





HOW FACILITIES CAN SIGNAL FORWARD THINKING & A COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY RUBEN MEJIA

“Green,” “sustainable,” “inclusive”—to some, these may seem like buzzwords meant to be sprinkled into presentations or used in taglines. But on the campus of a university or college, these aren’t just words; they’re a way of life and may be major motivators in choosing the next phase of a young student’s life.

Today, those values must be reflected in every aspect of the student experience. And whether the goal is recruitment, retention, positive public relations, or a genuine desire to reflect the values of a student body, institutions must be aware that the decisions they make, from the classroom to the recreation center, tell a story of whether they care about those values.

Across the board, we have quantitative data from a variety of sources proving that students want green technology and sustainable products in their schools. And, equally important, they want an authentic commitment to forward-thinking, environmentally-friendly, and inclusive spending and planning from their campuses. College is a major financial decision and a commitment to an institution; students need those commitments to reflect their own values in the same way that consumers in other industries do.

A 2019 *Princeton Review* survey found that 64% of students consider a school’s environmental commitments when deciding where to attend, while a study conducted in 2015 and again in 2022 by the Yale Center for Business and the Environment found that the percentage of students who consider themselves knowledgeable about environmental sustainability grew from 21% to 41% over just seven years. Students’ awareness of these issues isn’t a flash in the pan; it’s a growing trend that shows no signs of reversing.

Across the country, campuses are taking steps forward. Each year, there are enough initiatives to help the *Princeton Review* compile a ranking of the top fifty green colleges and a list of more than four hundred “environmentally responsible schools.” For many students and their parents, colleges appearing on lists like these are a prerequisite for their interest. And at the very least, being in lists such as these can be a tiebreaker when students are deciding between schools.



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Schools on “green” and “environmentally responsible” lists are chosen for a variety of reasons, tallied based on institutional data gathered by surveying administrators. But the key pillars of the formula are:

- Whether students have a quality of life on campus that is both healthy and sustainable
- How well a school is preparing students for employment in an increasingly green economy
- How environmentally responsible a school’s policies are

Fitness equipment is an often overlooked area where improvements in sustainability

can be made. A school’s fitness facilities offer an exciting opportunity for innovative, eco-friendly solutions that show a commitment to the cause. Take SportsArt’s ECO-POWR treadmills, for example, which convert up to 74% of human energy into usable electricity, reducing the need to buy those kilowatts from the electric company and generating up to an additional two hundred watt-hours. A single student on a single energy-generating piece of cardio equipment can create a net positive 1.2 kilowatts of electricity per hour.

Of the eight colleges that recently installed ECO-POWR cardio equipment on campus, five are represented on the 2022 Princeton Review list, and another was featured for ten straight

years from 2011-2020. ECO-POWR certainly isn’t the only factor at play, but these energy-generating products provide a demonstration that forward-thinking colleges and universities are looking for solutions that match their institutional identities and values. The students are responding to these choices, as well.

At Ohio State University, a 2017 comprehensive energy management project announced the goal of improving energy efficiency on the campus by 25% over the next ten years. Part of achieving that goal was the installation of twelve ECO-POWR products in the university’s recreation center. The equipment gave students the ability to see the tangible impact of burned calories, adding an additional layer



survey found that the vast majority of students care about inclusivity. In the survey, 88% of students said that institutions should “prioritize funding for programs and resources that support historically disadvantaged student subgroups,” while only 66% feel that “their institutions make it a top priority to narrow success gaps for under-resourced student groups.” Just like green initiatives, this broad support for an increase in inclusivity applies across the entire campus, which includes fitness equipment.

Improving physical inclusivity means providing fitness equipment that serves the entire student body, not just athletes or fitness enthusiasts. An inclusive athletic facility can be designed to serve a wide range of individuals, including students who are not accustomed to working out, those rehabbing from injury or other health issues, and people on campus who may not be physically able to use traditional cardio machines.

Universities can meet the needs of these students in a number of ways. They can install cardio equipment that has been designed for rehabilitation purposes. For instance, rehabilitation treadmills that have longer handles, lower step-up heights, and other features that can help someone who needs more support. Recumbent cycles allow a more comfortable and manageable posture for those without much experience or ability on a traditional stationary bike. Universities can even offer equipment like the Madonna ICARE by SportsArt, an elliptical trainer that helps physically challenged individuals and those with chronic conditions regain or retain their walking ability and levels of physical fitness.

By investing in these types of solutions, colleges and universities invite the entire student body to stay healthy, be fit, and use the amenities that are available. Providing equipment that everyone can use signals to the student body that each one of them—not just those who love fitness—are welcome. This message ultimately helps more students become healthier by taking advantage of the school’s recreation facilities.

Students want their campuses to be more sustainable and more inclusive, and a school’s athletics and recreation programs are an opportunity to showcase those values. Administrators should be asking themselves

tough questions: Are we striving to prioritize sustainable products? Are our fitness offerings inclusive to our entire campus, not just athletes and those who are already fit? There was a time when tackling sustainability and inclusivity issues could put a college on the forefront and ahead of the curve. But now, these values are “price of entry.”

Students have the choice of attending thousands of universities across the country, and they are now looking for institutions of higher education that make bold new decisions based on meaningful values. These students are interested in leaders and innovators who are choosing what’s best, not settling with “good enough” or making the same choices because they’re comfortable or expected. What was successful and well-received five or ten years ago doesn’t necessarily move the needle in 2022; while sticking to the tried and true old methods can be easy, students see that options as school leadership not living their stated values. Young adults can tell when the same decisions are being made over and over again, and institutions must realize that not making the forward-thinking decision is a decision in and of itself.

Institutions of higher education are often seen as homes for innovation, progress, inclusivity, and achievement, and no institution gains that reputation by standing still. Athletics facilities are potentially an untapped opportunity to make a statement about social responsibility, showing that a campus has thought through every aspect of student life. Now is the time to make positive changes that signal to students that they have been heard and that the campus is taking steps to improve lives in the community, among students, and in the world.

of meaningfulness to their workouts and connecting students to the university’s energy efficiency goals.

“I think the problem with sustainability is it’s tough to feel the tangibility and the difference you make,” said Zayn Dweik, Undergraduate Student Government Chief of Staff, during the school’s ECO-POWR installation. “With this equipment, you see how many watts you’ve generated and get to say, ‘I’m helping out the university, helping out the environment, and helping out my body.’”

But students aren’t just thinking about the future; they’re interested in helping those on campus who are already in need of extra support. In January 2022, a Hanover Research



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ruben

Mejia is the executive vice president for SportsArt Americas, previously holding the title of chief technology officer. In 2000, after four years of active deployment in the military, Mejia began working in the corporate IT and telecommunication fields for the U.S. Army, launching his career and interest in the technology industry as a whole. Prior to joining SportsArt, Mejia held executive roles within the technology and ecommerce spaces.