Universities need to support and encourage faculty and staff to lead environmental sustainability projects

What is this research about?
Over the past several decades, an increasing number of universities have started to develop sustainability projects. The aim of these projects is to make positive environmental changes on campus, and/or to reduce the negative impacts of the university on the broader environment. These projects are typically classified as either taking a “top-down” or “bottom-up” approach. A top-down project is started by university administrators, who create plans and policies that are then handed down to faculty and staff to be put into practice. On the other hand, a bottom-up or “grassroots” project involves student groups lobbying the university administration for environmental reforms. Most research on campus sustainability efforts has focused on these two approaches, while ignoring the role of “middle level” individuals, faculty (professors and researchers) and staff. Faculty and staff are in a unique position to develop and lead sustainability projects because they often have a better understanding of how the university works, and they typically stay at the same university for much longer periods of time.

What did the researchers do?
The researchers examined previously published papers to find examples of successful faculty- and staff-led sustainability projects at universities across Canada and the United States. To compliment these findings, a full review was completed of all environmental and sustainability programs at the University of Guelph, a medium-sized university in South-Western Ontario, Canada. In addition, campus sustainability projects at 17 other Canadian universities were categorized based on the approach used, and evaluated to see how much impact they had, how well they involved the campus community, and how innovative they were.

What you need to know:
The importance of faculty- and staff-led sustainability projects has been frequently overlooked in the research on campus environmental initiatives. While their inside knowledge and long-term association with a university can help to make their projects a success, they need support and encouragement from students and the university administration.
What did the researchers find?

While top-down and bottom-up approaches to campus sustainability are both successful, the greatest potential for long-term positive change comes from projects led by faculty and staff. There were several obstacles to the success of these “middle-out” projects identified, such as worries over job security, lack of time or financial resources, unsupportive superiors, and lack of contact with experts in the field or people with an interest in the problem. To ensure continued success of faculty- and staff-led projects, current obstacles need to be addressed by the university administration and continued support and encouragement must be offered to these “middle-level” individuals.

How can you use this research?

University administrators can use this research to understand how to encourage and support faculty- and staff-led campus sustainability projects.

University faculty and staff can use this research to make their campus sustainability projects more likely to be successful.

Students can use this research to better understand the role that faculty and staff can play in developing and leading an environmental sustainability initiative. They can also learn how to better assist a faculty or staff member with their environmental initiative.

About the University of Guelph researcher:

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