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# Higher Education and Construction; Does Building Green Still Matter?

CONSTRUCTION, HIGHER EDUCATION  
BY JOE BRUCE

At a recent symposium held by the Master Builders' Association of Western Pennsylvania (MBA), a panel of speakers tackled the question of whether green building and sustainability is still relevant. Key concepts and practices developed around the concept have existed now for almost 25 years, since the creation of the U.S. Green Building Council, with the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system turning 18 this year and the Living Building Challenge building performance standards in existence for a dozen.

So what roles do major project owners, such as colleges and universities, have in building green and developing long-range sustainability plans? It was not surprising to learn that one local institution of higher learning, the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt), believes it has the answer to that question and the plan, and the data to back it up.

Dr. Aurora Sharrard, former executive director of the Green Building Alliance, is now Pitt's Director of Sustainability. During the MBA discussion, she provided detail on Pitt's sustainability plan, which focuses on stewardship, exploration, community and culture in 15 impact areas, and addresses everything from energy and emissions, landscape and ecology, and materials and waste, to water systems, health and well-being, global outreach and innovation. The University's geographic massive footprint affords substantial opportunity to influence its areas of impact, as the main campus and four regional campuses account for 131 buildings, comprising 13.8 million square feet on 146 acres of property.

Key goals within the Pitt plan include:

- Produce or procure 50% of the University's electricity from renewables;
- Reduce landfill waste by 25%;
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 50%; and
- Increase tree canopy by 50%, all by 2030.

Additional goals include increasing sustainability-related service learning opportunities for students, serving meals in reusable containers, and the incorporation of sustainability into all student programming. The University currently has 12 LEED-certified buildings and is pursuing certification for nine current or recently completed construction and renovation projects.

Dr. Sharrard also believes the financial data and that Pitt's students and faculty,

which number over 41,000, support its commitment to green building and sustainability. The University's focus with any concept or practice within its plan is "triple bottom line," a three-part framework comprised of social, environmental and financial components to evaluate overall performance and impact. Execution of the framework within the sustainability plan has so far resulted in a 12% reduction in energy use and a 14.5% reduction in water use, with overall financial savings estimated at approximately \$27 million. Additionally, sourcing a 2018 National Union of Students survey of higher education students, Dr. Sharrard noted the following:

- 61% of students would accept a salary 15% lower than average to work in a job that contributes to positive social and environmental change
- 92% are concerned about the effects of climate change
- 85% would vote for a government that increased action to tackle climate change
- 76% responded that climate change will negatively affect them

These responses clearly identify students with a strong support of climate change action, and the interest to work for companies with positive social and environmental records and change initiatives.

The University's focus on green building and sustainability not only directly correlates with its triple bottom line framework – so important to key stakeholders – but is also highly appealing to its primary consumer, its students. Pitt's best-in-class sustainability plan and results clearly illustrate the importance of green building, and our region is fortunate to have a university committed to long-range sustainability.

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