all things; and *change* unsustainable systems by finding solutions so that the voices of the future are clearly heard.” The Sustainable Campuses project goal is to make university and college campuses in Canada more sustainable. SYC takes a three-pronged approach to meeting the goal.

First, SYC has created a network of more than 50 member campuses via five regional coordinators and a national project committee and regional/provincial action committees. The network stays connected via an active listserv that is connected to two other college-oriented environmental action groups: the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition and Energy Action/Campus Climate Challenge.

Second, SYC sponsors an annual Sustainable Campuses National Conference to bring together campus sustainability activists from across the country and share workable solutions.

Third, SYC provides support to college campuses via its regional committees. Assessment Frameworks are shared, as are specific approaches to conducting greenhouse gas inventories. The committees also provide support for implementation of specific sustainability actions. Specific programs include the “Campus Sustainability Assessment Framework (CSAF)” and the “Campus Climate Challenge,” which focuses on conducting greenhouse gas emissions inventories.

SYC has implemented a three-phase communications strategy to build a formalized process for advancing sustainability on college campuses. Phase One is targeted outreach. This includes identifying and providing support for student leaders, building student capacity and communicating with stakeholders. In Phase Two, SYC helps campus sustainability activists create general awareness and broaden outreach to create buy-in from a variety of stakeholders. CSAF and GHG inventory work are implemented, and results are shared. Phase Three, consultation, advances what are often up to this point fractured approaches to sustainability on campus into a coherent Action Plan. Here, key players are identified, feasibility studies are

conducted, and programs are implemented and reviewed. Upon completion of this three-phase cycle, the goal is that a model of sustainability action will have been honed sufficiently to repeat with refinements.

In 2006 SYC supported sustainability efforts at more than 100 colleges and universities in all the Canadian provinces. These efforts varied from helping to develop a multi-stakeholder process, to implementing CSAF, conducting GHG inventories, and encouraging the establishment of sustainability policies and positions. Results include the integration of sustainability in curricula at many campuses; conversion to a biodiesel fleet at Concordia; completed assessments at four universities, and GHG emissions reductions through conservation measures and clean energy purchases.

DISCUSSION

The discussion flowed around key differences and similarities of campus sustainability in Canada and the United States.

In Canada there has been admirable emphasis on bridging the academic-operational gap in campus sustainability efforts. It has helped that an arm's length entity, the SYC, has been often taken the preliminary lead in initiating efforts. The student-student counseling that SYC supports has been very effective. The YC plays a unique role in building student leadership in Canada.

The Canadian model of university administration has also helped the broad implementation of the sustainability agenda. The vast majority of funding to universities flows through Provincial governments, as there are virtually no private universities in Canada. Inter-university meetings of upper-echelon administration at the Vice-President level are relatively frequent. Therefore there are more opportunities for a natural cross-fertilization and communication of effective strategies.

Sustainability efforts on campuses in the United States have been driven in large part by climate change considerations and have therefore focused on GHG reduction strategies. The sustainability discourse and approach on Canadian campuses tends to take a more holistic approach, more commonly including social, economic and traditional environmental considerations in sustainability goals.