

The Sierra Club “Cool Schools” Survey 2010: An Initial Report

The Environmental Advisory Committee

March 31, 2010

1 Background

Each year the Sierra Club invites universities and colleges to complete a survey that covers various issues relating to sustainability. These surveys are scored by the Sierra Club and each school receives a grade and a breakdown of their performance across several categories. The results are made public online. Last year’s results are available here:

www.sierraclub.org/sierra/200909/coolschools/allrankings.aspx

Schools that do well are featured in various articles and interviews in the Sierra Club magazine and website.

As you can see from the above link, last year Marlboro College earned a D+. Some reasons for this low grade are discussed in the next two sections. This year we believe we will rank higher. Despite this, we believe that the survey is an imperfect tool for capturing Marlboro’s genuine progress towards sustainability. We discuss these issues in the rest of this report along with some recommendations for action we should consider on topics the survey has brought to light.

2 Completing the survey

There was no clear process for completing the survey. Once we were aware of the looming deadline (20th March) various groups mobilized to contribute to filling it in and on 10th March the EAC officially took on the job. Next year we think that the responsibility

should remain with the EAC. We will make a note to start looking for the release of the survey early in the Spring semester.

The completed survey (attached to this document) was submitted on 19th March. The ten days of hunting out answers to the questions was surprisingly smooth. A mix of using a large email list of everyone that had some way been involved and targeted questions to smaller groups of people with specific knowledge produced a great response from the community. Over these ten days, 22 different people made a substantive contribution to improving our answers, in many cases multiple times. Next year, we recommend circulating the survey as widely as possible as early as possible.

Another issue to be aware of is the integration of the undergraduate campus and the Graduate Center. Practices seem to be very different between the two and it is hard to present clear concise answers that capture this. Grad Center staff and faculty are keen to be involved, however, and I think that next year with a longer lead time we'll do a better job with this aspect.

3 How will we fare?

While it is, of course, impossible to predict the grade, there are many reasons to be hopeful that we will improve. Table 1 compares our opinion of how we think we will score in each category this year with how we scored last year. The arrows indicate the expected direction of movement, \uparrow indicating a strong improvement, \nearrow a weak improvement, \rightarrow no improvement. Happily, we don't need \searrow or \downarrow .

Of course, despite our optimism, we are far from perfect. The next section details some of the issues that arose while completing the survey.

4 Issues arising

A common comment in the email responses can be summarized as “Don't we do this? Why not? Could we? We should.” Here are the issues to which this comment was applied along with the EAC's initial actions.

1. Unwanted clothing and other items—can we organize donation at the end of the semester?

Suggestion passed to the EQC, the community service committee, work coordinators and Ken and Kyle. The reply: We do this and have done every semester for at least three years (organized by the community service committee). The survey coordinator emailed

Table 1: Expected 2010 progress

Category	2009	2010	Reason
Energy supply	3	→	No change.
Efficiency	5	↑	Better explanation of our responsible water use and addition of the Thermal House energy audit and work.
Food	7	↗	Modest improvements in the amount of organic food offered.
Academics	4	→	No significant changes.
Purchasing	6	↗	Addition of EPEAT-certified electronics.
Transportation	4	↗	This year's questions allow a better explanation that most of our students walk to class and we added information about borrowing bicycles and skis from the OP.
Waste Management	6	↗	Addition of composting is good, but there was a new question about end-of-semester donations that will pull us back down some (see Question 4.1—we may get credit for the system that we didn't know about at the survey deadline).
Administration	1	↗	Rather than not doing audits and the like we're now promising to do them. We don't know how well this will play; it might be that we still score badly and then get a big boost next year when we've done the work.
Financial Investments	×	?	New category.
Other Initiatives	×	?	New category.

asking for clarification on one of the other questions and I optimistically included this new information in the reply. He said he'd "make a note" of it, so we may well get some credit.

2. Can we "incentivize" the Moover? What about a carpooling scheme or another college van run for those not on the Moover route?

One suggestion is an annual (or by semester) fee for a campus parking permit. However, the fear is that this would penalise a lot of people unnecessarily and create more issues with unregistered vehicles than we already have. A more formal carpooling scheme is an interesting idea. The EAC is investigating whether there is interest and we are talking to Tobias and Elliot about whether the nook map plug-in, or other technological wizardry, could help coordinate this. Chris Silva is open to the idea of a new van run and we've been talking about what would be required to make that happen.

3. How can we compost more (kitchen waste and coffee shop)?

We're speaking with Ari, the Crew Chief, about how the current system is functioning and will raise this as part of the dumpster enclosure conversation.

4. Can we buy Marine Council certified fish to be served in the dining hall? Can we have more organic and local food?

The kitchen and food committee are already doing a great job of making the Dining Hall food increasingly sustainable. These comments have been passed along to them for consideration. They are currently considering removing the soda machine and using the money saved to pursue these goals.

5. Can our investments be made more sustainably?

There are already board-level conversations on this topic. We hope they continue. Is there any research with which the EAC can help?

6. I'm sure that this information is held somewhere and/or I'm probably not the best person to answer but here's what I know...

If we had more systematic ways to measure, record and access data on lots of different issues around campus then that would make the survey easier to complete and be valuable in tracking our progress on various fronts and making the community more aware of what is going on. We have no concrete proposal other than to urge habitual data collection and circulation.

5 Next steps and final thoughts

Next, we wait. Based on previous years, the results will become public in late summer or early fall. When the results arrive we recommend issuing a press release. The content of such a press release obviously depends heavily on the results. However, we hope that there are two themes to explore.

The first is the unsuitability, in many ways, of the methodology of the survey when applied to Marlboro College. We are small, rural and frugal. These are qualities that perhaps lead to practices that place us further along the path to sustainability than a big university that has buses continuously trundling around its campus, throws up several LEED-certified buildings each year and has an energy-star vending machine on every corner.

The second theme is Marlboro's continued progress. We can talk about the big steps made between the 2009 and 2010 surveys (the Thermal House project, composting, food improvements and so on) and our plans for the coming year(s).

We believe that the filling out this survey is a valuable process. It gives us a way to compare ourselves to other institutions and encourages self-reflection and targeted action.