

Collaboration within Communities of LEED Practitioners

An interview with Jaime Van Mourik, Center for Green Schools at the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), member of the Learning Spaces Collaboratory (LSC) Advisory Board

Introduction

Diverse communities of practice are engaging in efforts to advance meaningful transformation of the undergraduate learning environment, with a small but growing number giving attention to how learning spaces are designed, experienced, and assessed in the context of institutional planning.

The “aha” moment for the LSC planning team was that we might be at a tipping point— that efforts to reshape 21st century learning environments could be informed and advanced through formal, collaborative processes that help institutions connect the dots between theory and practice.



Here, LSC Principal Jeanne L. Narum talks with Jaime Van Mourik, Director of Higher Education at USGBC’s Center for Green Schools, to gather insights regarding ways in which the USGBC is helping institutions “connect the dots” as they engage in planning for learning spaces.

Jeanne L. Narum: Jaime, evidence of the impact of the USGBC, particularly through the LEED Green Building Rating System, can be found on campuses across the country. Can you set the stage for discussing the new USGBC initiative— the Center for Green Schools— with a brief story of the evolution of the LEED rating system?

Jaime Van Mourik: First, the Center for Green Schools, which we launched in 2010, is an outgrowth of previous initiatives here at the USGBC, including the National Green Schools Campaign for K-12 learners and the Green Campus Campaign for higher education institutions.

And what we’ve found through tracking the use of LEED is that it has a catalytic impact— particularly in higher education. People are using it. And when you look at the total square footage in higher education and compare it to the total square footage of LEED-certified spaces, it is clear that the higher education sector is leading all other market sectors. So it appears that, when addressing the complexity of “sustainability” issues, many of the innovators and leaders are in higher education.

Narum: Can you describe further what you mean by having a “catalytic impact”?

Van Mourik: Well, the first thing that I recommend to an institution embarking on planning is that they try to figure out where they’re going, so they need to ask: “what is our final destination?” Well, before they can determine their final destination, they need to determine their current longitude and latitude.

The first step in this process is to conduct a campus assessment to understand what is already happening in the buildings, infrastructure, and course work, and in the student clubs and faculty research. There’s probably a lot that is already happening on a campus that people, depending on where they sit, may not be aware of.

So really what’s important is the first step: the assessment part. Then using that information to determine where you want to go based on your institution’s vision for the future, values, and academic mission, whatever it may be.

Narum: What key lessons did you bring to bear from LEED as you developed the Center for Green Schools?

Van Mourik: What we learned through developing the LEED rating system was that it was the process that matters. Indeed, we learned that it was *collaborations within a community* that mattered, that planning for green buildings (and for LEED certification) requires a very integrated, community approach.

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UC San Diego students conduct a waste audit on campus for the first LEED for Existing Buildings project.

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And when we speak about community, we speak of all the stakeholders in the process. In speaking of educational spaces, it is important to have the kind of conversations through which students, faculty and staff have a common understanding of the impact that the built environment has on their everyday lives.

Again, what we have learned through the process is that it comes down to collaboration, which for many can be a very different way of working. A much more integrated approach is required, and LEED both fosters and necessitates that different approach.

Narum: what other stakeholders within a campus community can be a part of the collaborative process?

Van Mourik: One thing that has certainly surprised me is the interest of the staff in getting involved in course work and teaching. There are a number of people I can think of at institutions working in the facilities office who are also teaching courses or working with a faculty member to conduct research or tag team on a course.

In a number of institutions I have met facilities folks who say, "Hey wait a minute, we are already doing green stuff." Okay, well, how do you communicate it then? How do you communicate it back to the faculty and students on your campus so that they are in fact aware of what's going on behind the doors. How would they know that was happening? These are important questions to ask.

Narum: The LSC is exploring the connection between physical spaces and how they impact learning. How does the Center for Green Schools address the impact of space on learning outcomes?

Van Mourik: The evolution of the Center for Green Schools reflects our thinking at the USGBC about questions such as: "What is a green school?" and "What is a green campus?" We are very clear that it is not just about buildings and infrastructure, but that learning is a key component.

The Center is founded on the idea that today's students are essentially becoming what we call "sustainability natives." It is clear to us that the learning experiences in today's learning spaces must prepare students to be green citizens, with an understanding of both the language and the practice of sustainability. When we talk about environmental transformation, we believe it is this next generation of leaders who will truly transform our world.

Narum: Research on how people learn shows that the people learn best when they are given opportunities to personally engage with the material. This finding seems central to the mission of the Center for Green Schools.

Van Mourik: Yes! Current USGBC efforts with student groups are among the most powerful ways to provide real-world learning experiences.

We developed a resource called "Hands-on LEED: Guiding College Student Engagement," which lays out three strategies by which students can be involved with the LEED process on their campus. The resource illustrates how to weave such opportunities into curricular and co-curricular activities. And as students participate, they become eligible to sit for the LEED professional credential exams.

In essence, what students are telling us is: "We want to be part of the solution; we want to have practical experiences with sustainability and green buildings so that when we leave campus we have more than a theoretical understanding of real problems and potential solutions."

One example where this is taking place is at Catholic University where we are working with faculty and staff on a pilot program to develop a LEED laboratory, giving students the opportunity to come together as part of a studio in the School of Architecture to work on a *LEED for Existing Buildings: Operations and Maintenance* certification. As this pilot proceeds, we will consider developing a formal program to work with other colleges and universities. Another pilot underway is a program called Research to Practice, and information about this and other activities I am describing can be found on our website.

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Edited by David R. Narum, GreenWay Partners, Inc.