

The Green Quad as a Catalyst for Change: Spreading Green Values across the University and Community

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Abstract

The University of South Carolina's "Green Quad" aspires to be a living-learning community that integrates sustainability into all aspects of its operations and serves as a model and advocate for sustainability on campus and in the larger community. This article outlines the general approach and specific strategies pursued by the Green Quad staff and students to fulfill its ambitions to become a catalyst for change for students, faculty, staff, and community members.

The University of South Carolina's "Green Quad" (officially the West Quad) aspires to be a living-learning community that integrates sustainability into all aspects of its operations and serves as a model and advocate for sustainability on campus and in the larger community. At the core of the Green Quad (www.greenquadcommunity.org) is the Learning Center for Sustainable Futures, and the staff of the Learning Center have the challenge of promoting collaborative relationships among students, faculty, staff, and community members for exploring the personal, social, political, cultural, and technological changes required to create a sustainable society. The guiding image is that of a "green bubble": the Green Quad provides a safe incubator for "green values" and serves as a catalyst that leads students, faculty, staff, and community members to explore how to incorporate green values into their daily lives, their own organizations, and the larger society.

This article will outline the general approach and specific strategies pursued by the Green Quad staff and students from August 2006 to August 2009 to fulfill its ambitions to become a model for innovation and a catalyst for change at the University of South Carolina. In general, the strategy was to be opportunistic, responsive to serendipitous partnerships, satisfied with incremental progress, open to a very broad conceptualization of the meaning of green and sustainability, and patient in awaiting the emergence of a critical mass of support. Our strategies were implemented in an extremely supportive environment. Nationally, the period from 2006 to 2009 might be seen as a time when the "green wave" finally rolled over the country, as use of the word "green" went from somewhat confusing still (hard to believe only three years ago) to now being ubiquitous. On campus, very little opposition emerged to anything we proposed—the immediate administrator over Green Quad programs has been very enthusiastic and upper-level administrators have been generally positive.

While the Green Quad is a residential community, most of our strategies are applicable to larger, non-resident metropolitan campuses as well, particularly initiatives undertaken by the campus Office of Sustainability. After an initial section on the background and structure of the Green Quad, succeeding sections discuss programming initiatives taken to reach four different audiences: students, faculty, staff, and community members. Our primary audience, of course, is students, and our primary goal is “to promote student engagement in campus life on issues related to sustainability and the environment.” However, to achieve that goal, we need the involvement and enthusiastic support from a broad range of individuals and organizations, both on campus and in the community. Thus, our secondary goal is “to facilitate student success by serving as a gateway for involvement with faculty, staff, and members of local, statewide, and national organizations” (Green Quad Learning Center 2009, 1).

Background and Structure

The Green Quad at the University of South Carolina is an experimental living-learning community that opened in fall 2004. The building itself was designed to be the first “green building” on campus and attained the silver level of the Leadership in Environmental and Energy Design (LEED) standards developed by the U.S. Green Building Council (Dow, Cellini, and DeBarbieris 2005). A four-building complex totaling 170,000 square feet, the Green Quad is home for five hundred students (including ten undergraduate Resident Mentors), a full-time Residence Life Coordinator, and a part-time Assistant Residence Life Coordinator. Three of the buildings in the complex are four-story residence halls, and the fourth is the Learning Center for Sustainable Futures, which contains three classrooms, a large lounge for receptions, a kitchen, and five offices.

The administrative structure of the Green Quad staff is somewhat complicated, reflecting the university’s initial attempt to forge a collaboration between the Provost’s Office and the Housing Department. The academic leader of the Green Quad is the Faculty Principal, a faculty member who reports to the Vice-Provost for Student Engagement and who is appointed by the Provost for a three-year term. The Faculty Principal is officially a half-time position, and the current Faculty Principal is also half-time in the political science department. The Faculty Principal is also the Director of the Learning Center, which has a staff currently comprised of a full-time Assistant Director, three graduate assistants, and eight part-time staff members who are either interns, undergraduate staff program assistants, or recent graduates. The Faculty Principal collaborates with the Residence Life Coordinator, who manages the “housing side” of the Green Quad and supervises the Assistant Residence Life Coordinator and the ten Resident Mentors.

Programming at the Green Quad is coordinated by the staff of the Learning Center, in collaboration with students, faculty, staff, and community members. During the first two years of operations, the focus of programming was on green building technology and the kinds of individual actions (such as recycling and resource conservation)

consistent with more sustainable lifestyles. Beginning in 2006 with the implementation of the Faculty Principal structure, the focus shifted to a more general emphasis on “green pedagogy,” exploring a broader range of social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of sustainability (Orr 1992). The current annual budget for the Learning Center is \$114,000, not including the contributions of other units which have in the past provided graduate assistantships and some unrestricted funds.

Students: Increasing Engagement

Student activity related to sustainability issues in 2006 was sporadic and uncoordinated. One student organization existed, Students Advocating a Greener Environment (SAGE), which had the ebbs and flows typical of most student organizations. Other student work had been supported by the School of the Environment’s “Sustainable Universities Initiative,” but the personnel associated with that program left late that year. Three years later, a much larger and evolving network of students (and student organizations) has emerged, many of them connected to programs of the Green Quad. The Student Body President’s cabinet now has a Secretary of Environmental Affairs. The Student Senate now has an Environment Committee. The Residence Hall Association now has a Chief Officer of Sustainability and a small army of Sustainability Reps. And the Business School has a new chapter of “Net Impact” working on sustainable development issues.

The strategy of the Green Quad to increase student engagement was (1) to create a “green culture” to provide a broad context for all activities and to demonstrate the breadth of green values; (2) to cultivate a critical mass of students strongly interested in sustainability issues; (3) to use that context and critical mass to gradually widen the scope of engagement, primarily through “green living” programs; and (4) to gradually introduce more opportunities to become engaged in sustainability issues on campus and in the community.

Creating a Green Culture

One necessary condition for the success of the Green Quad was the creation of green culture, so that programs and initiatives promoting green values could have a safe place for incubation. Success in creating this green culture would produce a green bubble on campus that could gradually expand to encompass not only the rest of campus but the community as well. Creating a green culture began with adopting a broad notion of green, beyond simply referring to green technology. Within the Green Quad, being green means seeking a sustainable society in a holistic and fundamental way, exploring the full range of personal, social, economic, political, technological, and cultural changes which may be required. Concern for the environment is part of being green, but it is not the entire story. Core green values include community, personal responsibility, ecological thinking, and grassroots democracy.

To convey this broad notion of green culture, the Green Quad began to sponsor a variety of programs to enhance a sense of “green community.” Community-building

activities are important in creating an environment in which students engaged in sustainability issues can get to know each other in a relaxed atmosphere and can create a sense of common purpose. One part of creating a new culture is to introduce new rituals, holidays, and events. To celebrate the spring equinox, for example, we organized “Spring Equinox Service and Celebration,” which included service projects around the Green Quad in the morning and an afternoon celebration afterwards. One fall, to celebrate the fall equinox we hosted an “Ice Cream Social Awareness.” To celebrate each full moon, we sponsor a “Moon Movie” in collaboration with the Hall Government. Moon Movies are meant to be out-of-the-ordinary films in order to spark interest and engage students in conversation—typically off-beat or independent films with some underlying green theme, such as *Soylent Green*, *Black Sheep*, *Grizzly Man*, *Into the Wild*, *The Mosquito Problem*, and *Wall-E*.

The Learning Center also sponsored other kinds of cultural events to expand the notion of “green.” One year we were able to invite Jeni Wightman to be our environmental artist-in-residence for two months. During her time she worked with students, developed a workshop called “Graphic Language,” and created a living sculpture using compost and mushroom spores. We also sponsored an appearance by the Beehive Collective (a performance group), a mountaintop removal benefit concert, and a trip to a performance of an Earth Symphony and a discussion with the composer.

The most prominent program in this area is the Green Action Film Series, which features films on themes such as climate change, environmental justice, alternative energy, and global sustainability. Films are always accompanied by guest speakers, who lead a discussion and provide options for research and action. We also have a filmmaker-in-residence program in which we invite an activist documentary filmmaker to work with our students and screen films over a two-day period. We have also offered a summer course called “Emerging Green Media,” focused on the social implications of new grassroots, decentralized communication technologies, and we hope eventually to develop a green media group within the Green Quad to encourage students to produce and exhibit their own media projects.

Creating a Critical Mass of Student Activism

While the development of green culture may seem very abstract and unlikely to serve as a catalyst for specific programs, the second and complementary aspect of our strategy was to cultivate a critical mass of students who were motivated to take action on sustainability issues. We pursued this in two ways: convincing the primary activist group on campus to adopt the Green Quad as its base of operations, and creating a “Green Learning Community” to become the core of activity within the Green Quad.

The primary environmentally-related student group on campus is SAGE (www.sageusc.org), an organization of 25–30 students that meets weekly to discuss environmental topics and organize events and campaigns on campus. The Green Quad offered to provide them with office space and programming resources, and we now host their meetings in our lounge and work with their leadership to collaborate on

events and initiatives. We have also begun to employ some of the most active SAGE members as undergraduate staff assistants in the Learning Center, which greatly improves communication. Through SAGE, the Green Quad has also become involved in other regional student organizations, hosting two conferences for the South Carolina Association for Sustainable Campuses and Communities (the coalition of student environmental groups from campuses across South Carolina).

The second part of our strategy to create a critical mass of activist students was the creation of a Green Learning Community, which began in August 2007. Community members all live on the same floor in the Green Quad and create and participate in special programs: field trips to places and events of interest, an organic community garden, occasional community meals, informal meetings with faculty members and visiting scholars and activists, and ongoing activist and research projects. The Green Learning Community is designed to cultivate a smaller group of students within the Green Quad, with the intention that the programming developed by and for them will energize students in the rest of the Green Quad. Currently the Green Learning Community has thirty students, selected from over a hundred applicants and representative of a broad spectrum of majors throughout the university.

All members of the Green Learning Community are required to register for a common one-credit course. The course is designed to give students credit for the activities they engage in as members of the community, including attending the weekly community meeting, attending the public events of the Learning Center, attending various community-building activities (student-designed outings and meals), and participating in the field trips and projects. Field trip destinations have included the Congaree National Park, an organic farm, a local recycling center, Earthaven Ecovillage, the Edisto River basin (for kayaking), and camping in the mountains.

As the Green Learning Community develops, we plan to gradually increase its size, so that ultimately it would include 60–80 students (two floors of the Green Quad), and perhaps even more. At that point we would like to begin another option: the “Ecovillage at USC.” As part of our planning process, we offered a course called “Ecovillages and Sustainable Living,” which was designed to explore what it might mean to have an ecovillage within the Green Quad. We brought in a series of speakers from the ecovillage movement and read case studies of major ecovillage developments (Christian 2003; Kinkade 1994; Walker 2005). Our ecovillage would likely be a subset of the Green Learning Community, probably limited to 10–20 students who are interested in developing a close-knit community in which members share meals a few times a week, share their inspirations for sustainable living, and explore what kinds of community structures might contribute to a more sustainable society.

As a critical mass of activist students has evolved over the past three years, our programs have served as a catalyst for further sources of activism, and we have also attempted to support new groups that have emerged. Last year we worked with the president of the Residence Hall Association (RHA) to create a Sustainability Rep program, and the first two students to lead that program (as RHA Chief Officer of

Sustainability) were members of our Green Learning Community. Last year the Student Body President first appointed a Secretary for Environmental Affairs, and the Student Senate first created an Environment Committee—and most of the students leading those organizations have been previously or are currently participants in our programs. The Green Quad also supports the Student Sustainability Coalition, an umbrella group initiated last year by Student Government made up of representatives from all sustainability-related student organizations (including student government, SAGE, RHA, and Net Impact). One of our most successful programs to support our activist students has been to send them to conferences to meet peers and spend time with national organizers. We sent twenty-eight students to the Power Shift 2007 conference and forty students to Power Shift 2009, two major national gatherings of student activists, as well as twenty students to Southeast Student Renewable Energy Conference, the primary regional gathering of student activists.

Developing Programs in Green Living

Beyond supporting programs for these, the most active subgroups, we also have more general programming for all of the students in the Green Quad. One of the most successful programming areas has been green living. Promoting a holistic green perspective means that all aspects of everyday life become opportunities for education and engagement. One primary goal is to create awareness of how personal lifestyle choices link to sustainability—the social and environmental impact of lifestyle choices.

The most visible accomplishment in this area has been the development of the Green Quad Community Garden, an 1,800-square-foot organic vegetable garden that provides a tangible statement of how food and agricultural issues are addressed within the green bubble. The project is a collaborative project with the Landscaping Department and the Housing Department. The garden provides a resource for explorations in the areas of food production, giving participants an opportunity to learn about biodiversity, organic gardening techniques, native plant species, permaculture design, edible landscaping, and composting. We have hired a part-time permaculturalist to help with design and then to work with students in the initial stages of the garden, with the idea of gradually allowing the students to take on as much responsibility for operations as possible. Currently the garden is coordinated by a member of the Green Learning Community, who works with volunteers from among students, staff, and community members.

Another successful programming initiative has been to work with individual Resident Mentors to create programs for particular halls within the Green Quad. One program focused on “green cleaning” and featured, in addition to food from the Community Garden, a discussion of conventional cleaners and the chemicals in those cleaners, how they affect humans and the environment, and how they compare to green cleaning products as far as content, effectiveness, and economic savings. Students made their own green cleaning solution using vinegar, water, castile soap, and essential oils. Another successful program focused on “local foods.” One of our program coordinators served local cuisine to demonstrate a simple, quick, local meal; displayed various places that market and sell local food; discussed the impacts of buying locally

on individuals, economy, social networks, culture, and industries such as agriculture; and listed ways for students to get involved with projects other than buying power (like the Green Quad Community Garden).

The Learning Center also has other ongoing programming related to green living. Every Wednesday we have a free yoga session, open to students, faculty, and staff. The sessions are dedicated to learning and refining basic yoga poses and help reinforce how personal practices like yoga can reinforce sustainability principles and help promote a holistic perspective. We also promote a healthy and sustainable lifestyle offering a variety of classes and workshops that help people learn how to eat healthier, choose healthier foods, and exercise. We offer a one-credit course (in conjunction with the campus “Healthy Carolina” initiative) called “Sustaining the Human Body” and have sponsored a mini Health Fair and informal classes on exercise, nutrition, smoking cessation, and vegetarian and vegan cooking.

We also have green living programs that focus on resource conservation. Our intent is to have the model recycling program on campus, and to encourage students to participate in that program. Students are encouraged to understand the physical features of their LEED-certified green building, particularly the energy-saving features, and we organize tours for student groups to promote a deeper understanding of green building principles. We also try to make use of the ability of residents to monitor their own resource consumption (water and electricity).

Expanding Opportunities for Green Engagement

Once we developed an initial critical mass of engaged students, we began to sponsor a variety of programs to directly facilitate further engagement, and those programs in turn served as a catalyst for other university units. For example, the Green Quad sponsors an annual “Green Study Abroad Night,” co-sponsored with the campus Study Abroad Office, featuring study abroad options linked to sustainability (including an option we developed to investigate sustainable living in Scotland, including Findhorn Ecovillage). In preparation for the event, the Study Abroad Office developed a new brochure and a new listing of programs appropriate for students interested in a sustainability focus. We also worked with the campus Career Center to sponsor an annual “Green Career Night” to encourage students to consider green career options. In addition to preparing a presentation on that topic, the Career Center also developed a new brochure and a listing of careers appropriate for those interested in sustainability issues.

The Green Quad also serves as a gateway for student involvement in service-learning projects (see also the community section below). We specifically promote service-learning projects linked to sustainability and the environment, including projects in conjunction with Conservation Voters of South Carolina, Sierra Club, Keep the Midlands Beautiful, and Five Leaves Farm, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm near Columbia, South Carolina. An Honors College course called “The Philosophy of Food,” taught at the Green Quad, incorporated a service-learning segment that included work in the Green Quad Community Garden.

Faculty: Promoting Green Pedagogy

Connecting students with faculty is a crucial but perhaps the most difficult aspect of facilitating student engagement with sustainability issues. The strongest ongoing faculty connection for Green Quad students is with the Faculty Principal, who, while officially half-time, maintains a nearly full-time presence in the Learning Center. In addition to teaching courses, the Faculty Principal attends meetings of the Green Learning Community and other student organizations, is available for informal advising and consultations, and is the sponsor for a variety of student research projects. Students are able to apply for research grants, independent study courses, and internships on topics related to sustainability.

Our strategy for increasing faculty involvement was to (1) to create new courses that would take advantage of the Faculty Principal's ability to bring in other faculty, (2) to encourage other faculty to teach their courses in the Learning Center, and (3) to gradually involve other faculty in general programming (including a series called "Green Pedagogy").

Creating New Courses on Green Explorations and Green Engagement

One of our central innovations was the creation of a new two-course seminar sequence for first-year students, "Green Explorations/Green Engagement," offered for the first time in 2007–2009 through a grant from the College of Arts and Sciences. The academic rationale for the sequence was that it would provide an interdisciplinary experience for first-year students that would strengthen offerings in environmental studies as well as create a structure within which faculty could collaborate on teaching and research within the area. The grant provided for student field trips, faculty research funds (for collaborative projects with students), and a full-time graduate teaching assistant. The strategic rationale for the Green Quad was that it would provide an opportunity to invite faculty from a wide range of disciplines to come to the Learning Center and interact with our students.

The courses (cross-listed between political science and environmental studies) were designed to allow students first to explore their physical and intellectual environment and then to engage with those in their university and local community in creating projects to increase sustainability. The Green Explorations seminar allows students new to the university to explore in four different ways: (1) exploring the community, by taking weekly field trips into the environment around Columbia, South Carolina, learning about the geography and the social and natural history of the region; (2) exploring the disciplines, by learning about what the concepts of "green" and "environment" mean in a variety of disciplines by reading and discussing major books and articles central to environmental thought and practice; (3) exploring themselves, by undertaking their own individual explorations about the relationship between humans and the environment in regular writings in a journal; and (4) exploring action, by exploring opportunities to respond to the problems identified during the semester.

The Green Engagement seminar allows students to build on these new understandings by undertaking their own research/advocacy project, in collaboration with key stakeholders within university and community organizations. The overall objective of this course is to build the capacity of students to achieve success in promoting environmental sustainability on campus and in the community by (1) understanding the process required for successful action; (2) creating the linkages necessary with students, faculty, and staff on campus and with people in the community; (3) developing a goal; (4) conducting research to devise an effective plan to reach that goal; and (5) using their communication and organizing skills to put that plan into action.

Both of these courses, and particularly Green Explorations, have successfully drawn in a wide range of faculty from across the campus. Over the years, guest speakers have come from the departments of English, Political Science, Economics, Law, Civil Engineering, Geography, History, Journalism, Philosophy, Music, and Media Arts. The courses have also been avenues for bringing in a variety of other university staff (including Landscaping, Dining Services, Recycling, and Purchasing) as well as activists from many community organizations (including Historic Columbia, Conservation Voters of South Carolina, Sierra Club, and Congaree Land Trust).

Hosting Courses Taught by Other Faculty

At the same time that we were creating our own courses, we began recruiting other faculty to teach their courses in the Learning Center. The attraction for the Green Quad was twofold. First, having those faculty teaching in the Learning Center made more possible the kind of collaborations that we were looking for. Second, those classes also brought many more students to the Learning Center, students who would ideally learn about and participate in our other programming.

A good example of this strategy has been our experience with a colleague in the philosophy department who has taught his undergraduate and graduate Environmental Ethics courses in the Learning Center. The objectives of that course are to increase the student's ability to (1) formulate and evaluate philosophical arguments, (2) evaluate and defend ethical positions using both traditional ethical theories and the contemporary environmental-ethics literature, and (3) argue for a reasoned position on issues related to environmental ethics. Students taking a course like that are obvious candidates for participation in our other programs, and some of them have gone on to become members of our Green Learning Community or SAGE. But the course has also led to increasing collaboration with the philosophy professor. He subsequently developed a new course, "Philosophy of Food," which examines a range of ethical and societal issues associated with the production and consumption of food, including animal rights, agricultural subsidies, organic and community based agriculture, genetic engineering, and biofuels. The course also included a service-learning component: each student was expected to spend ten hours over the course of the semester helping with the Green Quad Community Garden in order to have a hands-on opportunity to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of organic and community-based agricultural initiatives.

Another example of a successful collaboration was with a history professor who teaches the course “Exploring Local Environmental History.” Using the Columbia area as a case study in local environmental history, the course explores the role and place of nature in American history from the origins of European colonialism in the 1500s to the present, asking questions about how nature has enabled and set limits for human actions, how people have modified the ecosystems they inhabit, and how different cultural conceptions of the non-human world have shaped beliefs, values, economies, and politics. During one semester, this course met at the same time as the Green Engagement course, and students in the two courses were able to work together on projects.

A similar collaboration emerged between a Green Engagement course and a Media Arts course on documentary film. Students in the Green Engagement course are divided into groups to implement a final project on campus or in the community, and those groups were paired with groups of Media Arts students who were assigned to make an activist documentary film. The result was a series of five short documentaries, shown at the local nonprofit community media arts center, which chronicled and promoted activism on campus and in the community.

Beyond these three examples, we have had a wide range of courses from the College of Arts and Sciences taught in the Learning Center. Another philosophy course, “Technology, Society, and the Environment,” examined current developments and debates around powerful technologies that promise to transform the world as we know it (and which also had an associated film series and speaker series co-sponsored by the Green Quad). We have hosted sustainability-themed English courses, such as “Basic Composition and Rhetoric,” “Poetry and Ecofeminism,” and “Women in Culture.” We have also hosted a special section of an introductory physics course, the “Physics of Energy,” and an anthropology course, “Primate Studies.”

Many courses have also been taught from the professional schools. Faculty in the Engineering School have offered “Next Energy” and “Municipal Solid Waste Engineering.” Journalism faculty have offered “Journalism of Science and Technology.” Public Health faculty have offered “Sustaining the Human Body,” which examines the relationship between the environment, nutrition, and health outcomes, with course topics including genetically modified foods, the politics of agriculture, exercise as a means for physical health and sustainable living, and hands-on learning and service opportunities. Law faculty have offered “Introduction to Environmental Law and Policy” as well as “Dealing with Environmental Law and Policy in the Press,” which covers issues related to the nature and management of press coverage of environmental legal and policy issues.

Involving Faculty in Other Programming

Beyond formal courses, our strategy for promoting faculty involvement and student-faculty interaction has been to create a variety of informal opportunities for participation, ranging from informal one-on-one meetings to small group discussions. The Green Quad has a Faculty Associates program, which, though still a work-in-

progress, provides a core group of faculty who we rely on to volunteer to be guest speakers for the Green Learning Community or other events and to consult informally with students pursuing sustainability-related projects. Another initiative has been our “Green Pedagogy Series,” which are generally lunch-time discussions designed to provide faculty and staff with models for green teaching methods and for incorporating sustainable and green issues in the curriculum.

Often when we have visiting speakers or film-makers we create a “Green Pedagogy” event as one of many opportunities for student and faculty interaction. For example, in 2008 we invited Professor Harry Wray, author of the recently published *Pedal Power: The Quiet Rise of the Bicycle in American Public Life*, to include the Green Quad on his book tour. We took advantage of his appearance to sponsor the first annual campus Bicycle Festival, a two-day festival with several programs around campus. As part of the festival, Wray participated in a bike ride, gave a presentation to the Green Explorations class, led a discussion with the Green Learning Community, talked with faculty at a “Green Pedagogy” event about the political science course he teaches while riding bicycles around Chicago, and gave a public presentation about his book.

Operational Staff: Building Collaborative Relationships

Developing strong relationships with operational units at the university has been an extremely important, though much less visible, aspect of our strategy. If our primary goal was to promote student engagement in sustainability issues, we needed to enlist the assistance of operational staff to help our students use the campus as one of their “laboratories” for sustainability-related campaigns. In 2006, however, there were few if any operational staff members assigned full-time to sustainability-related duties. The full-time sustainability officer in the Housing Department had just left the university, and the staff person in charge of the “Sustainable Universities” project in the School of the Environment left shortly thereafter. The President’s “Environmental Advisory Committee,” comprised of students, faculty, and administrators, played the role of facilitating communication among those staff who supervised operational areas most relevant to sustainability issues. Our strategy was to gradually expand our connections by (1) establishing a stronger relationship with the Housing staff within the Green Quad, (2) identifying and getting to know operational staff working in all areas related to sustainability (everything from parking and dining services to landscaping, recycling, and purchasing), and (3) creating a much stronger sense of collaboration between operational units and interested students and faculty.

The relationship between the Housing staff and the Learning Center staff in the Green Quad has grown tremendously over the past three years, and this year they provided us with a graduate assistant to support our efforts. As noted above, staff of the Learning Center work with the Housing Department personnel within the Green Quad, primarily the Residence Life Coordinator and his staff of Resident Mentors. Over the years, we have worked with them to create a new model of how to integrate the roles of the

Resident Mentors into the overall mission of the Green Quad. This year we took a very significant step in this process: the Residence Life Coordinator produced a booklet called “Roadmap to the Ecovillage” in which all of the required functions of the Resident Mentors are given a green spin. In the fall, Green Quad staff members participate in the training of the Green Quad Resident Mentors and continue working with them during the school year.

Beyond the Housing Department, we have attempted to build relationships with all of the other administrative units related to sustainability. For example, our initiative to create a Community Garden required the approval and assistance of the Landscaping Department, and their enthusiastic embrace of the project has led to a series of expansions, mostly recently to include a grove of fruit trees (a project designed by three students from the Green Learning Community who received research mini-grants). Another initiative that prompted collaborations with an operational unit was the new “sustainable dining policy” that we developed to apply to all events held in the Learning Center. Because the policy mandates that only reusable plates, cups, and silverware can be used in the Center, we had to work with Dining Services, who were very supportive, to develop options that groups could use to meet our policy requirements.

Our efforts to create a stronger sense of collaboration between operational units and interested students and faculty began with a round-table discussion, organized as part of the initial offering of the Green Explorations class, which brought together representatives from most of the departments related to sustainability issues. The round-table was the first time that many faculty and students had realized the wide range of operational staff who were already working in various ways to improve the university’s record on sustainability. The following year, the Green Quad sponsored the university’s first annual “Earth Summit,” which brought together representatives of operational units with faculty and students to set a list of goals and priorities for the upcoming year. Throughout the rest of the year, the Green Quad provides administrative support (hosting meetings and providing staff support) for the Environmental Advisory Committee, which oversees the implementation of those priorities.

Community: Facilitating Connections Outside the University

A crucial part of the Green Quad’s ability to promote student engagement is to have the ability to serve as a gateway for student involvement with members of local, statewide, and national organizations. Contact with dynamic activists in the community organizations has a great potential to energize students interested in sustainability. As of 2006, the primary community connection for the Green Quad was the South Carolina chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council, which held its meetings in the Learning Center. We wanted to build on that by broadening the range of community organizations present in the Center, increasing the accessibility of those organizations to students, and building on these contacts to develop a wide array of opportunities for students to collaborate with community organizations through internships or less

formal relationships. Our overall strategy for accomplishing these goals was to open ourselves up to the community, in three ways: (1) having more public programs, (2) inviting community members to be part of events and courses, and (3) encouraging community organizations to have meetings in the Learning Center.

Over the years we have developed strong connections with many of the major environmental organizations in the state and many of the local environmental activists. Some of these relationships have developed from just opening up and publicizing many of our programs to the community. The Green Action Film Series has brought in many interested community members, particularly for our visiting film-makers. Also, each year we have a series of films and speakers around a specific theme (such as “Ecovillages,” “Water Talks,” or this year “Global Sustainability”) that we think will attract those in the community. And some of our best events occur when community members ask us to show a film or host a speaker who is traveling through the area.

Another aspect of the strategy has been inviting representatives from community organizations to be part of our courses and events. The Green Explorations and Green Engagement courses have hosted a number of local activities. Other events, such as “Green Career Night,” are natural occasions to bring in those in the community who have careers that our students might aspire to. And we have invited community representatives to share their expertise and experiences with our Green Learning Community and SAGE. One local activist has led a bus tour for interested students called “Columbia’s Environmental Disasters.”

We also wanted to take advantage of our prime meeting space to offer students more opportunities for connections. Early on we attempted to recruit several green organizations, but as our work continued, we found that community organizations approached us instead. Currently we host weekly or monthly meetings of five organizations: the local chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council, the regional Sierra Club group, Trout Unlimited, Environmentalists Inc. (a local environmental group), and the Macrobiotic Food Group. Typically we advertise the program scheduled for these groups as co-sponsored with the Green Quad, so that we benefit from speakers and presentations ranging from statewide legislative lobbying to the details of nutrition. In addition to these regular meetings, we host a variety of other organizations. Some of our favorites are meetings of community groups trying to get started, such as a local group (CLUCK) which is advocating the legalization of urban chicken-keeping. Conservation Voters of South Carolina also holds their semi-annual gatherings at the Green Quad, which brings together the leaders of all of the major state-wide environmental organizations to develop a “Common Agenda” for the purposes of lobbying the state legislature. We have also hosted meetings of the Mayor’s Climate Change Task Force and groups sponsored by the state Department of Health and Environmental Control.

All of these new relationships provide students and faculty with the opportunity to interact with community groups. While we have had limited success directly involving students in these groups, we are gradually increasing our ability to use these

connections to increase student opportunities. We maintain a listing of all internship and service options from these groups, and we assign one of our graduate assistants to facilitate student contacts. For example, recently SAGE has worked with the local Keep the Midlands Beautiful organization on recycling, and Conversation Voters of South Carolina has provided service-learning opportunities for the Green Engagement course.

Finally, while our community connections have grown dramatically since 2006, we have also maintained and strengthened our original linkages with the Green Building Council. The Learning Center hosts Council meetings and promotes green building technologies, primarily through offering tours of the Green Quad buildings and grounds to students, community members, and visitors. The Green Quad provides examples of alternative energy production (including a hydrogen fuel cell and passive solar water-heating) as well as sustainable landscape design (such as bio-remediation, edible landscaping, native plant species, wetlands management, water-runoff management, community gardening, organic gardening, and permaculture design).

Conclusion

The Green Quad aspires to be a living-learning community that serves as model for innovation and a catalyst for change. How well has it fulfilled its ambitions? Certainly the Green Quad is very much an experiment in progress. This article has outlined the general philosophy and specific strategies pursued by the Green Quad staff and students over the past three years. As noted above, these three years have corresponded with an explosion of public interest in all things green, so the Green Quad can hardly be given credit for everything that has been happening on campus and in the community.

Still, a number of our initiatives have served as catalysts for change. For students, a critical mass of activist students has emerged to work on sustainability issues, and new structures and programs are in place in the Student Body President's office, the Student Senate, and the Residence Hall Association. For faculty, collaborative opportunities have increased the range of green courses in the curriculum. For the administration, some departments have developed new programs through their interaction with the Green Quad, and all departments are benefiting from the new, more comprehensive and coordinated "Earth Summit" process. For the community, some groups now have a stronger connection with the university and are benefiting from the labor of our students, and the public has an increased awareness of a wide range of issues.

One remarkable aspect of this three-year project has been the uniform level of support for the programs and the absence of any real opposition. Recent budget cuts have slowed progress somewhat, but that is the case in most universities. While some administrative units are more reluctant to become involved than others, the overall climate is extremely positive for our initiatives. The Green Quad may be an oasis of green values within the larger university, but it still exists within a hierarchical university administrative structure, and our success is linked to the cooperation of other units (such as Student Development and University Housing, Landscaping,

Dining Services, and the School of the Environment), which have been very supportive of the Green Quad experiment.

This article has emphasized some parts of our general strategy more than others. The examples offered show the importance of being opportunistic, responsive to unexpected partnerships, and open to a very broad notion of sustainability. However, other parts of that general strategy are very important as well: being patient in awaiting the emergence of support and being satisfied with incremental progress. The ultimate changes that the Green Quad seeks to promote are fundamental and long-term, and such changes are not readily observable month-to-month or even year-to-year. Affecting the level of student engagement in sustainability issues is a daunting task, particularly when students are involved in and attracted to an incredible array of other opportunities on campus that pull their attention away from Green Quad initiatives.

The basic ideas presented in this article are readily adapted to other settings. Colleges and universities without significant residential communities might find these ideas more relevant to the programs of their Office of Sustainability. Other campuses are experimenting with different models of residential learning communities, and these communities offer many opportunities for promoting sustainability in the campus and community. The Green Quad model is one to be considered for those interested in how innovative programs and structures can provide a catalyst for action within the university and larger community.

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