

ENERGY EFFICIENCY:

How green is your college? American University scores in new rating system

Lacey Johnson, E&E; reporter

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To the untrained eye, there is nothing extraordinary about American University's 84-acre Washington campus; but according to several rating systems, what's happening there is making the school one of the "greenest" educational institutions in the country.

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- Hundreds of students shower with solar-heated water in the university's residence halls, and professors can gaze through their office windows at rooftop gardens, which were planted all over campus to help absorb rainwater that would otherwise flow into the fragile Anacostia River.
- The campus coffee shop -- which is located inside a new, ultra-efficient building, certified Gold under the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program -- brews coffee using solar energy and sends the leftover grounds to be composted with organic waste from nearby dining halls.
- Each year, the university offsets 100 percent of its electricity usage by purchasing more than 50 million kilowatt-hours of renewable energy credits from a wind farm in North Dakota, making it one of the top 25 green power purchasers in the nation, according to U.S. EPA.

American University is part of a growing sustainability movement on U.S. college campuses, and the schools that join in are discovering how going green can make for good publicity.

A cure for 'survey fatigue'

Green roof

A rooftop garden at American University spells out AU's commitment to green expertise. Photo courtesy of American University.

In recent years, organizations like the Sustainable Endowments Institute, the Princeton Review and *Sierra* magazine have been flooding college sustainability offices with surveys that rate and rank their environmental efforts or lack thereof. The latest rating system is called STARS (Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System), and it aims to cut back on so-called "survey fatigue" by developing the single most comprehensive assessment to date.

STARS was created by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) through a three-year collaboration with college leaders and sustainability experts. It made its official debut in early 2010 with more than 100 registered colleges in the United States and Canada, and that number has since tripled to more than 300.

The survey scores institutions in 139 categories, including energy use, waste management, public engagement, innovation and green research. The highest STARS rating is Platinum -- which no school has yet attained -- followed by Gold, Silver and Bronze. American University is currently among the top five Gold-rated schools, accompanied by Georgia Institute of Technology, Colorado State University, Green Mountain College in Vermont and Dickinson College in Pennsylvania.

"It's helping institutions understand where they're at using these consistent measurements," said Meghan Fay Zahniser, the program manager for STARS. With the campus sustainability movement just getting started, many colleges are at a loss for where to begin. That's where Zahniser believes STARS can offer a framework for improvement. Each rating is broken down in detail and made public online, so each institution can learn from its peers' strengths and weaknesses.

Experts say the green ratings offered by groups like STARS are becoming increasingly important to students. In the Princeton Review's most recent "College Hopes & Worries Survey," 65 percent of prospective freshmen said they would consider a university's environmental commitment when deciding whether to apply or attend.

A lure for students

"Anecdotally, when we've asked student leaders if they thought about these things when they thought about their decision to come to Cornell, almost all them said yes," recalled Dan Roth, the associate director for sustainability at Cornell University, which received its first Gold STARS rating earlier this year. He said a dozen student environmental clubs existed at the school in 2005, and that number has jumped to 35 today. "Every year there's just more of them."

As students' interest in environmentalism has grown, so has the number of surveys. "It felt like we were spending just as much time filling out surveys as doing things," remembered Roth, who said each survey's unique questions and standards made the whole process "a headache."

But earlier this year, the creators of STARS aimed to change that with the "Campus Sustainability Data Collector." The new survey system allows colleges to complete a single online survey and share the answers with the Princeton Review, the Sustainable Endowments Institute and *Sierra* magazine -- three of the most respected green evaluators. In exchange for adding a few extra questions, the reviewers have agreed to use the STARS questionnaire to gather data for their assessments.

"Many of those earlier surveys led to a realization by higher education [leaders] that we need to take it to the next level, and STARS is the next level," says Christopher O'Brien, the director of sustainability at American University. "For us it means having a framework that makes sense."

"This is actually a huge win for everyone involved," agrees Roth. "To me, it's an indication that groups like Sierra Club and Princeton Review are publicly saying, 'OK, we're putting our institutions behind this data set.' It adds a lot of legitimacy to the work that they've done."

A 'risky step' for some schools

While STARS may be turning into the gold standard of green university rating systems, less than 6 percent of the nation's 4,400-plus degree-granting colleges have actually signed up for an evaluation, and the vast majority of those are four-year institutions. At a time when many public colleges are struggling to stay afloat amid budget cuts, costly investments in green technology are rarely a priority. And if a school is falling behind in the sustainability department, why would it want a survey to publicly confirm it?

"A vast majority of universities are just getting started on sustainability," says Roth, "but they know if they sign up for STARS, it's not going to be a pretty picture. That's kind of a risky step."

This is one reason that STARS emphasizes it is a rating system, rather than a ranking system. The Sustainable Endowments Institute is known for issuing harsh grades of C, D or F to colleges that participate in its Sustainability Report Card assessment, and some of those bad scores have been reprinted by the media, making for bad press. The lowest rating STARS publicizes is Bronze, and colleges are listed by alphabetical order, rather than rank.

Zahniser says it's a constant challenge to push colleges to become more sustainable, while also making STARS welcoming to newcomers. Joining the ranks of green schools like American University isn't an easy task, and Zahniser insists that colleges don't need to aim for a Gold or Platinum rating right away.

"It's basically an opportunity for intuitions to pick and choose where they want to begin. It enables each institution to say, 'This makes sense for us.'"