



# Student-Driven Sustainability Effort at Princeton University

by Brian Yeoman

**T**he sustainability movement received yet more encouragement and took another baby step as students at Princeton University led a campus-wide adoption of 100% post-consumer-waste paper (PCW) for the New Jersey campus's use in copiers and information technology printers. "Leave it to the young," an uncourageous mantra of many in the environmental movement, may be beginning to actually pay off as the youth of America on many campuses are creating the kind of leverage to bring about change in the 800-year-old bastion of tradition on the college campus. After many failed attempts by environmental activists to convert many college and university campuses to more environmentally responsible alternatives to virgin-timber-based papers, today's youth are having more success.

The key to this success may lie in the data-based approach to the issues of the environment, as opposed to the more emotional and anecdotal approaches of the past, and in the willingness of the students to work within the traditional structures of higher education, most notably the committee. The Princeton students worked very hard and in a very science-based way to effectuate change on their campus. It wasn't easy, and it wasn't quick – but it was effective.

In their journey, the students identified three major obstacles worth noting:

- The cost difference between virgin paper and post-consumer-waste paper,
- Concerns among potential users of post-consumer-waste paper about its quality, and
- Decentralized purchasing. There are 280 independent purchasers making up Princeton's Academic and Administrative Managers Group (AAMG).

Obviously, there were many people to convince that potentially paying more for 100% post-consumer-waste paper was worth considering and that their quality concerns about post-consumer-waste paper was not founded on fact. On the upside, the decentralized purchasing setup meant that some departmental purchasers already agreed with the idea that post-consumer-waste paper made sense and that they could change independently. This ultimately helped make the case for the end result: the university-wide mandate.

The utilization of post-consumer-waste paper in large-scale institutions is critical because it creates a sustaining market for recycling programs in the country. If there is not high utilization of 100% post-con-

sumer-waste product, the market value for paper declines. As the market declines, the economic viability of recycling programs becomes less vibrant.

Paper consumers are frequently misinformed about their paper-making decision criteria. The marketing of paper is very sophisticated. And without casting aspersions towards any segment in the process, the results are confusing at best. A common mistake made by buyers of paper is to confuse percent recycled content with the actual act of recycling. Within the paper industry, the notion of recycled content has everything to do with recycling mill scrap, roll-end cuts, waste, and selvaige. It has nothing to do with the recycling program at your home operated on behalf of the city or county, school, church, college, or university. This is because the industry has created the notion that post-consumer-waste is the mechanism to describe and market products that have been used and then harvested by a recycling process not operated by the industry and then returned to the paper manufacturers as feedstock – but used feedstock, or post-consumer-waste.

The undertaking by the students was not something easily accomplished or one that moved with great speed, but it was

one that progressively built on each action along the way. Many students and alumni have been part of greening Princeton's paper efforts. Generically, the effort has come to be known as Greening Princeton, and over the last two years, many staff members have played a critical role in helping the students achieve their goals. The students were also clever enough to work with the university's oversight committee to achieve their objective. An undergraduate course project had suggested the creation of the Princeton Environmental Oversight Committee (PEOC) as a result of a recommendation to conduct environmental audits. The president of the university agreed. Thus, concurrent with

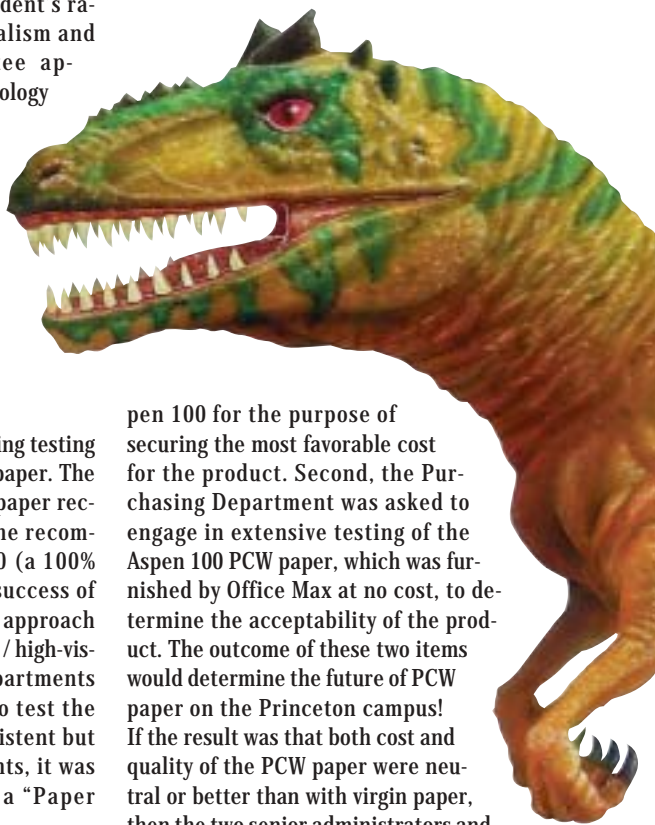
switch to all recycled paper. This included the Office of Information Technology, the top user. Some of the other big users utilized almost no recycled paper (of either 30% or 100% PCW). The report also indicated that some of these users were paying more for virgin paper than they would have paid for the 30% PCW paper.

This report was used by one student to formulate the strategy of where to focus. This quantitative analysis of where Princeton stood with regard to recycled paper use was a key part of Greening Princeton's case before the PEOC. The student's rationale was one of incrementalism and data. The student committee approached the Department of Ecology

was encouraging, and as a result, the student Greening Princeton committee asked for and was granted a meeting with the Senior Vice President for Administration and the Treasurer, the purpose of which was to discuss the possible establishment of a university-wide standard for PCW paper.

There were two critical action items as a result of this meeting. First, the Senior Vice President for Administration and the Treasurer agreed to ask the Purchasing Department to enter into negotiations with Boise Office Solutions (OfficeMax) for As-

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the executive initiative, the PEOC began meeting to bring the environmental audit into focus. The committee is chaired by the Vice President of Facilities.

Key to the executive initiative effort was Don Weston, Purchasing Director; Lisa Ridolfi, Senior Purchasing Agent; and Mary Erickson, Boise (OfficeMax) on-site representative. Importantly, Mr. Weston, under the direction of the committee, helped the students formulate the strategy to influence the leadership of the university and understand the possible switch to using 100% PCW paper and the related implications. With the help of Bob Colgan, OfficeMax's representative, Mr. Weston prepared a profile of departmental paper use at the university, showing which departments used which types of paper and in what quantities. This report showed that some of the top paper-users had made a

and Evolutionary Biology regarding testing the 100% post-consumer-waste paper. The department agreed to test the paper recommended by the students. The recommended paper was Aspen 100 (a 100% PCW) paper. Based upon the success of this test the students began to approach purchasers in other high-volume / high-visibility departments. These departments slowly and cautiously began to test the paper. After a year of this persistent but low-key pressure by the students, it was suggested by the PEOC that a "Paper Party" be held.

The event was sponsored by Greening Princeton (the student organization), the Purchasing Department, Boise Cascade, and the Office of Information Technology. The purpose of the "Paper Party" was to increase awareness of benefits and availability of PCW paper. The outcome of the party

pen 100 for the purpose of securing the most favorable cost for the product. Second, the Purchasing Department was asked to engage in extensive testing of the Aspen 100 PCW paper, which was furnished by Office Max at no cost, to determine the acceptability of the product. The outcome of these two items would determine the future of PCW paper on the Princeton campus! If the result was that both cost and quality of the PCW paper were neutral or better than with virgin paper, then the two senior administrators and the committee chair would agree to support a campus-wide mandate for 100% PCW copy paper.

Based largely on the intent of the principle-based agreement above, the Woodrow Wilson School switched its departmental usage to 100% PCW paper. This was fol-



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lowed 30 days later by the Office of Information Technology converting all student cluster printers (in dorms, libraries, other common areas) to the Aspen 100 PCW being evaluated.

Consistent with the charge given by the executives, Purchasing Director Weston reported that the 100% PCW paper had been tested. The results were that 80 departments reported excellent findings using the paper, and only 9% of those who used the PCW paper reported problems. On the issue of cost, Mr. Weston reported that the Purchasing Department had negotiated a lower price with Boise Cascade if the university worked towards a mandated use of 100% PCW paper.

Following the report to the executives, a PEOC meeting was convened, and the results were evaluated. Purchasing department personnel and students persuaded the committee to draft a letter to the Provost on behalf of PEOC endorsing the switch to 100% PCW paper. The PEOC subsequently sent the letter to the Provost endorsing the mandate for 100% PCW paper. Thirty days later, the Chair of the PEOC reported that the Provost had forwarded to the President for approval PEOC's recommendation for a policy requiring that all paper for routine office use on campus consist of 100% PCW material. The President approved the suggested policy change. The process has been very successful. The 24 months of hard work by many people yielded outstanding results (attention is invited to the following Web page references).

In some respects, this is an extraordinary event, and in others, it is a signpost. The students of today are a dedicated, purposeful

group that understands the inner workings of organizations, data, and the value of consensual approaches to problem-solving. They also understand that they can define the funnel... that is, they can choose the issues they can impact the most, in a manner that is forceful yet respectful. The key for us purchasing professionals is that we can expect more activism and requests for information from our students.

The story has a bittersweet postscript. In a vendor fair six months later, Princeton learned that the E & I Cooperative contract available to them provided the virgin-tree-

based paper at 90 cents a ream cheaper than the 100% PCW paper. So what are the Princeton students doing about it? They are trying to organize students at other Universities to endorse 100% PCW paper on their campuses to increase the volume. The Princeton students have talked to E & I and Boise Cascade, and have secured an agreement in principle to adjust the pricing when the volume is there. Smart people with principles working hard for the environment will probably show up on your doorstep. When they do – and they will – remember that to do great things, sometimes you have to be asked.

### Web Page References

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