New environmental coordinator aims to save green by going green

By Angela McManaman

There is no such thing as a typical day at work for UWM's first-ever environmental sustainability coordinator.

While discussing her new role designing sustainability standards that will conserve money and energy, and promote environmentalism at UWM, Kate Nelson touches on the environmental virtues of linoleum.

And on the challenge of finding recyclable ceramic tile, because "we don't want to pay for a dumpster to store nonrecyclable materials."

Then there is the round of phone calls she made recently, to figure out how to safely dispose of a door hinge filled with hydraulic fuel.

The 2007 graduate of UWM's Conservation and Environmental Science Program examines processes and projects affecting every square inch of campus: from the Surplus and Purchasing departments to campuswide recycling efforts and food waste from its restaurants.

"UWM is a large system that places many demands on the earth's natural resources," says Nelson, who also has a bachelor's degree in Theatre and Writing from Cardinal Stritch University. "As the university looks to expand, we have the chance to practice sustainable, smart growth that manages our resources wisely."

TWO KEY PROCESSES

Nelson relies on her experiences as environmental consultant for Cedarburg Science and the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, and the belief that environmental sustainability is tied to two key processes: life-cycle analysis and waste management.

The first is a more proactive approach to environmentalism, like thinking about what types of building materials will wear best over time and can be recycled when no longer needed.

"We can think about what is the cheapest product we can buy today," says Nelson. "Or we can ask, 'How long will this last? What else can we accomplish through this building project?'"

Waste management encompasses campuswide recycling efforts and the repurposing of waste in new ways – like turning fry grease into bus fuel.

"Zero-waste is not an option for UWM," says Nelson. "So I'm thinking 100 percent product – utilizing by-products in new ways."

But there is much to consider before the university can transition the operations of its growing urban campus toward maximum sustainability.

Kate Nelson, UWM's first environmental sustainability coordinator, poses in Downer Woods. The woods include 11 acres of permanent conservation area.

UNIQUE CHALLENGES

"Diversity of resources and our surrounding environment, the community, our urban setting – we have totally different sustainability challenges from any other university," Nelson says. "There really is no sustainability model to compare us to."

Given these unique sustainability challenges, Nelson appreciates the efforts already under way to make UWM greener.

She credits the Heating Plant's voluntary efforts to reduce fossil fuels, and a green roof project that will capture stormwater runoff and insulate the residence hall commons area it shelters.

These efforts drew support from multiple departments, institutes and groups on campus working together.

Nelson says this collaborative mindset is critical to her work, as well.

"This position requires product management skills, inventory skills, the ability to work with city and state government," Nelson says. "There's no clear path, so we'll be creating a sustainability model for UWM from the ground up."

Nelson means this literally: She wants to help students implement a composting program, and she is now drafting a campuswide environmental survey and an environmental policy.

MORE THAN SAVING ENERGY

"I am always looking for people with a wealth of knowledge about how things work around here," Nelson says. "And I like the challenge of getting different constituents working together – purchasing, carpentry, our three custodial staffs, student activists."

Nelson says she's well positioned to do this from her office in UWM's University Services building.

"I love working with the men and women who are behind the scenes, who have their hands on every inch of this campus," she explains.

"Sustainability is not just about cutting energy," adds Nelson. "It's about bringing people together."

For more information about sustainability at UWM, watch the UWM Web site in late March, when Nelson's "Sustainability at UWM" Web page goes live with news, tips and event information about sustainability on campus.

ENVIRONMENTAL EFFORTS GET UWM NOTICED BY NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

UWM is on the frontlines of the battle against global warming, according to a January 2008 report by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) that profiled leading environmental efforts of 104 colleges and universities nationwide.

"As traditional hubs of innovation, colleges can model emission reductions that can be replicated by companies and communities," says Kevin Coyle, vice president of education for the National Wildlife Federation. "They can also generate the needed research and inventions that will be needed for large reductions while preparing a work force that will embrace opportunities for a new low-carbon, energy-smart economy."

The 62-page report highlighted UWM as a recent addition to the list of 27 colleges and universities with Flexcar, a short-term rental car option. The university also received recognition for two key habitat-restoration efforts: the 11-acre Downer Woods and a native prairie garden surrounding the School of Architecture and Urban Planning (SARUP). The student environmental organization ECOTONE conducted much of the habitat restoration work, with assistance from the UWM Field Station, service-learning students, and Conservation and Environmental Science faculty.

These efforts included more than 300 hours removing litter and invasive plant species from a four-acre area of Downer Woods; clearing weeds and planting shooting stars in the SARUP garden, and circulating a petition to support campus environmental policy.

To see the complete report, visit www.nwf.org/campusEcology/BusinessCase/HigherEducationinaWarmingWorld.pdf.

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