

Executive Summary

Few, if any, sectors of American society are better positioned than U.S. higher education—and perhaps none face the moral imperative—to lead on issues of environmental performance and sustainability. With less than 5 percent of the world’s population, the U.S. uses almost 25 percent of the world’s resources and its universities are among the most numerous and well-to-do in the world. Endowed with excellent research facilities, libraries, inspirational educators leading a broad array of disciplines, energized students and experienced staff, colleges and universities enjoy a unique mix of resources that, when harnessed with vision and persistence, can help lead society towards a more sustainable future.

AT A GLANCE

Number of states participating in the survey	50
Number of campuses participating	1,068
Percentage of all U.S. colleges & universities	27%
Number of participating schools recognized for exemplary programs or having a strong commitment to “do more.”	334

The purpose of Campus Environment 2008 is to explore the extent to which college and university leaders value environmental performance and sustainability and are putting these values into practice. We not only report on current activity and performance, but also compare these trends with our 2001 study. Other studies by peer groups, looking in different ways at select colleges and universities, have emerged since 2001. Taken together, these surveys provide varied lenses through which to view the vast and complex subject of campus leadership for sustainability, and signal the growing interest in this topic. With more than 1,068 campuses responding in 2008 (176 more than in 2001) this study, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International, remains the largest in the United States, enabling us to glimpse beyond the anecdotal into nationwide trends across all types of campuses, large and small, public and private, in all regions of the country and spanning the current decade.

For a variety of reasons, even though the data would permit it, we do not attempt to rank or grade individual campuses. Instead, we analyze trends in terms of collective percentages of schools engaged in important good practices in the areas of leadership, management, academics and operations. Based on their survey responses, this report identifies campuses having exemplary programs in specific areas and also recognizes those with the greatest number of exemplary programs¹. The findings highlight areas where more emphasis is needed and where considerable progress is underway. In some cases, our findings challenge the claims of recently published articles about campus greening that suggest promising new trends based on a few anecdotal examples. In other cases, our findings corroborate such stories.

Some of the important outcomes of the study are highlighted below, listed according to the three topic areas in the survey: management, academics and operations. For all survey questions, a comprehensive “report card” was prepared to show the relative strengths of particular campus practices. See page 69 for the complete report card and grading criteria. A few of the more significant marks are given here, showing trends since 2001.

⁽¹⁾ See also Campus Environment 2008: Exemplary States List at www.nwf.org/campusecology.

1. Greener overall leadership of the university

A welcome discovery is that university leaders value environmental, social and economic sustainability considerably more than in 2001 and are putting structures in place to broaden and sustain engagement campus-wide. Indicators of this commitment include increased goal-setting for improving performance, more staffing for sustainability programs, and a rise in orientation programs for students, faculty and staff on the “green” aims and practices of their college or university.

Leadership trends	2001	2008	Trend
Setting and reviewing sustainability goals	B-	B	↑
Staffing sustainability programs	C	B-	↑
Orienting students, staff and faculty	D	C-	↑
Commitment to do more on the above	11%	33%	↑

2. Equipping students to lead the way

Academics still lag behind the vision, management and operations of the campus—even more so than when this survey was first conducted in 2001. Today’s student is just as unlikely as in 2001 to graduate with exposure to basic ecological principles, much less with an understanding of how the human-designed economy can work in harmony with natural systems. At only a minority of schools have fifty percent or more of the students taken a course on the basic functions of the earth’s natural systems and even fewer have taken courses on the connection between human activity and environmental sustainability. Areas such as business, engineering and teacher education still lag far behind the natural and physical sciences in offering environmental or sustainability courses within their disciplines. Relatively small percentages of campuses offer interdisciplinary degree opportunities in environmental and sustainability studies. Moreover, considerably fewer campuses today require all students to take courses on environmental or sustainability topics.

Academic trends	2001	2008	Trend
Educating a majority of students on the basic functions of earth’s natural systems	C	C-	↓
Have programs to support faculty professional development on environmental or sustainability topics	B	C+	↓
All students take at least one course related to environment or sustainability	8%	4%	↓

3. Greening the day-to-day operations of the campus

Efforts to green the campus shine most brightly in day-to-day operations. Facilities leaders, together with students and faculty, have been instrumental in driving programs to conserve energy and water, increase the amount of clean energy used to power the campus, and reduce waste. Almost all campuses are working to improve the efficiency of heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems, which are responsible for the largest share of direct emissions of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. Since 2001, a new movement to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and shift to cleaner sources of energy has taken hold in a whole variety of ways. For example, one-third (32%) of colleges and universities, use off-campus renewable energy sources to meet some of their electricity, heating and cooling needs, and more than 36 percent of schools say they have plans to generate more renewable energy on campus. A sizeable number of campuses are also working actively toward people- and wildlife-friendly landscapes.

Trends in campus operations	2001	2008	Trends
Heating, ventilation and cooling efficiency upgrades campus-wide	C-	C	↑
*Using some form of renewable or cleaner energy sources to meet campus electricity, heating and cooling needs	C-	C	↑
Water conserving upgrades campus-wide	C-	C+	↑
Greener transportation solutions	C-	C	↑
Waste diversion rates	C	C	—
Sustainable landscapes	B-	B-	—

*Although still a small percentage overall, 6% of campuses use renewables for 90% or more of their energy needs, compared to 1% in 2001.

Little progress has been made to date, though, in reducing the congestion, pollution and other environmental impacts associated with staff and student commuting. Taken together, the findings of the current survey are quite encouraging. While some areas are in need of significant improvement, there is a sense of real progress across the board. Given the quantum leap in campus activities related to sustainability and climate change over the past two years, we expect more trends to be headed sharply upward when we repeat this survey in five years or so.

The 2008 survey was sent to all 2- and 4-year schools in the United States and over a quarter responded, making this a truly representative snapshot of higher education today. But many schools with strong environmental credentials did not participate—for whatever reason—which means the lists of exemplary schools in this report could be even longer. There are many positive signs that increasing numbers of colleges and universities are responding to the growing call for leadership and commitment to a sustainable tomorrow. And because we recognize the need for widespread, collaborative engagement across all sectors of society, we invite and welcome any comments, inquiries and ideas to further the national conversation about what sustainability means in practice and how higher education can help lead the way.

Trend Highlights

- **Most promising new development:**
Rising percentage of campuses setting goals for reducing emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gases.
- **Second most promising new development:**
In 2008, campus leaders much more likely to rank environmental and sustainability programs among their highest priorities, and competing priorities are no longer the obstacle that they were in 2001.
- **Most prevalent environmental initiative:**
2008: Water conservation and efficiency
2001: Recycling
- **Most popular performance goal:**
In 2008: Conserving energy
In 2001: Environmental performance in new buildings
- **The biggest obstacle to expanding environmental and sustainability programming:**
2008: Money
2001: Other priorities
- **New motivator for sustainability programs:**
In 2008, the cost effectiveness of environmental and sustainability improvements is a much stronger motivator than was the case in 2001.
- **Changing impetus for sustainability programs:**
In 2008, government regulation is a much less significant motivator for environmental and sustainability programs than in 2001.
- **Big plans to do more:**
Since 2001, significant increases in plans to hire recycling, energy and green purchasing coordinators, recycle all waste and surplus goods including construction materials, and improve the performance of new and existing buildings.
- **Areas most likely to be staffed:**
Recycling managers and staff who administer sustainability programs.

Trend Highlights

- **Biggest opportunities missed**
Educating about sustainability to pre-service teachers as well as undergraduates across most disciplines.
- **Steady progress**
Using renewable energy, improving efficiency of heating, ventilation and air conditioning.
- **Still struggling**
Little progress in the congestion, pollution and costs associated with students and staff driving alone to campus.
- **Biggest surprise**
Decline in teaching and learning about sustainability.
What we expected

Expectations vs. Reality

What we expected

Students would be the main drivers of change on the majority of campuses.

What we found

Students, faculty and staff are listed equally as instigators of change on campus. A third of schools each list one of these groups as the main driver.

What we expected

Academics would receive a big boost since 2001 because of the imperative set forth by climate scientists to realign human activities with the natural systems of the earth.

What we found

Curriculum connections are slipping. In terms of academic offerings, students are slightly less likely in 2008 to be environmentally literate when they graduate in 2008 than in 2001.

What we expected

The area most likely to be staffed would be energy management because of the motivation to save money, but that sustainability staffing overall might decrease due to the impact of rising energy and other costs on overall budgets.

What we found

Staffing overall is on the rise. Recycling coordinators are the most commonly staffed positions, followed by sustainability coordinators and then energy conservation managers. A majority of schools not only have sustainability staff in place, but large percentages have plans to increase sustainability staffing across diverse departments.

What we expected

Most sustainability staff would report to specific departments or serve in mid-level positions.

What we found

Sustainability staff play prominent roles on campus. A majority of all sustainability positions report to the central administration and a large number of positions are vice president, associate vice president, or similarly high-level.

What we expected

A surge in orientation of new faculty, staff and students to the campus sustainability goals and programs, which would be a relatively simple and cost effective way to increase participation.

What we found

There is room for improvement. Indeed, a modest increase in orientation programs occurred for new faculty, staff and students, but most campuses are still overlooking this relatively easy and powerful step.