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Campus Initiatives Are Turning Drexel University 'Drexel Green'

Drexel Green is making Drexel greener, officials at the Philadelphia University believe.

They see "Drexel Green," the campus' sustainability program started in 2008, as unifying and amplifying various environmental efforts started by students more than a decade ago.

Walking the campus, some standard things are clear, like recycling containers and big informational ads in the student newspaper. Proponents describe other efforts: biodiesel in vehicles, sole-source recycling, solar-powered compressors in refuse containers, digital controls and systems to conserve water. Drexel Green is essentially a set of mechanisms that fosters a culture of greener behavior. Day-to-day activities reinforce that idea. There are residence hall recycling competitions and no-tray days in cafeterias, with figures posted on how much dishwashing water is being saved. But there's much more.

Green Globes

Drexel officials see an independent assessment system, Green Globes, as a key way for the campus to build on its green edge. Literally. Green Globes, set up by the non-profit Green Building Initiative, assesses, monitors, and rates the environmental impact of construction projects. That matters: Drexel now has \$164.4M in construction projects underway, and another \$85.6M on the drawing boards.

The University is applying its green approach to that construction by committing to Green Globes standards, a policy that peppers conversations with Drexel officials, including Tobey Oxholm, a Drexel senior vice president. Green Globes assessments of the environmental impact and energy use of current projects will go onto rankings to be published online a year after each new building is occupied.

A number of green features are being

installed in Drexel's five current projects, including its Integrated Sciences Building, which will have a bio-growth wall. It will be a 40-ft.-high "living plant wall that naturally improves indoor air quality." Drexel's Recreation Center will reuse rainwater and use amplified natural light. And two other buildings will have green roofs. Recycling rates for the construction waste generated from them will be published. This continues the overall green program's transparency, with results posted online at www.drexel.edu/sustainability.

Room Remains for Improvement

Still, there's room for improvement, according to the Green Report Card green ranking system published by the Sustainable Endowments Institute (SEI). The current report card gives Drexel a B- average based on nine criteria. That lags behind the nearby University of Pennsylvania, which, incidentally, was one of the few institutions nationwide to earn an A-, but tops other locals Temple and Lehigh. The Green Report Card gives Drexel its lowest grades, Cs, in criteria that include administration and student involvement.

Oxholm sees silver linings there. First, he said, "the B- represented a very healthy step up from the C- Drexel had received the year before." And second, Drexel Green is new, and data were due before changes had a chance to make an impact. Oxholm, citing the student action at the core of the Drexel Green, pointed out that student involvement grade "was wrong when given, and is quadruply wrong now!" He's confident that things will change in next year's ranking.

Officials give the impression that the campus goes its own way toward green. Oxholm argued that Drexel Green has no specific model, and is instead based on what's on campus, what works, and what people are doing about it. For example,

Drexel has not signed on to the American Colleges and Universities Presidents Climate Commitment. Drexel officials say they are not signing, just doing. Oxholm said that Drexel's senior vice presidents measured the committee's criteria against the University's construction and renovation plans, saw a poor fit, and recommended that the president not sign on. Oxholm said, "While it would have been easy to sign and leave implementation to others in later years, our word is our bond, and we will only sign pledges when we are ready and able keep the commitments."

Instead, "even with the additional capital projects, I am confident that Drexel will be committing itself to substantial reductions over current operations," said Oxholm.

Information-Based Goals

Drexel Green is a fluid program, with participants planning and implementing evolving initiatives that will enable the campus to set specific goals as more information is gathered. For example, there's a comprehensive carbon reduction plan due to be rolled out later this year, which will be based on the findings of an independent carbon/greenhouse gas inventory study.

If there are marketing and public relations benefits to all this, it's beside the point, said Drexel Green activist Anoo Sukhia, executive director of the University's printing and mailing operation. Sukhia stressed that the point is to do the right thing.

On another level, the initiative is also a way to engage in open dialogue with students — a number of students co-chair campus green committees — while providing hands-on learning experiences across disciplines.

There may be as many green practices as there are campuses, but officials seem confident that Drexel University will only get greener. **CPM**