

How green is your campus? Motivations for sustainability for universities vs. for-profit companies

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Corporations and individuals alike are increasingly focused on "going green," in an attempt to reduce their carbon footprint and impact on the environment. It is questionable whether higher education institutions are adopting sustainable practices at the same rate, despite large consumption rates of energy and water, among other resources. In the first study of its kind, *Contemporary Economic Policy* presents an article which compares the factors that drive colleges to adopt sustainable practices to the factors that motivate for-profit companies to "go green."

Dr. Sarah L. Stafford, Professor of Economics at the College of William and Mary, utilized data on campus sustainability grades originally developed by the Sustainable Endowments Institute, with information from over 180 universities. Her research analyzes the factors that had a significant effect on campus sustainability rating, including regulatory pressures, financial constraints, student preferences, and pressure from stakeholders such as faculty, alumni, and the surrounding community.

Stafford remarks, "The size of the university, their endowment, and the opinions of the faculty, alumni, and the local community are all highly influential in whether colleges adopt sustainable practices. I found that the decision to adopt sustainable policies was not at all related to the goal to attract students. For-profit companies pursue sustainable practices to increase their environmental performance due to regulatory pressures, but universities are not influenced by these factors."

Stafford's research speaks to the fact that if government or non-profits wish to increase sustainability on college campuses they will need to use different policies than what is currently used for corporations. Stafford points out that the decision of college presidents to sign the Presidents Climate Commitment (PCC) was mainly a symbolic gesture and motivated by quite different reasons for pursuing overall sustainability. Most importantly, institutional wealth and size were not significant factors in that decision.

Stafford concludes, "Since wealth and size make it more likely that a campus will adopt sustainable practices, efforts to subsidize campus sustainability or provide technical assistance to smaller institutions might be the most successful strategy to encourage campuses to adopt green practices. Smaller institutions may in the future be able to utilize sustainability initiatives to attract students interested in attending a university with green practices, and establish a unique position among higher education institutions. Top-ranked schools normally attract more qualified candidates than lower ranked schools and typically do not use sustainability initiatives to attract students."

More information: "How Green Is Your Campus? An Analysis of the Factors that Drive Universities to Embrace Sustainability." Sarah L. Stafford. *Contemporary Economic Policy*; Published Online: October 18, 2010. [DOI: 10.1111/j.1465-7287.2010.00231.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-7287.2010.00231.x)

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