

North Central College joins Billion Dollar Green Challenge



Lighting in the Residence Hall/Recreation Center of North Central College was updated using green revolving funds. Savings from the reduction in energy consumption is used to pay off upgrade costs so the money can be reinvested in other projects. (David Sharos / Naperville Sun)

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A solar array to be installed on the North Central College's Naperville campus this fall will be funded by an endowment aimed at reducing the institution's carbon footprint.

This summer, North Central joined the Billion Dollar Green Challenge, a movement that encourages colleges, universities and other nonprofit institutions to invest a combined total of \$1 billion in green revolving funds.

The funds finance projects that reduce energy consumption. The savings garnered from those projects are used to pay off the initial investment. And savings that come in after that are reinvested back in the green fund for future projects.

The Naperville college is one of 62 participating institutions in the United States and Canada that have committed more than \$131 million to investing in sustainability and efficiency operations on their campuses. Only two of those 62 are in Illinois; the other is the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Emily Flynn Pesquera, associate director of the Sustainable Endowments Institute overseeing the challenge, said green revolving funds enable greater reinvestment back into the campus to create more opportunities for sustainable projects.

"Colleges like North Central have committed to the Billion Dollar Green Challenge for many reasons, including joining an active network to share best practices, pose questions, and learn from the broader scope of institutions that have sought to deepen their commitment to reduce carbon emissions," Pesquera said.

"It's a part of a new sustainable campus, one that is business savvy while also committed to environmental reform. By coming together to commit to this greater investment, schools can not only achieve their sustainability missions but create transformative impact on the global emissions produced by inefficient, outdated, and unsustainable technology and strategies."

Pesquera said the network of institutions are all dealing with the same issues: Rising energy costs; a need to update older, inefficient technology on campus; and increasingly constrained operating and administrative budgets.

"Sharing data with a network of like-minded schools will help to build body of knowledge on revolving fund practices, furthering the area of study and benefiting all involved schools and organizations," she said. "Institutions are able to access other schools' data, work with an online green revolving fund tracking web platform, and receive guidance from SEI on the management and operations of their fund."

Although the college joined this summer, North Central's green revolving fund – the Cardinal Sustainability Fund – was established in 2014.

College President Troy Hammond said endowment-based green funds hold potential for institutions like North Central and presented his ideas in the TEDx "Sustainability: Why Universities Can Lead by Example."

In his talk Hammond said the college is on its way to saving a million kilowatt hours of electricity, which is the equivalent of reducing the electrical consumption of 100 households to zero or removing 150 vehicles off the road.

"A college like North Central has the time horizon to experience the full upside and benefit of energy efficiency projects and the expertise to evaluate these projects, to assess the science behind the technology, to model the energy, to evaluate the financials, to verify the math," he said.

North Central has committed \$1.8 million of its unrestricted endowment toward sustainability projects.

Hammond said roughly a quarter of million dollars financed the replacement of outdated metal halide fixtures and fluorescent lights with more efficient LED lighting in the college's gymnasium, track and field house, pool, a dorm and the student activity center.

This fall the college will embark on its biggest sustainability project to date when a 538.56-kilowatt solar array with a 250-kilowatt energy storage system will be installed in the residence hall/recreation center.

North Central officials estimate the panels will provide 22 percent of the electricity needed for the 201,439-square-foot building, with energy storage capacity that can be sold to help support the project.

The college's sustainability coordinator Brittany Graham said being a part of the Billion Dollar Green Challenge brings many benefits to the college.

"It exposes others to our robust sustainability efforts and we gain access to many resources, like research papers and a green revolving investment tracking system (GRITS) to help us track our savings and fund balances," she said.

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