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Striving to be sustainable

University promotes new green initiatives, faces mixed reactions on Grounds

BY ABBY MERGENMEIER, ASSOCIATE EDITOR on October 3, 2011

The Board of Visitors agreed in June to cut the University's greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent by the year 2025, citing the school's "tradition of environmental stewardship" and pledging to reduce annual greenhouse gas emissions to 250,000 metric tons from 2009 levels of 330,000 metric tons.

Concern about lowering the University's environmental impact extends to more than this single issue, however. The U.Va. Beyond Coal campaign wants the University's coal plant retired, and some students are opting to pursue a newly-developed minor in global sustainability.

"Try Just One"

Students reaching for paper towels in bathrooms around Grounds may notice a sticker advising them to "Try Just One." These signs are the work of the University Committee on Sustainability, which works toward reducing the University's carbon footprint and building awareness about sustainable measures.

As part of its "See Why" campaign, the committee placed 2,000 "Try Just One" signs on paper towel dispensers around Grounds. The signs encourage bathroom users to use only one paper towel when drying their hands. Since paper towels cannot be recycled, cutting consumption of paper towels reduces waste and saves both trees and money.

The campaign is also responsible for some 20,000 "Flip the Switch" signs above light switches in classrooms. These stickers encourage students and teachers to turn off lights when exiting a room.

A third sign posted around Grounds by the campaign reads "Choose to Reuse" and encourages students and employees to invest in reusable items, like durable water bottles, instead of single-use items, and to reuse other items when possible.

"It is called the 'See Why' campaign because the signs encourage readers to 'see why' their actions matter by visiting the University's sustainability website," said Ida Lee Wootten, director of community relations in the University's Office of Public Affairs. "We're still in the process of having the signs installed in buildings across Grounds, and the goal is to have all the signs up by Campus Sustainability Day on Oct. 26."

Second-year Engineering student Dyanna Jaye said she thinks the "See Why" campaign is a successful initiative.

"Everyone always has so much going on, especially here at U.Va ... and those signs with the images get it in your mind that it's an issue that's affecting all of us," Jaye said.

Looking beyond coal

A growing number of students have been speaking up about a campaign called U.Va. Beyond Coal. Last fall, University student activists joined the Sierra Student Coalition's Beyond Coal campaign, which works to phase out campus use of coal power.

"Sixty or so colleges and universities in the U.S. ... have coal power plants on their campuses, of which U.Va. is one," U.Va. Beyond Coal President Kenneth Hawes said. "[The University] prides itself on its sustainability initiatives, but it's really falling behind when it comes to coal."

Coal burning produces many harmful chemicals and carcinogens, including mercury. The University's coal plant is located across from the hospital.

"When I saw that they were burning coal across the street from the hospital, I was appalled," said Chris Linsmayer, an organizer with the Sierra Student Coalition. "To burn it right across the street from a hospital, that was a step over the line for me. Coal is the dirtiest form of energy in the United States today. We are poisoning people at the hospital ... [and] at the University every day."

To date, U.Va. Beyond Coal has collected 1,850 student signatures to present to President Teresa A. Sullivan asking her to retire the University's coal plant. The Beyond Coal campaign has been successful at 16 other

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universities, including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which agreed to shut down its coal plant last year.

"What we're really looking for is a commitment, a date, to shut down the plant ... and then we'll sit down and find a solution," Linsmayer said. "Switching is a really big and expensive upfront investment that makes a lot of people hesitant to act on ... but a lot of the initial costs end up paying themselves off in two to five years."

Discussions about what source of energy could possibly replace coal are ongoing.

"The University is looking at using geothermal," Linsmayer said, adding that geo-solar power was successful at her alma mater, Amherst College.

U.Va. Beyond Coal will meet with the University Committee on Sustainability this week to discuss the University's use of coal.

A "minor" change

University students also have the opportunity to explore these issues in an academic context. This semester, students may apply for a new minor, global sustainability. Creation of this minor stemmed from discussions in a 2009 University Seminar about the topic. In late January of this year, the Office of the Provost approved the minor, and the course in global sustainability is now the foundation requirement for the minor.

"Several students were looking for a way to structure and synthesize their course work in sustainability as an enrichment to their course of study," said Phoebe Crisman, associate Architecture professor and director of the global sustainability minor. "After a semester of research examining sustainability majors and minors around the country, the students determined that a minor would be the most effective option."

Students must apply for the minor, be accepted into the program and then take 15 credit hours to complete it. Eighteen students have been officially accepted into the program, and several other applications are pending, Crisman said.

The minor is based in the Architecture School, but students can choose from more than 75 different sustainability-related courses to fulfill their 15-credit requirement. Students must complete at least one course from each of three categories: equity, environment and economy, Crisman explained.

"They begin with a mandatory interdisciplinary foundation course ... that features guest lectures by sustainability experts from across Grounds," Crisman said.

Jaye said she thought the minor was "something a lot of students should look into."

"It's something really simple to tack onto your major," Jaye said. "Adding a global view and adding a global tweak to any major like astronomy or philosophy, for example, is highly beneficial to anyone."

This month, Crisman and Carla Jones, a graduate student in the Architecture School and one of the student initiators of the minor, will present a co-written paper about the minor at the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education Conference in Pittsburgh.

"It's very meaningful to continue and expand the faculty/student collaborations that started the minor," Crisman said.

Taking the LEED on green buildings

The University's academic expansion has accompanied a physical one, and the amount of construction the University has seen during the past few years has prompted concerns of environmental friendliness.

Each new building is required to meet sustainability standards set by the U.S. Green Building Council, however. In February 2007, the Board of Visitors adopted Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification standards from the U.S. Green Building Council, which means each building newly constructed or renovated since 2007 must meet LEED qualifications.

"The LEED certification process awards credit for sustainable design features," said Andrew Greene, sustainability planner in the Office of the Architect. Water efficiency, energy efficiency, indoor environmental air quality and materials and resources involved in construction are factors considered during the certification process, he explained.


"LEED has certainly focused all members of the building project team on sustainable design considerations," Greene said, though he added that the University was using sustainable practices before LEED certification became a requirement.

Seven buildings have been LEED-certified. Bavaro Hall, an addition to the Education School completed in July 2010, and the South Lawn Project were both certified at the LEED gold level. The gold level means that energy-efficient equipment was used in the construction of the buildings, all paint used contained little or no volatile organic compounds and more than 90 percent of construction and demolition debris was recyclable.

Cost plays a role in outfitting buildings to meet these requirements, but when spending choices are made, LEED requirements protect sustainable features from elimination, he explained.

"Because project budgets are so complex and consist of many options, in many cases spending decisions come down to priority," he said, giving the example of different varieties of countertops. "Since buildings are required to be LEED-certified, certain elements that contribute to the certification are typically protected from elimination."

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LEED certification does not apply to already-existing buildings, which differ in terms of energy efficiency and sustainability. The old residence halls on McCormick Road are low consumers of electricity because they lack air conditioning and forced-heating systems. On the other hand, existing buildings built between 1960 and 2000, like the Chemistry Building, are heavy energy users. The University performs a sustainability audit on these buildings to look for ways to reduce water and energy use in a process they call “retro-commissioning,” Greene said.

He added that keeping abreast of new research developments in the field is crucial.

“The path towards sustainability is not laid out,” he said. “This is a constantly evolving concern.”

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