

Evergreen State College: Inspiring Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Practices

By John Pumilio and Jason Wettstein, the Evergreen State College

All too often, efforts to green a business or institution begin and end with talk. At the Evergreen State College, in Olympia, WA, we use our educational strengths—based on interdisciplinary teaching and focused on teamwork and critical thinking—to prepare our students for a lifetime commitment to a healthier and more environmentally sustainable future. Although our strategies are well reasoned and discussed, the focus is increasingly on measurable outcomes and actions. We embrace theory, but thrive on practice.

Practice 1: Evergreen integrates campus operations and teaching with its curriculum and planning. We start with people. For several years now, our dedication to environmental sustainability has been a factor in recruitment and hiring, particularly among senior officials such as the vice president for administration and the director of facilities.

All segments of the Evergreen community—students, faculty and staff—actively participate in advancing sustainable practices through governance structures. By integrating operations and curriculum, Evergreen community members learn transferable skills that allow them to make lifelong contributions to achieving a more environmentally sustainable world.

Governance efforts bridge academics and operations through the management of the campus land, building space, green building design and purchasing policies. This



has led to a number of management innovations. We purchase 100% recycled paper, Green Seal cleaning products and Energy Star appliances.

The groundbreaking new campus master plan features a series of education centers on our 1,000-acre campus to engage students in studying campus environment and

facilities impacts. This includes a storm water monitoring center, sustainable design resource center, organic farm education center, Terrascope interdisciplinary center to

study the evolving tree canopy of second-growth forest, alternative energy education center, and a solid waste stream and renewable fuels education center.

Practice 2: Evergreen welcomes student initiative. Students drive Evergreen's green efforts and benefit from management and academic advice. A self-imposed student tax offsets 100% of Evergreen's electricity use through green tag purchases. Building on our reputation for the first publicly funded Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified gold building in Washington State, students voted to renovate our campus activities building to achieve LEED Gold status.

This year, Evergreen's clean energy committee funded 14 projects, including a biodiesel production facility for our organic Farm, a 9-kilowatt photovoltaic array for our library building, solar-powered lighting for our covered bus shelters and a new solar-powered weather station that will collect data and reduce campus water use by 6.5 acre-feet per year.

Practice 3: Evergreen enables sustainable living on campus. Sustainable living is Evergreen's guiding principle and is woven into its identity, values and building environment. We enable a lifestyle in which human communities can coexist in harmony with ecological communities. A walk around campus quickly reveals this. Our campus is beautiful, located on nearly 1,000 acres of Pacific Northwest forest. Our campus core consists of teaching gardens that provide exceptional educational value and landscaping that is herbicide and pesticide free.

Among an increasingly wide stream of awards for sustainable practice, green building, education and conservation, we were recently recognized by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as one of the "best workplaces for commuters." We provide transit passes to faculty, staff and students, offer a guaranteed ride home program, provide commuter and bicyclist lockers, and employ staff and students to encourage greener commuting options.

Evergreen's food service purchasing from local and organic sources is up 28% from 20% in 2006. Students will soon open the Flaming Eggplant Café with a focus on sustainable food service. We offer a vigorous ecological agriculture program that works in conjunction with our organic farm and local farms.

This commitment also extends to purchasing. The energy savings plan will reduce carbon output by 500 tons and save \$73,000 per year.

We recently retired five gasoline-powered vehicles and replaced them with electric-powered ones. Over the seven-year lifespan of each electric vehicle, we will save 5,950 gallons of gasoline and 60 tons of carbon dioxide pollutants.



Practice 4: Evergreen embodies environmental ethics in its academic offerings.

Ours is a cross-generational focus, with emphasis on social justice and environmental responsibility. A sampling of sustainability-related programs for 2008-2009 include course titles such as the following: Climate Change; Conceptualizing Native Place; Environmental Health: Science, Policy and Social Justice; Food, Place and Culture; Green Studio; Living in the Sacred Garden; Mediaworks in Context: Sustainability and Justice; The Olympic Peninsula; Practice of Sustainable Agriculture; The Pacific Northwest: History, Culture and Environment; Toward a Sustainable Puget Sound: Place, People and Policy; Why Businesses Succeed: Designing a Sustainable Company; and Writing for Change.

The curriculum for the bioregion is an initiative of the Washington Center, which is located at Evergreen. Participants aim to better prepare students to live in a world in which the complex issues of environmental quality, environmental justice and sustainability are paramount. This curriculum is currently being shared with institutions across the state.

Practice 5: Evergreen's academic model encourages students to embrace complexity and meet complex challenges. Visitors to Evergreen from around the country want to know how a small college tucked in the Puget Sound region of Washington State has been able to inspire such a deep level of commitment to a sustainable future.

The answer, like Evergreen, is multifaceted. The subject matter of ecology and society, the challenges of sustainably living within nature and the solutions to challenges

such as climate change are cross-disciplinary. Evergreen develops a student's aptitude to deal with complexity. The Evergreen educational philosophy encourages creativity, critical thinking and cooperation.

Evergreen students are required to think laterally, develop both broad perspectives and specialties, and define their inspiration, whether art, science, politics—or all at the same time. Professors provide written reviews of student work as a nearer to real-world alternative to grades.

At Evergreen, our philosophy—extending back almost four decades—has been to encourage students to struggle collaboratively with issues from a variety of disciplines and perspectives and embrace creative solutions to real-world challenges. We see our job as offering a practical liberal arts education that will provide students with theory and skills to live better, more environmentally friendly lifestyles.

John Pumilio is the director of sustainability at the Evergreen State College and Jason Wettstein works in the office of college relations. For more information on the Evergreen State College, visit www.evergreen.edu. For more information on the college's Washington Center, visit www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project.asp?pid=62.