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Report finds decline in teaching green

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In a recent study, researchers at the National Wildlife Federation found surprising results when they examined the developments in sustainability across America's college campuses: more environmentally sustainable practices in campus facilities management and growth planning have not been mirrored in classrooms nationwide. Surveying 1,068 institutions of higher learning, including Brown, the study found that students today are less likely to be environmentally literate than their recent predecessors.

Green investments need to be coupled with an "infusion" of sustainability teaching across all disciplines, said Julian Keniry, senior director of campus and community leadership at the federation and one of the authors of the report, *Campus Environment 2008*, released August 21. She said the lack of improvement in the academic and curricular aspects of campus sustainability efforts is troubling, adding that while sustainability is "fundamental to every major," many are barely touching on the topic.

According to the report, conserving energy was the most widely held performance objective across campuses in 2008 and the movement to reduce emissions was called the "most promising" trend. On the other hand, the curricular component was unexpectedly "slipping" as the percentage of students taking courses pertaining to the environment fell from eight to four percent in the last seven years.

Keniry said the poor showing by the academic programs could be explained by the lack of incentives presented to faculty. She suggested that sustainability teaching be tied to opportunities for tenure, and proposed a "swapping time" for faculty to exchange ideas on curricular development. Professors are not given the support or "relief time to reconsider courses," she added.

At Brown, the environmental studies program encourages "project-based learning" to help students build skills that can be applied to programs and policies in their careers, said Kurt Teichert, the University's environmental stewardship initiatives manager. Teichert said that while most of the science disciplines incorporate sustainability studies into their curriculum, more widespread integration is possible and "there is always room for improvement."

Teichert said that the methods used by reports like the NWF's can be "tricky" and don't focus as much on the programs that "have been in place for decades," adding that "Brown has a high standard" concerning sustainability practices and teaching. Brown was not among the U.S. colleges commended for their programs in sustainability.

Some of Brown's Ivy League peers were, however. Princeton was acknowledged for its "environmental or sustainability goal-setting," while Harvard, Yale and the University of Pennsylvania all received citations for their efforts to improve transportation.

Salve Regina University in Newport was commended as a school dedicated to making advances with "energy efficiency, conservation, and renewable energy." A university-wide conversion to fluorescent light bulbs in the last decade, the purchase of hybrid cruisers and the transition to tray-less meals are among some of the university's efforts to conserve, said Jameson Chace, assistant professor of biology and a member of the environmental advisory committee at Salve Regina. In addition, dining services at

the university serve only food that is grown within a 200-mile radius.

In 2007, Salve Regina set the broad goal of establishing an "environmentally literate and responsible community" through raising general awareness about sustainable practices and integrating sustainability into academic programs and research, according to an April 26, 2007 official statement. However, incorporating sustainability into curricula is a challenge, said Chace, who teaches a course at Salve Regina called "Humans and their Environment." Even though instruction on sustainability isn't reaching enough students, adapting curricula is difficult because many professors prefer to take "total ownership of their courses" and are suspicious of intrusions on the independence of their instruction, he added.

Brown's support of sustainability is exemplified through the funding of student-led projects aimed at reducing carbon emissions, said Julia Beamesderfer '09, a member of the energy and environmental advisory committee and the student group emPOWER. Funds from the Community Carbon Use Reduction at Brown program have led to "creative and innovative" endeavors that will have an impact in the Providence area, she said.

Project 20/20, supported by the program, involves replacing the incandescent light bulbs of middle and low income households in the Providence area with compact fluorescent bulbs, a change which has simultaneously "promoted awareness and reduced electric bills," Beamesderfer said.

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