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Students Are Key in Broadening Sustainability Efforts

*By Adam Reger***Issue Date:** August 22, 2016

The store window displays a mannequin wearing a brightly colored, dress-length T-shirt. Wrapped casually around its waist is a chic, long-sleeved cotton sweater.

"You look great," reads a sign in the window.

"I know. #HailToThrift," says another sign below.

The University of Thriftsburgh, based in Pitt's O'Hara Student Center, is making sustainability trendy. Opened in March 2015, the student-run thrift shop sells used clothing and accessories to the campus community. It has been wildly successful, attracting enough business to repay a seed grant from Pitt's Green Fund just six months after it opened.

The idea for Thriftsburgh began as a group project in a sustainability class taught by R. Ward Allebach, an instructor in the Department of Geology and Environmental Science.

"We did research on the textile industry and saw how environmentally detrimental it could be," says cofounder Anna Greenberg, a Pitt senior. "On top of pollution, there are civil rights and labor issues with the way some clothes are made overseas. So we started to think of a thrift shop as a way to divert money from what could be a problematic system."

Pitt, too, is widening its definition of sustainability. A collaborative effort is underway among members of the University's administration, faculty, staff, and students, with key roles being taken by the Facilities Management Department, the Mascaro Center for Sustainable Innovation, and the Division of Student Affairs. This fall, a new University-wide committee will convene to further define Pitt's Sustainability Plan.

Pitt's students continue to be essential players in the design and implementation of sustainability initiatives, many of which also address social equity issues.

"Students bring a fresh perspective and a passion to sustainability issues," says Laura Zullo, Pitt's senior manager of energy initiatives. "And they challenge us. Where we've gotten used to saying, 'This is just the way we do things,' students often come in and ask, 'Why not another way?'"

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ON THE FREEDOM ROAD



Follow a group of Pitt students on the Returning to the Roots of Civil Rights bus tour, a nine-day, 2,300-mile journey crisscrossing five states.

The Student Office of Sustainability tries to cultivate a “sustainability culture,” encouraging all campus members to think more broadly about the subject, says Erika Ninos, sustainability program coordinator, Office of PittServes, who also acts as a liaison to the Student Office of Sustainability.

“We work with students to think about budget, project logistics, and the effect the project or initiative will have across campus,” Ninos explains. “We also work to put students in contact with other students, faculty, or staff who will be integral to their project’s success.”

Pitt has been recognized as a national leader in sustainability, garnering mentions in The Princeton Review’s Guide to Green Colleges each of the past four years and in *Sierra Magazine*’s “Cool Schools” ranking.

In addition to the green projects spread across campus, the University offers ample opportunities to students who want to do sustainability-related research, said Melissa Bilec, associate professor of civil and environmental engineering in the Swanson School of Engineering and deputy director of the Mascaro Center. She frequently hires undergraduate assistants to help her conduct research, and she works with students on individualized research projects as well.

Meanwhile, a new undergraduate certificate in sustainability has been created for students in the Swanson School and Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. The program will be offered this fall through the Mascaro Center and will provide interdisciplinary sustainability education and research at the University.

Not only are the students learning about global environmental and social issues, they are also building project management skills as they develop projects from the ground up, Ninos says. “Students really are our best asset. Their creativity, energy, and professionalism have been the impetus for many of our best-known sustainability initiatives.”

Among the abundant student-led initiatives, so far, are:

- Plant to Plate, which manages Pitt’s urban garden, a University-owned tract of land located at Oakland Avenue and Sennott Street. Volunteers plant, tend, and harvest vegetables, fruit, and flowers at the site. A portion of the food is donated to Oakland Community Food Pantry, 370 Lawn Street, which was created in 2009 by Community Human Services in collaboration with Pitt and the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. Plant to Plate also donates to the Pitt Pantry, the University of Pittsburgh’s student-run food pantry.



Pitt’s Plant to Plate student organization manages an urban garden at the corner of Oakland Avenue and Sennott Street in Oakland. The garden’s vegetables and fruits are donated to local food pantries. From left, Erika Ninos, sustainability program coordinator, Office of PittServes; Holly Giovengo (A&S ’15), who was a student leader in sustainability initiatives on campus while an undergraduate and an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer last year; and Alyssa Martinec, the student sustainability intern for Pitt’s Department of Housing who is active in Pitt’s Take Back the Tap initiative. (Photo by Emily O’Donnell)

- A campus chapter of the Real Food Challenge, a national initiative encouraging campuses to increase their offerings of “real food,” defined as food that is locally sourced, hormone free, ecologically sound, or fair trade.
- A campus presence for Take Back the Tap, a national program that seeks to eliminate

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waste from plastic water bottles by increasing the number of hydration stations on campus. (A hydration station is a water fountain outfitted to efficiently fill a reusable water bottle.)

- The O'Hara Street Garden Revitalization Project, a garden of native plants in front of the Space Research Coordination Center at 4107 O'Hara St., Oakland. The garden, which promotes biodiversity among local wildlife and aids storm-water management, won Pitt's 2015 Sustainable Solutions Competition. The annual innovation contest is led by the Student Office of Sustainability and judged by a panel including staff members from Student Affairs, the Office of Facilities Management and Grounds, and the Offices of Housing Services and Dining Services. Additional judges include faculty members affiliated with the Mascaro Center for Sustainable Innovation, the student Green Fund coordinator, and members of the Student Government Board.

- The Pitt Pantry, a volunteer-run food pantry serving the Pitt community. Based in Oakland's Bellefield Presbyterian Church, 4001 Fifth Ave., the pantry not only offers food but also programs, including healthy recipe demonstrations, home winterizing workshops, and additional support services.

"One of my biggest takeaways from working on Pitt Pantry was learning how to compromise and collaborate," says Holly Giovengo (A&S '15), who led the effort to implement Pitt Pantry as a volunteer for AmeriCorps VISTA, a national service program to fight poverty in America. (While a student, Giovengo helped bring the Real Food Challenge to campus.) "It's been amazing to work in an environment where you can have an idea and run with it."

"At its core, sustainability is about protecting people," adds Giovengo. "Sometimes that gets lost in the sustainability conversation. We like to remind everyone that we do this work for *people*."



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