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*Green Quad, University of South Carolina,  
Columbia, South Carolina*

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## Creating a “Green Bubble” on Campus: A Model for Programming in a Green Living-Learning Community



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**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 is the Learning Center for Sustainable Futures; its staff 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. To meet this challenge, the learning center has developed a broad notion of green pedagogy for creating programs and supporting student and faculty initiatives in order to reach residents, other students, faculty, staff, and members of the larger community.

Programming at the Green Quad is inspired by David Orr's (1992) notion of "ecological literacy," which emphasizes the importance of a holistic, non-hierarchical approach to education, transcending the confines of the traditional classroom. Central to this approach is the importance of making and understanding connections, both connections in the natural world and connections with diverse organizations inside and outside the university. The ideal program is one that is initiated by students, incorporates a broad notion of sustainability, and creates connections among students, faculty, staff, and members of the larger community.

Creating such programming within the context of a residence hall presents a number of challenges, not the least of which is establishing a strong connection between housing staff and academic staff. This article will explore these challenges as it provides (1) background on the development and structure of the Green Quad and (2) an overview of a tiered model of green programming.

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## BACKGROUND AND STRUCTURE

The Green Quad at the University of South Carolina is an experimental living-learning community which opened in the fall of 2004. The building itself was designed to be the first green building on campus and attained the Silver level of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards developed by the U.S. Green Building Council (Dow, Cellini, & DeBarbieris, 2005). A four-building complex totaling 170,000 square feet, the Green Quad is home for 500 students (including 10 undergraduate resident mentors, similar to RAs), 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 lounge, a kitchen, and five offices.

The administrative structure of the Green Quad staff is somewhat complicated, reflecting the university's attempt to forge a collaboration between the housing department and the provost's office. The academic leader of the Green Quad is the faculty principal, a faculty member appointed by the provost for a three-year term. The faculty principal position is a half-time position, with the faculty member spending the other half in their home department (geography for the original principal and political science for the current one). The faculty principal is also the director of the learning center, which has a staff comprising a full-time assistant director, a graduate assistant, and, currently, eight part-time staff members who are either interns, undergraduate students, or recent graduates. The faculty principal collaborates with the residence life coordinator, who

manages the housing side of the Green Quad, supervising the assistant residence life coordinator and the 10 resident mentors.

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The initial focus of programming was on student understanding of green building technology and the kinds of individual actions (such as recycling and resource conservation) consistent with more sustainable lifestyles. Starting with its third year of operation, the focus began to emphasize a more holistic vision of green pedagogy, exploring the full range of personal, social, political, cultural, and technological changes required to create a sustainable society.

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Programming at the Green Quad is directed by the staff of the learning center, in collaboration with students, faculty associates, and members of the larger Columbia community. The initial focus of programming was on student understanding of green building technology and the kinds of individual actions (such as recycling and resource conservation) consistent with more sustainable lifestyles. Starting with its third year of operation, the focus began to emphasize a more holistic

vision of green pedagogy, exploring the full range of 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 providing a safe incubator for green values, which then allows students and others to explore how to incorporate these values throughout their daily lives and the larger society.

The programming model being implemented at the Green Quad involves three tiers. The first tier is programming for core constituencies, including the Green Learning Community (GLC) and activist student groups. The second tier is programming specifically for residents of the Green Quad, including programs designed exclusively for all residents of the Green Quad as well as programs which may also be open to the rest of the university community and to the public. The third tier is general programming for the entire university and community.

## **TIER ONE: CULTIVATING CORE CONSTITUENCIES**

The highest overall programming priority is to facilitate programs initiated by students, and this requires the presence of a critical mass of engaged and/or activist students. One might think that the mere construction of a green residence hall might attract a flood of environmental activists intent on living there (if you build it, they will come), but at least on the relatively conservative campus of the University of South Carolina this was not the case. Indeed, a survey of residents in the first year of operation revealed that only 20% were even self-defined environmentalists, much less students likely to initiate programming on sustainability.

Given that reality, our initial strategy focused on cultivating a core of more engaged students who would then design and participate in programs that would involve the many more peripherally interested residents. We focused on two smaller groups. First, we encouraged the existing campus environmental group, Students Advocating a Greener Environment (SAGE), to adopt the learning center as its home and to allow learning center staff to provide administrative and programmatic support to their organization. In doing so, we ensured that at least once a week we had most of the more active students on campus meeting at the learning center. We are able to support their activities in a variety of ways, including providing office space, administrative support, food for meetings, and travel expenses to regional and national student conferences. At the same time, we encouraged members of SAGE to participate in our public programs.

Second, in the fall of 2007 we created the Green Learning Community, a smaller group of Green Quad residents who ideally would also be actively engaged in our programs. Our intent was to attract a strong core of perhaps 30-50 active green students to live together on one floor of the Green Quad. We developed programming specifically for the GLC, but our hope was that they would also create their own programs and projects and that the combination of programming developed by and for them would energize students in the rest of the Green Quad.

In its first two years, the Green Learning Community has averaged about 20 students, selected from over 100 applicants each year. These students are provided extra resources and programming to educate them and en-

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courage them to experiment with personal and community changes that might bring about a more sustainable society. Community members participate in an orientation retreat at the beginning of the school year and then enroll in a common one-credit course that meets weekly in the learning center. The course has become a crucial component of the GLC, providing common time each week for planning and programs. The course is also a vehicle to encourage the development of student-initiated programs and projects and to encourage participation in other Green Quad programming. Students are assessed based on the amount of time they spend undertaking individual and group projects, attending the public events of the learning center, and participating in various GLC activities such as field trips, working in the Green Quad community garden, having occasional community meals, and meeting informally with faculty members and visiting scholars and activists.

As the overall programming at the Green Quad develops, we anticipate gradually increasing the size of the Green Learning Community or perhaps creating additional separate but complementary communities. One intriguing option is to add an even more intensive living option, either within the Green Learning Community or in addition to it: an ecovillage at USC. The ecovillage would be a smaller and more intensive experiment in green living, probably limited to 10-20 students who are interested in developing a close-knit community in which members would share meals several times a week, share their inspirations for sustainable living, and explore what kinds of community structures might contribute to a more sustainable society. As part of the planning process for

this option, the learning center offered a three-credit course, "Ecovillages and Sustainable Living," which was designed to explore what it might mean to have an ecovillage within the Green Quad. We read case studies of major ecovillages and brought in a series of speakers from the ecovillage movement, including Liz Walker from the Ecovillage at Ithaca in New York and Diana Leafe Christian from Earthaven Ecovillage in North Carolina. Through these resources, the class identified some of the key components of an ecovillage within a residence hall setting.

## **TIER TWO: REACHING PERIPHERAL RESIDENTS**

The most challenging aspect of Green Quad programming is creating programs that will reach beyond the Green Learning Community to the remaining residents. One aspect of that challenge is that success requires a strong collaboration between learning center staff and the housing staff (the residence life coordina-

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tor, the assistant residence life coordinator, and the 10 resident mentors). The residence life coordinator attends weekly learning center staff meetings, and a liaison from the learning center attends the weekly meetings with the resident mentors. The learning center also organized two sessions of training with resident mentors prior to the beginning of the school year and then at least one additional session each semester. This training included a basic orientation to green values and the notion of a green bubble as well as specific discussions of programs the resident mentors might want to help develop or at least participate in with their residents. Another part of the challenge to reach all Green Quad residents is to establish a strong collaboration with the elected hall government. In this case also, a liaison from the learning center attends all meetings of the hall government officers and tries to support their initiatives, suggest improvements, and encourage participation in learning center programs.

One basic strand of programming for the entire Green Quad emphasizes community building: programs designed to foster both a strong sense of community and an appreciation for our unique educational setting. Through community building we attempt to create a new green culture, one appropriate for establishing the green bubble, with its own rituals, holidays, and events. For example, in collaboration with the hall government, we celebrate each full moon by hosting a "Moon Movie," which is usually a somewhat off-beat film with some connection to sustainability (including films such as *Wall-E* and *Grizzly Man*). We also celebrate the fall and spring equinoxes with large outdoor events, usually centered around the community garden and including food and

The community garden is perhaps the most visible component of general Green Quad programming. The garden is a 900-square-foot organic vegetable garden on the southern lawn of the Green Quad, and it provides a tangible statement of how food and agricultural issues are part of the green bubble.

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ice cream ("Ice Cream Social Awareness"). Of course Earth Day is our major annual holiday. Last year we collaborated with SAGE and the Green Quad hall government to produce a day-long event, with tables and events in the center of campus during the day (featuring both student and community groups) and a party and concert at the Green Quad that night.

The community garden is perhaps the most visible component of general Green Quad programming. The garden is a 900-square-foot organic vegetable garden on the southern lawn of the Green Quad, and it provides a tangible statement of how food and agricultural issues are part of the green bubble. The project initially was 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, edible landscaping, and com-



posting. The garden emphasizes the principles of permaculture design, with its emphasis on creating environments that reflect natural ecologies, and the learning center hired a part-time permaculturalist to help with design and then

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to work with students in the initial stages of the garden. Students and community members have gradually taken on more responsibility for operations, and coordination of the garden is now in the hands of one of the students in the Green Learning Community.

One additional strategy for reaching students involves working with individual resident mentors to develop specialized green

living programs for individual floors. Promoting a holistic green perspective means that all aspects of everyday life become opportunities for education and engagement. These programs for individual floors, such as an overview of green cleaning products and a presentation on local foods, create awareness of how personal lifestyle choices link to sustainability: the social and environmental impact of lifestyle choices. In addition, the learning center encourages residents to understand the features of their LEED-certified green building, to take advantage of informal green-living classes on yoga and smoking cessation, and to participate in a model recycling program. Our aim is to have the most advanced recycling program on campus, in the range of items recycled, the number of recycling containers, the quality of education programs, and the amount that does get recycled.

### **TIER THREE: OUTREACH TO THE CAMPUS AND BEYOND**

Beyond the residents of the Green Quad, the learning center is asked to develop programming for the entire campus and members of the larger community as well. Ideally these programs are complementary with the other programs, in that they serve as a gateway for Green Quad students to interact with faculty, staff, and community members who are interested in and even active with issues of sustainability. Increasingly, our programs are collaborative efforts with other campus or community groups. Currently five community environmental groups meet regularly in the learning center (Conservation Voters of South Carolina, Sierra Club, Trout Unlimited, Macro-



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biotic Food Club, and Environmentalists Inc.). This provides both residents and organizations a ready opportunity for collaborative programming and a regular chance for students to interact with community members and become involved in ongoing community projects.

Each year the learning center establishes a central theme (food last year, water this year) and offers a variety of related speakers and films. Our “Water Talk” series, for example, includes presentations from faculty and from representatives of state government, non-profit community groups, and activist environmental organizations. We also sponsor a variety of cultural events, such as a trip to a performance of an “Earth Symphony,” poetry and writing workshops, and an environmental artist-in-residence. Perhaps our most prominent program is the Green Action Film Series, which features films on topics such as climate change, alternative energy, local foods, and permaculture. Films are always accompanied by guest speakers, who lead a discussion and provide options for students to conduct their own research and take action. Each year an environmental filmmaker is invited for a three-day residency, screening films and working with media arts students on the techniques and challenges of making activist documentaries.

While green pedagogy emphasizes learning beyond the classroom, we also offer a wide variety of somewhat more traditional educational offerings in established academic courses. Such courses are an important avenue for bringing students and faculty to the learning center so that students can be exposed to our other programming options and faculty can be encouraged to participate in some of our

more informal programs. The learning center hosts regular three-credit courses from a wide variety of departments on topics related to sustainability, including courses on environmental ethics, alternative energy, environmental law, environmental literature, environmental engineering, and community action. We also offer one-credit courses such as “Green Issues,” “Green Living,” and “The Sustainable Body.” To attract faculty and staff to the center, we have also developed a green pedagogy series. These monthly programs (including lunch) are offered to provide faculty and staff with models of green teaching methods and examples of ways to incorporate green and sustainability issues in the curriculum.

The learning center also offers a seminar sequence of two courses for first-year students: “Green Explorations” and “Green Engagement.” Academically, the seminars create an interdisciplinary experience for first-year students that strengthens our offerings in environmental studies and creates a structure within which faculty can collaborate on teaching and

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One additional aspect of the learning center's outreach to the community is its promotion of green building technologies, primarily through offering staff- and student-led tours of the Green Quad buildings and grounds to students, community members, and visitors.

research. The course also serves as a gateway for first-year students interested in environmental issues to become familiar with the Green Quad (and ideally become part of the Green Learning Community in their second year). The “Green Explorations” seminar allows students new to the university to explore their immediate physical environment as well as explore how “the environment” as a concept is used within a broad range of humanities and social science disciplines. 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 seminars include field trips and guest speakers from the faculty, operations staff, and community members.

One additional aspect of the learning center’s outreach to the community is its promotion of green building technologies, primarily through offering staff- and student-led 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 (including bioremediation, edible landscaping, native plant species, wetlands management, water-runoff management, community gardening, organic gardening, and permaculture design). The learning center also serves as the meeting place for the South Carolina chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council.

## CONCLUSION

The Green Quad at the University of South Carolina is still very much an experiment in progress. The tiered programming model outlined here is an attempt to create programs consistent with green values, emphasizing student initiative and a holistic approach to sustainability issues as well as addressing some of the challenges inherent in implementing such

programs within a large living-learning community. This discussion of the Green Quad's programming strategy may convey a somewhat idealized version of the situation, since in practice there are certainly many obstacles to successful implementation. For example, something as basic as community building is a significant challenge in a facility where 500 students living in apartment-style housing may not know their neighbors down the hall or even across the hall and where students are constantly offered an incredible array of other attractive opportunities on campus which pull them away from involvement in Green Quad programs.

The Green Quad programming model is readily adaptable to other college and university settings. Many campuses are experimenting with different models of residential learning communities (as noted in the introductory article by Torres-Antonini and Dunkel), and these communities offer many opportunities

for promoting sustainability in the campus and community. The tiered model of green education would be of interest most narrowly to those concerned about sustainability issues in housing and most broadly to those interested in how innovative housing collaborations create opportunities for outreach within the university and larger community.

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