ENVIRONMENTALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ARE UNIVERSITIES DOING ENOUGH?

A look into the different approaches to take and what gets overlooked

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Commercial entities account for almost 20% of Utah's energy consumption (Utah Office of Energy and Development 18). A large portion of that use is a direct result of the 25 universities and colleges across the state. It makes sense that, as such, higher education has become a champion of modern day sustainability practices: carbon pledges and renovations that improve energy efficiency on campus are commonplace. Despite their efforts at "going green," however, other areas in which they have real potential to make a difference are neglected or overlooked.

Universities take admirable measures to reduce their waste production. Similarly, their energy consumption and dependency on traditional fossil fuels are at all-time lows. This can look like everything from building renovations on campus to recycling programs to awareness campaigns advocating on behalf of environmental interests. (ES3 Consultants Inc. 9).

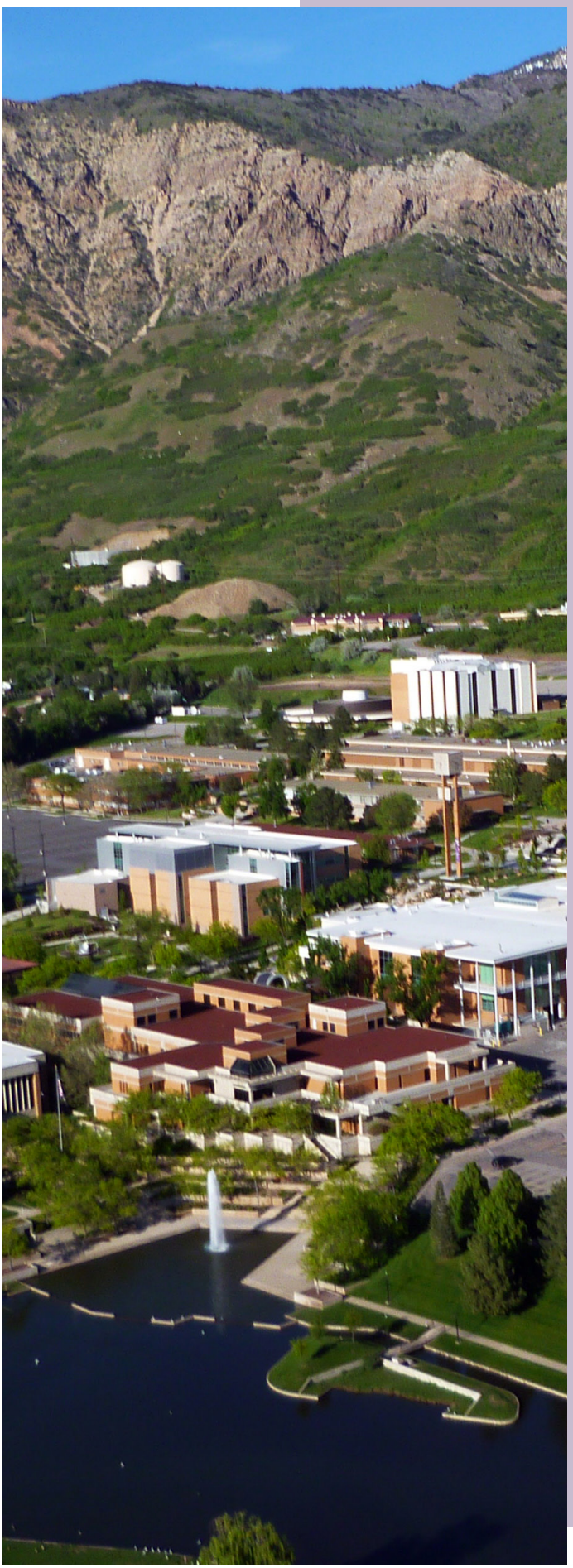
Water bottle refill stations (WRSs) are one example of higher education's success in these areas. WRSs reduce landfill by providing a simple way to refill water bottles on campus. The stations allow students and faculty to fill disposable bottles multiple times before throwing them away and encourage the use of reusable bottles so that less plastic waste is exists in the first place (Takuro 3). Logically, it follows that if students are going through fewer bottles on campus, they're doing it off campus, too. In

one small but powerful way, universities are influencing how their students think about their environmental footprint and what they do about it.

In many ways, however, the benefits of what a university does to limit its environmental impact does not reach beyond just that: its own impact. Universities provide a sort of bridge between early adulthood and the beginnings of students' professional lives that makes it a great time to develop habits that carry over into careers and homes. If a difference is really going to be made, higher education needs to take full advantage of that. It needs to do more than draw attention to an issue and provide practical solutions instead. It needs to broaden the scope of its efforts and take steps to integrate education and sustainable habits into its courses and campus life.

Weber State University is a perfect example of the institution being described here. In its 2015 Energy and Sustainability Investment Plan (ESIP), the university outlines its plans for "energy and water conservation goals," infrastructure improvements," and what its facilities management can do to work towards that (ES3 Consultants Inc. 26). Inside is a detailed summary of renovations, new construction plans, energy and water conservation projects, and other "changes to the built environment of the campus (ES3 Consultants Inc. 28). Clearly, the institution is very aware of what can be done on the macro level. It is what sets Weber apart as the stunning example it is. The same reports do not exist to address student education or behavior.

It could be argued that the Sustainability Practices and Research Center, or SPARC, is a step in the right direction. The center's goal is to "inform and educate" WSU's campus and local community "to ensure the sustainability of our region" (Sustainability Practices and Research Center). The center is a perfect example of what most universities lack. If it was having a deeper impact on students' experience in their classes and on campus, then this article would only have to point to the university as the gold standard.



As it stands, Weber shows that the university is not afraid to make the right steps in some directions and power forward in others. Other universities should not be afraid to do the same.

So, the question is, could higher education make a real difference in what its graduates do later by changing their habits now?

Renewable energy only accounts for 13% of the US's energy consumption as of 2014, almost double what it was in 1990 (Joyce). "Look at cars," said environmental chemist Nathan Williams in an interview. "Most of the first cars were electric. They started to-come back again in the '60s and '70s when there was some interest, and now we're seeing them again, because they're what people are asking for. One of the biggest factors in how quickly we see start to see renewable energy take over is how visible the demand is." How better to start generating interest in renewable energy and waste reduction methods than for universities to do everything they can to encourage it in their students?

Our effect on the world we live in is undeniable. Taking everyday steps to cut down our carbon footprints is something easy to learn when the right habits have been developed—when better to learn that than during college? Higher education usually stands on the forefront when it comes to environmental issues and producing not just alumni with emphases in sustainability but giving that knowledge to graduates across the board is just another way for them to continue running down the path. Awareness and collecting pledges go a long way; action and responsibility go further.

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