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News

UConn ranks in top 10 of Sierra Club's 'Cool Schools', student leaders say that's not enough

By [The Daily Campus](#) · October 12, 2020

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Oak and McHugh Halls each have LEED Gold Certification due to their distinctly green features such as window glazing, natural and adaptive drought resistant plants, indoor air quality controls, extensive recycling of construction waste, green roof, bioretention swales among many other features. Photo by Brandon Barzola / The Daily Campus.

The University of Connecticut ranked eight out of 312 higher education institutions for campus sustainability, marking the university's third consecutive year on the Sierra Club magazine's "Cool Schools" top 10 list. While student environmentalists commend this achievement, they urge UConn to take more action for the planet.

"Sustainability surveys are important to UConn because of the opportunities they afford, and because of the motivation they provide for the school to do better," Emma MacDonald, a seventh-semester student majoring in natural resources, said.

MacDonald serves as an undergraduate student representative of the UConn Environmental Policy Advisory Council, EcoHusky president and intern at the Office of Sustainability.

"UConn does a great job of reporting its successes, but there is still a long way to go for the UConn campus to actually be completely sustainable," she said.

UConn scored an 84.68 out of a possible 100 in a point system that weighed the sustainability of campus operations, environmental education and student engagement heavily. This year, the Sierra Club's most sustainable school was the University of California, Irvine, with a first-place score of 89.95.

Sierra Magazine said they based their scores off of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education's Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System. AASHE STARS, which currently rates 669 institutions in the U.S. and 15 other countries, gave UConn its first platinum rating in 2020. UConn is one of seven U.S. universities to receive a platinum distinction.

As an intern at the Office of Sustainability, MacDonald helped fill out the AASHE STARS survey. She said UConn's sustainable ranking will attract prospective students and show the importance of a sustainable campus.

"The platinum ranking by AASHE demonstrates to the administration that the Office of Sustainability is a valuable branch of the university," MacDonald said.



Emma MacDonald serves as an undergraduate student representative of the UConn Environmental Policy Advisory Council, EcoHusky president and intern at the Office of Sustainability. In this April 9, 2019 file photo, MacDonald speaks at an Honor's event discussion hosted by USG's Sustainability Subcommittee. Photo by Avery Bikerman / The Daily Campus.

MacDonald said sustainability rankings help companies find specific colleges to implement green initiatives. She said last year, the company OrganiCup provided hundreds of free

reusable menstrual cups to UConn students after finding UConn through the UI GreenMetric ranking system.

MacDonald also said these systems allow the Office of Sustainability to identify areas in need of improvement. MacDonald said specifically, she would like to see UConn transition to renewable energy sources and promote composting in residence halls.

UConn has a history of ranking among the top institutions for sustainability. Over the past decade, UConn placed in the top-10 eight times. Most notably, UConn earned first place in 2013.

UConn Environmental Policy Advisory Council Undergraduate Student Representative Emily Kaufman said she worries if UConn focuses too much of the conversation on the accolades, the university will lose sight of what else it must accomplish. Kaufman is a seventh-semester senior double majoring in environmental studies and sociology and also worked with the USG Sustainability Subcommittee.

"I definitely think that UConn has a lot of good sustainability initiatives," Kaufman said. "But, I think that a lot of the honors are kind of performative. We know how to check the boxes. ... It's giving us an excuse to say 'look we're great' but not really push for more."

"UConn is pledging to be carbon-neutral by 2050, but we're still putting our money into these huge buildings and developments that require so much energy...they aren't really looking long term about a lot of these things; they're still investing in fossil fuels."

Emily Kaufman, USG Environmental Advisory Council Representative

Kaufman said she is currently working with other students to address anti-racism and environmental justice, as well as the colonial roots of climate change, within the UConn curriculum. She said she wants to see the classes within the environmental literacy course requirement to extend beyond STEM to include all majors.

Kaufman also said she is disappointed the new building projects at the University require the expansion of fossil fuel use, instead of its elimination.

"UConn is pledging to be carbon-neutral by 2050, but we're still putting our money into these huge buildings and developments that require so much energy," Kaufman said. "They aren't really looking long term about a lot of these things; they're still investing in fossil fuels."

Kaufman said this is not just a UConn problem, but reflects a broader institutional issue across the nation.

Sierra Magazine, in an article explaining the methodology of the "Cool Schools" selection, said they hope these rankings increase competition amongst schools to go-green and examine their commitments to environmentalism.

"Our results show that while many universities are making admirable progress, no school has yet attained complete sustainability. In 2020, the top-rated university scored 89.95 points out of 100 — or a solid B+. In higher education, as in the rest of society, there is room for improvement when it comes to sustainability," Sierra Magazine wrote.

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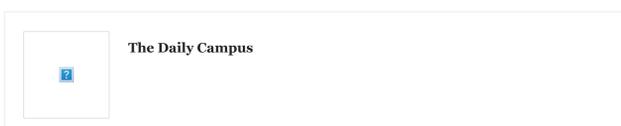


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