

The Ups and Downs of Environmental Assessment in a University Consortium

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to environmental management, universities are in an odd position. Their “product”—educated and inspired students and advances in human knowledge—is not often associated with environmental impacts. Yet universities are like small cities, with many of the same impacts on the environment. Like cities, universities produce large quantities of waste, some of it hazardous. Cars moving in and out of a university, like a city, generate emissions. Residents of universities—students in dorms—use water and electricity, just like residents of cities.

The South Carolina Sustainable Universities Initiative, begun in 1998 by Clemson University, the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC), and the University of South Carolina (USC), is helping universities to link their “product” more closely with its environmental impacts. The state’s three research universities are incorporating sustainability into their curricula, and are attempting to make their campuses models for the region. In 2000, 13 other four year and technical schools joined the consortium.

The schools are attempting to transform themselves through three primary mechanisms: establishment of campus wide environmental advisory committees, traditional assessments, and development of campus-specific Environmental Management Systems. The advisory committees consist of faculty, students and administrators, and are charged with developing campus environmental policy and overseeing campus environmental performance. This oversight takes place through monthly meetings, through campus assessments similar to those advocated by the National Wildlife Federation’s Campus Ecology Program, and through development of the EMS structure.

One frustration plaguing all the SUI member institutions is the difficulty in quantifying savings, as well as “progress.” While we are working with individual units to help develop measures to quantify change, we are also hoping that the Environmental Management Systems being developed will make such quantification easier in the future.

The University of South Carolina Environmental Health and Safety division is among the first several academic EH&S divisions to receive ISO 14001 certification. Their unique EMS combines environmental considerations with health considerations, making them a model for other EH&S offices on campuses and in industry and government.