Colleges Get Greener in Operations, but Not in Teaching

By SCOTT CARLSON

More higher-education institutions are making sustainability programs a priority, putting more resources into energy-conservation efforts, and setting goals to reduce carbon emissions, according to survey results to be released today by the National Wildlife Federation. Given the popularity of all things green, that's not surprising.

The surprising part of the federation's report had to do with how sustainability fits into the central mission of colleges: Despite floror over climate change, environmental degradation, energy costs, and other issues related to sustainability, the environmental group found that teaching and learning about sustainability has been in decline.

"It is extremely counterintuitive," said Kevin Coyle, vice president for education and training at the National Wildlife Federation. "If you were to use the sports analogy, we are really out of position."

The federation's survey, which drew responses from 1,068 institutions, queried college administrators on a wide range of programs related to sustainability: campus transportation, energy efficiency, landscaping, sustainability staff, sustainability goals, and more.

In most areas, particularly in campus operations, the responses reflected a deeper commitment to sustainability, compared with the results of a similar survey the environmental group conducted in 2001. Sixty-five percent of colleges had a written commitment to sustainability or plans to develop such a commitment in 2008, compared with 43 percent in 2001. The foundation gave colleges high marks for recycling programs, energy-efficiency programs, and green landscapes. Colleges were given low marks, however, in categories for generating green power.

Strong gains could be found in the hiring of staff members to oversee sustainability programs. More than 90 percent of institutions surveyed had hired or planned to hire an energy conservation manager, compared with 42 percent in 2001. Half of colleges had a position for a green-purchasing coordinator, compared with 13 percent years earlier.

The foundation expected to see green programs driven mainly by student interest, but found that students, staff members, and faculty members held equal roles in pushing sustainability.

Failure to Preach What They Practice

Where sustainability programs were found to be losing ground, however, was in the classroom.

In 2001, about two-thirds of colleges surveyed had majors or minors in environmental and sustainability fields; now about half do. (The report noted that two-thirds of the colleges had interdisciplinary degree programs in sustainability, which might account for the decline in majors and minors.)

In other curricular measures, fewer students had taken courses in sustainability by graduation this year, compared with 2001, and fewer institutions reporting having programs that support faculty professional development on sustainability topics.
Speculating on why sustainability had lost ground in the classroom, Mr. Coyle said that higher education's sharply divided disciplines did not work well with sustainability, which tends toward broad, systems-oriented thinking about societal and environmental problems.

"Always in higher education, there is a tendency toward specialization," he said. "The very nature of looking at things in sustainability is looking at things in an integrated system."

"I don't know a good solution to all of that," he added, predicting that academics from disciplines as different as, say, architecture, business, and medicine would have to work together to provide education in sustainability. "You almost need an ombudsman to say, 'Are you paying attention to this, because that is related to this over here.'"

Terry Calhoun, director of media relations and publications for the Society for College and University Planning, said he was pleased with the report's finding that operations divisions were leading proponents of sustainable practices.

The lag of sustainability in the classroom reminded him of the academic attitude toward information technology 10 years ago. Administrators wondered how to get faculty members to adopt technology; those faculty members who saw rewards for their careers eventually adopted technology in teaching. Professors are now often ahead of administrators in using technology in the classroom. Perhaps sustainability in academe will follow a similar arc, he said.