

## Becoming a Sustainable Campus: An Experience with the Earth Charter Community Summits

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### **Introduction**

Perhaps the most striking development related to the Earth Charter in the United States has been the emergence of Earth Charter Community Summits (ECCS; summits).<sup>65</sup> First conceived by Jan Roberts in 2001, there are now more than thirty Summits – local community gatherings – held in the US every October.



<sup>64</sup> University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, USA.

<sup>65</sup> Additional information about Earth Charter Community Summits can be found at: <http://www.earthchartersummits.org>.

The purpose of the summits is to provide an educational forum at which an array of speakers, performers, and community members can promote discussion, understanding, and action inspired by the Earth Charter principles. The summits are organized locally, and leaders involved in developing summits in their communities communicate via conference calls throughout the year, with many attending a retreat in Florida every January. To support the growth of community summits throughout the US, an independent, nonprofit organization called 'Earth Charter U.S.' was established. This nonprofit has been supporting the dissemination of the Earth Charter principles. Earth Charter Oshkosh, one ECCS community, based at the University of Wisconsin in Oshkosh, is an active participant in Earth Charter U.S. events, and is represented on the organization's Board of Directors.

Following the first Earth Charter Community Summit in Oshkosh in 2001, the Earth Charter was endorsed by all four elements of the UW Oshkosh's shared governance – faculty, students, academic staff, and classified staff. Top university administrators, including the Chancellor, also gave their enthusiastic support. This was the beginning of a significant re-focusing towards sustainability on campus and engagement with the wider community. Sustainability is now one of the university's "Governing Ideas," along with Collaboration and Engagement.



Earth Charter at University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

## Earth Charter Oshkosh ~ Earth Charter Community Summits

The main goals of our efforts can be summarized as follows:

- Development of the Earth Charter Community Summits as significant annual events
- Implementation of sustainability principles across the university and encouraging the same in the local community
- Fostering collaboration and good relations between campus and off-campus communities
- Establishing the UW Oshkosh as a national leader in responsible, sustainable practices
- Establishment of Earth Charter Oshkosh as a year-round presence in the university and wider community
- Integration of Earth Charter principles into academic areas and everyday life

Although revenue is often uncertain, the budget for Earth Charter Oshkosh has grown substantially over the years. Funds for Earth Charter Community Summit on campus and related initiatives have come from university student organizations, such as the Student Environmental Action Coalition, Campus Greens, International Student Association, and the American Indian Student Association; a number of academic departments; the Chancellor's funds; the Wisconsin Public Service Corporation (a utility company); and Johnson Controls, Inc., among others. Johnson Controls, Inc.<sup>66</sup> has also awarded a significant grant to help measure energy consumption and hire students to perform tasks related to this project.

On a much larger scale, University-wide projects, such as new 'green' buildings, have a major regional economic impact. They also provide for educational opportunities on campus and within the wider community. CASPER (described later in detail) and the Aquatic Research Centre have their own financial resources, as do university departments and student organizations. The financial affairs of Earth Charter Oshkosh are handled through the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Foundation, a nonprofit foundation related to the institution.

<sup>66</sup> Johnson Controls, Inc. is a company leader in automotive experience, specializing in building efficiency and power solutions; it is based in Wisconsin, USA.

Earth Charter Oshkosh's ECCS has also continued to grow in size and scope. These events, sometimes lasting for one week, are useful to raise awareness and educate the university community, as well as people from surrounding areas. Members of Earth Charter Oshkosh, other student organizations, and academic departments, suggest names for speakers and other participants for the events. Many distinguished speakers from around the country have participated, and presentations have addressed the broad spectrum of Earth Charter principles, with some speakers focusing on matters of particular interest on the local and regional level. Drama, art, and music have also been featured during the summit. Past programmes are highlighted on the website: <http://www.uwosh.edu/earthcharter>.

The total attendance at Earth Charter Community Summit events is difficult to estimate. Almost all events are free and open to the public. Many students attend events, and in some cases event participation is linked to specific classes. We estimate that recent summits have attracted more than 1,000 people, and special events, such as an American Indian Powwow (2006) and environmental fairs, boost that number considerably. Every year, we try to include new events to attract more participants. In 2007, for example, two walk/run activities are planned, dedicated to diversity issues and to energy efficiency. In addition, Earth Charter Oshkosh collaborates with other student organizations for Earth Day (Earth Week) events and other activities throughout the year. We are also one of the hosts for an annual "Solar Olympics" event,

organized by the Wisconsin Public Service Corporation, and connected to the utility's "SolarWise for Schools" programme.

### **Related accomplishments and recognitions for sustainability efforts on campus**

Although the concept of the UW Oshkosh being a 'green campus' is a new and (for some) surprising development, it has quickly become a key part of the university's public identity. A direct outcome of the first summit was the creation of a campus environmental audit, completed by students in collaboration with the Facilities Management office. Students earned college credit for participating in the audit and have had access to paid internships funded by a grant from Johnson Controls, Inc.; it is hoped that this project will be ongoing, but additional resources are needed. The Facilities Management office on campus created a "Green Master Plan" that is guiding the university and part of this plan involves achieving green standards in new building equivalent to the LEED "silver" rating.

Over the last few years UW Oshkosh has received national recognition for its energy and resource conservation projects. Recognition includes the 2003-2004 National Wildlife Federation Campus Ecology Recognition Award and the 2005 Energy Star Award for energy savings. In spring 2006, UW Oshkosh received the Wisconsin Clean Air Award from the Department of Natural Resources and the Wisconsin Partners for Clean Air. A few of these awards are associated with the university's commitment to steadily increase the percentage of our energy consumption that is derived from renewable sources (wind and biomass). This commitment is being achieved in collaboration with the Wisconsin Public Service Corporation, a regional utility company, through their "NatureWise" programme. In connection with this, the Governor of the State of Wisconsin has identified the UW Oshkosh as one of four campuses in the state to achieve 100% renewable energy within five years.

UW Oshkosh has also implemented a series of energy conserving building retrofits on existing buildings on



Exposition about alternative energy sources.

campus. Under a performance contract with Johnson Controls Inc., these have saved money on utilities and have reduced emissions related to climate change. The projects include energy efficient lighting retrofits, replacement of energy inefficient cooling equipment, installation of digital utility meters, installation of water conserving toilets and urinals, and the installation of control system upgrades. **Specific outcomes are expected, as follows:**

- Savings in utility costs of \$92,042 a year
- Reduced carbon dioxide emissions totalling 993,075 pounds per year
- Reduced sulphur dioxide emissions of 4,988 pounds per year
- Reduced nitrous oxide emissions of 2,583 pounds per year
- Reduced water consumption of more than 25,000,000 gallons per year

These improvements will be further augmented by the performance of the 'green' buildings currently under construction on campus, which will incorporate energy saving modern lighting technology, including natural light; water conservation and water catchment designs; the reuse of building materials from demolished buildings; and more. The campus is also reducing its use of non-organic pesticides and herbicides.

### **Academic engagement and methodological aspects of using the Earth Charter**

The Earth Charter principles are reflected in a variety of academic activities, on- and off-campus. Among the off-campus activities is collaboration between biology faculty and local schools to test water quality in local lakes. A new UW Oshkosh aquatic studies lab is starting to serve area public schools, communities, and citizens. It will also be a centre for research on area waterways and will provide important consulting services in the Great Lakes region and beyond.

In addition, the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh College of Business launched a new initiative known as the Centre for the Advancement of Sustainable Processes

and Environmental Research (CASPER). Its vision is to become "a regional centre for sustainable supply chain and environmental excellence." CASPER is already engaging regional businesses in its programme, which also places trained students as sustainability consultants in commercial manufacturing operations.

On campus, the university's Chancellor has directed the formation of a sustainability team. Its purpose is to devise ways of integrating sustainability (in the broad Earth Charter definition) on campus, including in the curriculum, outreach, infrastructure, and food services. Among curricular activities, for example, a variety of academic courses are currently including references to the Earth Charter. **The following are brief descriptions of three such courses and their methodologies:**

#### ***Media Photography II***

Students in the Media Photography II class, taught by Tim Gleason, are introduced to the Earth Charter through an assignment during the first week of the fall semester. Students are directed to the university's website to do research and background reading on the Charter. Afterwards they identify local problems and solutions, and estimate if they are 'photographable' – determining if a subject is an appropriate subject for photography. Students photograph their assignments and post the images online with captions. Two critiques are held: (1) an online written critique, and (2) an oral critique. The latter includes class discussion about how effective the photographs and captions were in



Photo from Student - Media Photography.

communicating the issues. Media Photography I students are directed to the Media Photography II website to view and learn from the projects and photographs posted on the Oshkosh Community News Network website to inform the network and encourage traffic back to the class website. Several photography instructors in other parts of the country have stated they are interested in participating in this programme in 2007. To see examples of the projects, visit: <http://uwomediaphoto2.blogspot.com>.

### ***Environmental Studies Senior Seminar***

Environmental Studies 261, "Environment and Society," taught by Jim Feldman, examines environmental problems from an international and comparative perspective. He introduces the Earth Charter as part of a discussion about the United Nations, and other efforts, to create a regime for the management of international environmental problems. He asks students to read the Earth Charter and explain how it fits into the established international framework, whose interests it represents, and who has signed it, among other questions.

### ***Writing-Based Inquiry Seminar***

Andrew Robson's section of a first-year course entitled, "Writing-Based Inquiry Seminar" (WBIS 188), uses the Earth Charter and sustainability as themes. He invites students to consider different world views, and to discuss and write about the Earth Charter's principles, their application on campus, in their local communities, in the nation, and in the world as a whole, as well as in their own lives. Readings and films relevant to the Earth Charter are used in class and are the source of further discussion, writing and research assignments. The scheduling of the class means it coincides with the Earth Charter Community Summit in October, an event that the students are required to attend. The summit events include scientists, activists, politicians, and others from local, regional and national arenas. People from diverse backgrounds put a human face on issues and offer real-world experiences to the audience, often encouraging

them towards involvement and action. Some guest speakers also visit classrooms, with students benefiting from a substantial period of question-and-answer time.

Professors in other departments have also incorporated the Earth Charter into their academic curricula, such as in Environmental Management, an upper-level Business Administration course that introduces the natural environment as a component of the business decision-making process. And faculty in the departments of sociology, social work, political science, music, English, and history have reported that they intend to do so in the future.

## **Lessons learned**

Encouraging the development of Earth Charter Community Summits has been important for UW Oshkosh because it's raised the awareness of sustainability principles among the shared governance at the University, and encouraged the implementation of these principles on campus and in the wider community. The summits have also been the model for the student-organized Earth Week, mentioned earlier. Perhaps the most important outcome, however, is the complete integration of students, faculty, staff, and community members into the planning, promotion, and staging of the summit events.

Another useful and innovative aspect of the summits has been the live satellite 'round robin' linkup, used to bring people together nationwide during their own ECCS events. This was implemented most successfully during the summit in 2002, courtesy of an external grant from a Franciscan organization. Unfortunately, the cost was too burdensome for most local summits to pay in later years. The link has become web-based, but this has been less successful. Earth Charter US is looking for ways to restore the live satellite link and expand it internationally.

Many leaders across the university community have inspired UW Oshkosh to develop a sustainable campus, resulting in many promising developments: the

formation of the university's sustainability team; a campus environmental audit; the Green Master Plan; the implementation of energy and resource conservation projects; the construction of green buildings; projects to work on local environmental problems; CASPER; and the integration of sustainability principles in academic courses and programmes. The

Earth Charter Community Summits will continue to play a significant role in these developments, with particular emphases on education and outreach.

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