

Making Campus Visitation Day Green

Laura Putre

Three years ago, administrators at Meredith College in North Carolina decided to make environmental issues a priority on campus. At the Student Government Association's urging, the college hired an environmental sustainability coordinator to develop and help implement a plan for greening the campus. The school began construction on an apartment building for upperclassmen that meets LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification standards and is outfitted with features like low-flow water fixtures, an outdoor irrigation system that recycles water, and flooring made of renewable materials such as bamboo and cork.

But they still needed to get the word out about the school's green initiatives to prospective students and their parents. So last fall, the college's recruiting team planned a green-themed visitation day for high school seniors and their families.

Called "Maximize Your Resources," the event gave students some visuals to go along with the school's green ideals, which were part of Meredith's annual theme this year, "Sustaining Our Environment, Developing Our Greenprint." At breakfast and lunch, guests ate locally grown produce on disposable plates made of sugar cane, a renewable material. Cups were made of recycled paper, and other paper goods were corn-based. At meal's end, the leftovers were com posted in trash bins with accompanying signs that explained the composting system.

Recruits also were sent home with a Meredith College journal and pencil made of recycled materials.

During her welcoming remarks, Cristan Trahey, director of admissions, wasn't shy

about telling the guests about the makeup of their tableware. "Often, it was a matter of pointing [it] out to the families," she says. "You saw the nods and smiles of recognition." She also mentioned in her remarks that Freshpoint, one of Meredith's main produce suppliers, provided the vegetables from nearby farms. As guests passed through the lunch line, they were handed flyers that reinforced that fact.

Fitting the mission

Kristi Eaves McLennan, Meredith's director of marketing, says that Meredith has fundamentally become more environmentally conscious "because we believe it is the right thing to do, not for marketing purposes."

Meredith College's "green" visitation day taps into its mission of developing community-oriented leadership skills.

But the green theme also fits in with the mission that this private women's college of 2,000 students tries to promote—"that our educational experience helps students develop the leadership skills necessary to make a difference in their communities and in the world," says McLennan.

"Our sustainability efforts are a great example of our students leading this kind of change," she adds, beginning with the Student Government Association launching its "Campaign for a Greener Meredith" in 1996.

On visitation day, tour guides were encouraged to talk up the school's green

initiatives, says Megan Deane Greer. As the assistant director of admissions at Meredith, Greer oversees the school's "White Iris Circle" tour guide program.

Greer says guests were particularly interested in the school's environmental sciences program and students' sustainability efforts on campus, including their push for a sustainability coordinator. Greer and her fellow guides explained to them that the coordinator is "tasked with a number of things, like finding ways we can reduce our energy intake and cut down on our electric bill. And starting recycling pilot programs."

Guides also noted that such programs have made students more aware of what they're consuming and where it's disposed of. They pointed out the school's Three Sisters Garden. Named after the Native American term for a complementary trio of crops—corn, beans, and squash—the community garden is a chance for students to grow their own crops.

Trahey says there were no extra costs involved in "greening" Visitation Day, and the admissions office "enjoyed collegewide support for the event." Trahey started work at Meredith, however, in September 2008, after the event was already planned.

Greer did help plan the event. "We wanted to tie our theme in with the campus theme," she says. "We started meeting over the summer. Another colleague started talking about all things green and sustainable, and we discussed things we could do that would fit in with our theme. Everyone was behind it."

Results

Whether the green-themed event was a success remains to be seen. The benefits have thus far been tough to measure, say Trahey and Greer. Their only evidence has been anecdotal.

"We'll get an email or some kind of response from a student who didn't have much knowledge of our sustainability efforts, who will say the things we're doing really piqued her interest," says Greer. "We're trying to get students excited about Meredith, to let them know they'll be learning things in college they'd never thought about before."

The college sent out email evaluations of the event in the days that followed, rather than handing out paper evaluations for students to fill out on the spot. According to Trahey, the paperless evaluations have worked better than their paper counterparts.

"They took more time to tell us what they thought, because we weren't hovering over them," she says. "It was more of a conversation." Of about 170 attendees, 70 submitted evaluations.

Trahey says she's not sure yet whether Meredith will make a point of environmentally conscious future visitation days. "No final decisions have been made," she says. "I hope to have the entire college community backing our overall efforts at sustainability. But the goal is that this becomes seamless, a normal part of life here, and it doesn't have to be highlighted."

***Laura Putre writes frequently
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