



# Education and Sustainability: Student-Led Activities

*Why and how sustainability has become a major focus for colleges and universities is the theme of a series of Herman Miller articles. They highlight the new and exciting projects we are continually uncovering both in our research and in our partnerships with education customers.*

*As a long-time sustainability practitioner and advocate, we believe:*

- *Good design can provide a foundation for sustainability and set the stage for building a greener campus.*
- *Education is a powerful tool; supporting and nurturing a new generation of environmentally conscious citizens will benefit us all.*
- *We all need to work together to create a more sustainable world.*

*In our series, we examine a range of topics, from examples of student-led initiatives to instructions on how to start a green team. We hope you find these explorations valuable and inspiring, and we encourage you to share them with others.*

## **College Students Leading Sustainability Movements on Campus**

They're starting green teams; they're planting edible gardens, they're sorting trash, they're assessing buildings for carbon emissions, they're promoting bike riding, they're recycling their leftover dorm furniture, and they're making a difference. They're today's college students, and they're seriously committed to helping their campuses become more sustainable.

And it's no wonder that so many are involved in the things they care about: They're surrounded by peers in a stimulating community that's ideal for networking and coordinating activities, with access to mentors (faculty) to guide them.

## **Hungry for Opportunities**

"Every day we hear from students who want to be part of the solution; they're hungry for hands-on opportunities to help their schools create greener campuses, smiling after dumpster diving and getting excited about it," says Jaime Van Mourik, Director, Higher Ed at the U.S. Green Building Council's Center for Green Schools. It helps students integrate sustainability themes into their coursework and advocate for sustainable university practices and policies.<sup>1</sup>

Among students making a difference, Maria Rosales is a prime example. She's a University of Tennessee/Knoxville senior. Winner of the 2012 Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) Student Sustainability Leadership Award (one of many honors she's received), she began her environmental work as a sophomore, volunteering with the Southern Energy Network.



## They're hungry for hands-on opportunities to help their schools create greener campuses.

As a volunteer, she was involved in a protest at EPA hearings to regulate coal ash as toxic waste, a particularly motivating experience for her. "Two years earlier Kingston, a town outside of Knoxville, had the biggest coal ash spill in history," she recalls. "The need to move toward clean energy became more real and more urgent than ever, and the first place to start was on my campus."

Rosales began working with the school's sustainability office to complete the Sustainability, Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) which she says gave her two very important tools: "I saw places where the university could move forward and I learned the structure of our university system. With these two pieces of information, my mind exploded with ideas and knowledge."

A Nicaraguan immigrant who recently became a U.S. citizen and is the first in her family to earn a bachelor's degree, Rosales went on to work on a student-led campaign for green fees. She helped monitor the university's commitment to green power, which contributed to it becoming the largest purchaser of green power in the state. The campaign also resulted in research showing the importance of student green fees—Tennessee schools have collectively invested close to \$12 million dollars in sustainability since 2006—which led to Rosales giving presentations at several statewide environmental conferences.

She also pushed the university to sign the Billion Dollar Green Challenge, a nationwide campaign where universities set up a revolving fund to collectively raise a billion dollars. In addition, she helped organize networks among 10 different campuses across Tennessee, where "we brainstormed, shared stories, challenges and next steps to move our schools towards 100 percent clean energy." In the meantime, she trained nearly 100 other students on how to become active in environmental projects.<sup>2</sup>

### **Making It Personal**

For many students, interest in protecting the environment comes from a personal experience. Rachel Andrews, a pre-med student at Pensacola State College, whose team took first place in the 2012 Herman Miller Student Video contest, "What Makes Your Campus Green?" says growing up on the Gulf Coast was her initial wake up call. "Every year we see more and more of the beach being eroded away by tourist traps and hotels...we figured we could try and help prevent this process."<sup>3</sup>

Erik Alskog, another video contest finalist and graduate student at the University of Washington, knows that students can be a powerful force. "It's the students who really make the campus green," he says. "In so many departments, students are questioning what it means to be green, redefining what it means to be green and at the same time, really pushing frontier designs further."<sup>4</sup>

Herman Miller's annual student video contest has become a valuable learning tool, a snapshot of what's happening on campuses throughout the country. More than 50 students from a wide range of schools entered our contest in 2012.

# It's all about working together to solve our environmental problems.

The majority of videos referenced green teams, made up of students, faculty, and members of campus environmental programs. Recycling and composting were commonly featured activities, as was promoting greener transportation solutions such as bikes and buses. Sustainable buildings were also a major focus, including the use of low VOCs, motion-sensor lighting, and meeting LEED standards. We learned, too, that washables are taking the place of recyclables on many campuses.

## Hands-on Help

As a corporation involved in sustainable practices for more than 60 years, Herman Miller is happy to help further student causes in other ways, too. For example, Dan Broersma, an environmental health and safety specialist, recently volunteered to work with a green team at Grand Valley State University's Meijer Campus in Holland, Michigan. He helped organize a dumpster dive (to identify garbage that could be recycled), where students discovered nearly 90 percent of the things people threw away could be recycled. The result? A new approach to waste management on the campus, including a partnership with a nearby rescue mission that operates a recycling system—and a 70 percent reduction in landfill-bound trash.<sup>5</sup>

## Share the Knowledge

It's exciting to see the work that's being accomplished by college and university students in North America. It's important, too, to share this information with others to encourage more of it. As we know from our customers and partnerships, it's all about working together to solve our environmental problems. And what better place to start than with the leaders of tomorrow?

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Jaime Van Mourik, "Journey to a Green Campus," webinar, May 23, 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> Melissa Ezarik, "Student Videos Answer: What Makes Your Campus Green?" University Business website, June 20, 2012 <<http://www.universitybusiness.com/blog/student-videos-answer-what-makes-your-campus-green>> (Accessed January 2013).
- <sup>3</sup> "We're Raising a Million!" Student Sustainability Leadership Stories, Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) <<http://www.aashe.org/resourcesawards/2012/maria-rosales>> (Accessed January 2013).
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> Grand Valley State University, Herman Miller Case Study Library, <<http://www.hermanmiller.com/content/hermanmiller/english/research/case-studies/grand-valley-state-university.html>> (Accessed January 2013).