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'Rangers' on a mission to save energy

Delaware Tech volunteers patrol campuses looking for ways to be green

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When Doug Hicks and David Pedersen began thinking about ways to conserve electricity at Delaware Technical & Community College's Owens campus in Georgetown, they started by asking building maintenance staff if they could turn off extra lights in their hallway.

But they didn't stop there.

Their efforts grew into an initiative that includes about 50 volunteers. Each of the "energy rangers" adopted a corridor or bank of offices in a campus building. The volunteers are in charge of ensuring classroom lights are turned off when classes end and letting building maintenance staff know if the heating and cooling systems aren't working efficiently.

"It easily fixes the problem because you get to the heart of the problem," said Hicks who, along with Pedersen, works in the engineering technologies department on the Owens campus. "Nobody is maliciously keeping the lights on or trying to fool the thermostat, they just weren't aware. By educating people, the energy rangers group is just allowing campus to run a little more efficiently."

The "energy rangers" program is being expanded collegewide as part of an overall effort to encourage environmentally friendly behavior among faculty, staff and students and to make the school's four campuses more energy efficient.

In April, Delaware Tech created a "green team" to come up with ideas for incorporating environmental sustainability into all levels of campus life, including purchasing, use of utilities and curriculum. Delaware Tech officials are monitoring electricity use and trying to cut back through work with a consultant and grass-roots efforts like that of the energy rangers.

Some of the college's other efforts include:

- The Stanton campus recently received a state grant to start a recycling program.
- Staff at the Terry campus in Dover recently purchased solar-powered lighting for the parking lot.
- Officials at the Wilmington campus replaced aging air handlers, which circulate air as part of the heating and air conditioning systems, with more efficient models.
- This week's collegewide in-service day for staff focused on environmental sustainability issues and ways the campuses can "go green."

"We know that sustainability is not a trend, it's not a fad," spokeswoman Lisa Hastings-Sheppard said. "We know it's a lifestyle change. Our plan is to figure out how we can integrate sustainability into our mission and planning and into our policies."

Administrators are working with John Byrne and his team at the Center for Energy and Environmental Policy at the University of Delaware to complete carbon-footprint studies on each campus. The studies

calculate Delaware Tech's carbon emission for waste, dining, landscaping and buildings. The project is in the data collection stage. The team from UD will create reports for each campus that include statistics on usage and recommendations to reduce carbon emissions.

"We prepare a full audit that gives a series of technical options and behavioral options that the college could implement on the various campuses in order to reduce energy requirements," Byrne said. "We also detail the economics, what is the best bang for your buck."

Part of the work of the "energy rangers" included trying to resolve an ongoing issue about the temperature in some of the buildings on the Owens campus. Hicks said staff members were bringing in heaters to warm their offices, but were unaware that in some cases the heaters were causing the building's heating and air conditioning systems to overheat -- or over cool -- the entire area.

"If you stick a space heater in a room where the thermostat is, you end up messing up every room in your suite because the thermostat thinks that room is plenty warm and turns off the heat for the whole suite," Hicks said.

Hicks and Pedersen organized an information session to explain the mechanics of heating and cooling to the entire staff. Another group of energy rangers created reminder cards to hang near each light switch on the Owens campus as reminders for staff and students to turn off the power when they leave a room.

"We're working on a system for energy rangers to get heating and cooling problems reported to administrative services and getting feedback in areas affected where there's a short-term fix or a long-term fix," Hicks said.

"One example was that administrative services wasn't aware that in some labs, everyone is required to wear lab coats. They hadn't set the thermostat down a couple of degrees for that room because they thought it was like every other room. The energy ranger for that area was the lab tech for that lab and said we need to have it a little cooler."
