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THE CAMPUS

Green, Greener, Greenest

By KATE ZERNIKE

HIGHER education can't resist a ranking: best college, best cafeteria, biggest endowment, biggest party school. It says something about what's important on campus, then, that when the Princeton Review releases its annual guide to colleges this week, it will include a new metric: a "green rating," giving points for things like "environmentally preferable food," power from renewable sources and energy-efficient buildings.

Green is good for the planet, but also for a college's public image. In a Princeton Review survey this year of 10,300 college applicants, 63 percent said that a college's commitment to the environment could affect their decision to go there.

And where there are application decisions to be made, there are rankings. The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, with more than 660 members, is developing a rating for environmental friendliness; at least six other organizations rated campus greenness last year, according to the group. There are lists from Forbes, Grist and Sierra magazines, and an annual report card from the Sustainable Endowments Institute, a research organization that assesses the greenness of an institution's investment portfolio. And the Princeton Review will give its top marks to — ta-da! — Arizona State, Bates, Binghamton University, the College of the Atlantic, Harvard, Emory, Georgia Institute of Technology, Yale and the Universities of New Hampshire, Oregon and Washington.

Campuses across the country are racing to be the greenest of them all. They are setting dates in the not too distant future for achieving carbon neutrality (the College of the Atlantic, an eco-college in Maine, already claims that distinction, as does Middlebury College's Snow Bowl ski area). They are hiring sustainability coordinators (the association's job board used to get one posting a month; now it often has five a week). And they are competing with one another in buying green power (in an Environmental Protection Agency contest among athletic conferences, the Ivies triumphed, with a combined 221.6 million kilowatt hours for the quarter ending in April).

"I don't think we've seen activism this strong since apartheid," says Cheryl Miller, vice president of Sightlines, a data company that helps campuses compare their operations, including environmental practices.

But as colleges and universities rush to declare themselves green, some higher education officials worry that campuses are taking easy steps to win the label rather than doing the kind of unglamorous work — replacing air exchange systems, for example — that would actually reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases. Some campuses are changing little more than their press releases. "I don't think we really have the tools to quantifiably test who's doing the best and who's not," says David W. Oxtoby, president of Pomona College. "It becomes a publicity hype type of thing."

Sustainability is far more than recycling and “Do It in the Dark” competitions to see which dorms use the least water and electricity. Sustainability is a complex concept, expensive and difficult to achieve. It involves an entirely new approach to day-to-day living and the reappraisal of the existing infrastructure.

Hail to the students demanding eating utensils made with cornstarch (they’re biodegradable) for the dining halls. But the changes that make the most difference are not what Mary Gorman, an associate provost at Dartmouth, calls “the low-hanging fruit” of getting students to turn off their screensavers or take shorter showers. The big results come from projects that often sound less catchy and depend less on students than on those who manage the buildings.

She is thinking of the institutions that are vastly reshaping their campuses — converting to greener fuel and power sources, even building their own wind turbines; retrofitting buildings to make them more energy efficient; composting dining-hall waste; replacing fleets with hybrid cars and shuttles that run on oil recycled from French fry vats; and offering sustainability studies to grow a generation of environmental stewards.

“It’s important that we focus on the significant rather than the symbolic, or at least recognize the symbolic for what it is,” says Sarah Hammond Creighton, the sustainability coordinator at Tufts. “I think the commitments are generally real, but I worry that the translation into the depth of the challenge hasn’t hit people.”

THE most high-profile effort, and the most debated, is the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment, signed over the last two years by more than 550 institutions representing about 30 percent of American students. Those who sign promise that within a year they will inventory their greenhouse gas emissions and within two will formulate a plan to arrive at carbon neutrality — that is, zero net CO2 emissions — “as soon as possible.” They also have to agree to at least two of seven measures, including buying 15 percent of their energy from renewable sources and building to LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards, a certification developed by the nonprofit United States Green Building Council.

Anthony D. Cortese, who helped create the sustainability association in 2006 as well as the presidents pact, says the quest for carbon neutrality “is creating a real change in the culture.”

“We’re essentially telling people to put a bubble over their whole campus and say, ‘We have to make sure the net greenhouse gases are zero someday,’ ” he says. “This is not going to be easy.”

But to many people, carbon neutrality is a hollow concept, because the only way to get there currently is to buy offsets, credits sold by an entity pledging to, say, plant trees in another country or invest in renewable energy — the environmental equivalent of paying someone to eat broccoli so you can keep consuming ice cream. (For just $35.70 a year, students can feel guilt-free about their electronics-heavy dorm rooms, with an offset bought from Terrapass.)

Offsets can be meaningful. The College of the Atlantic weighed options for a year before settling on a project in Portland, Ore., that manages traffic signals to reduce idling time. The changes are expected to cut carbon dioxide emissions by more than 189,000 tons over 10 years — the equivalent of taking more than 34,000 cars off the road for a year. For a contribution of $22,570, the college can offset 2,488 tons of its emissions.

But offset buyers can't always be sure the money goes to what it's supposed to, that the CO2 credit isn't being sold to someone else at the same time, or that the benefit to the environment is "additional," because the project would not happen without an offset payment.

Doubt about offsets was among the reasons Dartmouth declined to sign the pledge. "We were under a lot of pressure to sign, but we really said, 'How will Dartmouth be different if we're carbon neutral?' " says Ms. Gorman. "We decided we'd rather invest here and actually get real reductions." So while the college does not have a timetable for becoming carbon neutral, it completed an audit of the campus and is spending $12.5 million to make buildings more efficient.

Dr. Oxtoby signed the pledge for Pomona but argues that offsets create the wrong incentive. The college, in Claremont, Calif., is spending millions to install solar panels, though it could have achieved carbon neutrality with a mere $100,000 in offsets. "It's too cheap, it's too easy," Dr. Oxtoby says. "The actual hard work is more expensive, but it actually does something."

He tells of one college president who boasted that his campus was going green by spending about $20,000 to certify that the power it got from the grid was from a non-carbon-based source. "I'm sure the utility just sold the nasty electricity to someone else," Dr. Oxtoby says. "It doesn't change anything."

Some are choosing other models. The 23-campus City University of New York has aligned itself with Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's call to reduce greenhouse emissions 30 percent in the next 10 years.

Instead of signing the presidents climate commitment, Tufts pledged to reduce its greenhouse gases by 75 percent by 2050, consistent with an agreement between New England states and Eastern Canadian provinces. It has already reduced its emissions level almost to that of 1990, in part by switching from oil to gas at its large animal hospital, installing photovoltaic and solar hot water systems on the roof of a new residence hall and installing super-efficient LED lights in a parking garage.

All this won it a spot on the Grist magazine "15 Green Campuses" list, but not on the Forbes top-10 greenest list. In the Princeton Review's forthcoming "Best 368 Colleges," it scored 94 on a scale of 60 to 99.

While the campuses deemed greenest have all taken serious steps to reduce their impact on the environment, the various comparisons rarely look the same and can disagree about what matters most.

Many consider how many buildings are LEED certified. (Purists point out that truly sustainable campuses would not be building at all — a LEED-certified building may use less energy than a conventional one, but it's still expanding the total energy used.) Some ask whether the institution has hired a sustainability coordinator, whether it has signed a carbon-neutrality pledge; there are attempts, even more open to "greenwashing," to gauge how well students are being prepared to make environmentally responsible decisions.

All this may be important, says Jennifer Andrews, the campus program manager for Clean Air-Cool Planet, a nonprofit group that developed the Campus Carbon Calculator, which is used by many campuses to survey their emissions. But, she says, "A lot of it is measuring attitudes and values. Both are absolutely necessary, but there's a difference between looking at that broadly and looking at what we can quantify and track over time."

Even the quantifiable has its complications. Should we define greenness by how many tons of trash per student a campus recycles or how many kilowatt hours of electricity are supplied by green sources? What about the emissions produced to manufacture construction materials for a new dorm? The environmental cost of students flying in from distant homes or sports teams traveling to away games?

Ms. Andrews, like many others, fears that institutions are focused on where they stand rather than on making substantial changes that will reduce their carbon footprint. “They can lose sight of the fact that it’s more important to think about where we need to go and what it’s going to take to get us there than about what our peer school is doing,” she says. “The natural thing to do is say, ‘How does it compare to other schools?’ ”

Julian Dautremont-Smith, the associate director of the sustainability association, understands the ambivalence about rankings. “There is a suspicion that those lists are based on the strength of the P.R. office rather than the strength of actual efforts,” he says. “There’s a real fear people are responding to, because every time one of those rankings comes out, the sustainability officer has to go to their bosses and explain why we didn’t perform well.”

Indeed, campuses were eager to be rated by the Princeton Review. “We had a glorious response rate,” reports Rob Franek, a vice president. “Generally speaking, when schools get on our ‘reefer madness’ list, I’m not their favorite person. For this, they were pretty great.”

In fact, Mr. Dautremont-Smith and other sustainability advocates advised the Princeton Review on its rating system. In rankings, they see a greater good. “It gets people’s attention on the colleges and universities that might not have paid attention to these issues,” says Mr. Cortese, the force behind the presidents commitment. “People are beginning to see that it is important to think about this. To me, that opens the door to more serious conversations about what people are really doing.”

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