

From 'Econauts' to Bio-swale, Major Green Efforts Are Underway on UC San Diego Campus

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Students entering the University of California, San Diego campus in September will find a next-generation array of green innovations ranging from Econauts and drought tolerant bio-swale landscaping to organic foods and "hydration stations" that eliminate the need for disposable water bottles. And as an incentive to keep energy consumption as low as possible, each student in the new Village apartments will receive individual electricity bills.

Underlining its reputation as one of the greenest campuses in the country, UC San Diego is initiating a huge housing program with a new 1,000-bed "village" project for transfer students that is tracking LEED silver certification.

"UC San Diego is a living laboratory for climate change solutions," said Mark Cunningham, director of Housing, Dining and Hospitality at UC San Diego. "We have one of the nation's biggest student housing construction projects underway-nearly 4,000 beds over the next four years. We will be advancing seven housing projects simultaneously and they're going to be green, including some tracking LEED gold certified."

"If we show these citizens of tomorrow they can live without plastic, air conditioning and other unnecessary amenities during their life on campus, they'll take these good consumer habits out into their future world," Cunningham said.

"And students will eat knowing that they are contributing to sustainability, social consciousness and their own healthy diets," added Krista Mays, sustainability manager for Housing, Dining and Hospitality. "Our dining halls and markets will offer cage-free eggs; fair trade coffee, tea and sugar; organic food, and locally grown fruits and vegetables."

In another first-time effort to help students with their sustainability efforts, seven student "Econauts" have been hired to provide peer-to-peer education. The students will work with the campus residential life staff to educate students and dining customers about ways to reduce their carbon footprint and help UC San Diego meet sustainability goals. Among these goals is reducing water consumption by 20 percent and achieving zero waste by 2012.

Sustainability is evident on back-to-school arrival, where, in place of lawn around the new buildings, there's native planting in bio-swale, which washes water through rocks and is absorbed into the land, minimizing the need for irrigation.

Entering their suites, the transfer students will receive a reusable recycling bag in which they can deposit plastic and glass bottles and jars, paper and newspaper, metal containers and cardboard to take to central recycling locations. Additionally, UC San Diego will continue to provide each incoming freshman with a large reusable water bottle which can be filled at free filtered water "hydration stations" located throughout the campus.

The transfer housing will have high performance windows which cut the UV and heat and allow natural free air-flow ventilation, and radiators heated by hot water. Granite counter tops are used in place of laminate for a long term gain, and steel stairs replace carpeting.

Units will be individually metered, with each student getting a personal bill for usage. "That way," notes Cunningham, "awareness of the cost of energy for activities such as all-night gaming, and use of plasma TV, stereo and play stations, is built in."

But all is not total serious ecology for the incoming transfer juniors and seniors at "The Village." To build community-and add a touch of whimsy-the students will find a "story line" written in vinyl letters and posted along hallways and on doors. To follow the story, students will have to go into a neighbor's apartment. "This way," said Cunningham, we hope to get the students out of their rooms and into building community, rather than sitting at a desk gaming."

Student groups have supported the availability of cage-free eggs, fair trade, and organic foods, a trend that reflects a larger national and international movement for an alternative food system, according to Jeff Haydu, professor of sociology at UC San Diego. "People increasingly believe that they can advance political or social justice goals through their choices as consumers rather than, or in addition to, more conventional political action," Haydu said. "There is something very appealing about the idea that you can make a difference simply by buying this and not that. Some say, 'change the world one bite at a time.'"

Housing, Dining and Hospitality Services will continue a system tested last year that removed all disposables (take-away plastics and Styrofoam) and replaced them with compostable plastics and reusable china and silverware. Students who want food-to-go can use permanent dishware and leave it at drop-off spots throughout the campus known as "Toby's Spots." Mays said last year's trial test showed the change effectively helped students reduce waste.

All Housing, Dining and Hospitality restaurants and markets have offered organic, locally grown and cage-free options for some time, but the new initiative ensures that cage-free eggs will exclusively be sold in all of UC San Diego's dining locations. In addition, the campus will use fair trade coffee, tea and sugar at all dining locations and markets.

Cage-free eggs and fair trade products promote environmental wellness," said Becky McDivitt, a registered dietitian at UC San Diego. "Environmental wellness includes taking action to protect the world around us by, for example, allowing chickens to live in more humane conditions and supporting companies whose workers receive living wages and safe conditions."

UC San Diego's Housing, Dining and Hospitality division also will continue to offer a large variety of organic produce. In spring 2010, the El Mercado dining hall located on the Muir College campus will be transformed into an organic bistro.

In addition, dining locations will begin regularly featuring locally grown, organic farmer's markets where students will have the opportunity to buy produce directly from local food businesses.

Added Mays,"At UC San Diego we know that sustainability doesn't end at the doorstep. "It's understanding that everything is connected and impacts each other."

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