



Earth Club Furthers St. John's As Sustainability Pacesetter



May 05, 2009, St. John's University once again is making environmental history, this time, by launching an A500 Rocket® model food composter and thereby becoming the first U.S. university to use this technology.

The student-run Rocket was unveiled on April 22, Earth Day, at its current location—the Marillac Loading Dock on the Queens campus.

A Model for Achieving Sustainability

“The Earth Club is playing a critical role in the feasibility study that will enable St. John's to look at the efficacy of food composting on campus,” explained Frank Cantelmo, Ph.D., the Club's faculty advisor.

Club members with backup from the University's team of Sustainability Coordinators will oversee the seven-days-a-week operation of the composter. “We hope to demonstrate how all students can make a difference and impact their environment,” said Ashley Brown, president of the Earth Club. Ashley is a junior majoring in environmental studies.

The Rocket was leased by the University from a U.K. manufacturer with intent to buy, should the Feasibility Study confirm— as Facilities Services Director of Environmental and Energy Conservation Thomas Goldsmith expects it to— that food composting is a safe, sustainable, cost-effective and hygienic alternative to overtaxing New York City's landfills.

The catalyst for the University's decision to identify a sustainable way to recycle food waste is contained in the landmark [Memo of Understanding](#) (MOU) that St. John's signed with the EPA in 2008. With this agreement, St. John's became a role model for how academic institutions can partner with governmental agencies to reduce carbon emissions.

A year prior, St. John's took a leadership role in sustainability when it became one of the few New York area universities to accept Mayor Bloomberg's Mayoral Challenge to reduce carbon emissions by 2017.

Student Stakeholders

Thomas Goldsmith and Dr. Cantelmo worked together in the selection process leading the University to lease the A500 Rocket®.

“What sealed it for me,” said Goldsmith, “was that it passed U.K. health safety standards for food composting. This is critical since we want our students to be able to handle the food compost. In choosing the Rocket, we balanced technology, cost effectiveness, simplicity of operation and safety.”

According to Dr. Cantelmo, student engagement and learning is integral to the project, consistent with the University’s strategy of changing the campus culture by making it even more student-centered. It also incorporates the University’s Catholic and Vincentian mission of acting as stewards of the earth.

“We value student input, we value their help in our new sustainability initiatives and we are working on ensuring that students get academic credit for these critical activities. We want to increase the level of awareness University-wide about the necessity for recycling and inspire all students to participate.”

Yes We Can!

Dr. Cantelmo sees a “charged campus atmosphere with students coming to us asking to be involved in saving the environment.” He adds, “It harkens back to the era of JFK when the president challenged the country to ‘ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.’”

“Our students want to be part of the environmental solution and not part of the problem.”

Reflecting this changing atmosphere, Ashley also voiced her enthusiasm. “I am really excited and pleased that St. John’s is so substantially involved in reducing its carbon emissions. I have seen great progress during this past year in the number of sustainability activities our club has been involved in, partnering with equally involved faculty members.

“Right now, as students, we have a great opportunity to do something active for the environment and we also are lucky enough to have a laboratory—the University—in which we can see the results of our work. The Earth Club’s mission is to heighten awareness of the campus community about how we can improve the environment and the Rocket is helping us do that.”

In fact, Ashley reports that student interest in joining the Earth Club is high right now. Membership has nearly doubled this year and during Earth Week, she said, some 20-30 more students expressed interest in joining.

Vincentian-Catholic Linkage

“Earth Week was a jumping off point for growing campus awareness of what our students can do to make a difference and impact the environment,” said Ashley.

To illustrate how pollution impacts underwater life, the Club ran a three-hour ecology cruise on Long Island Sound for St. John’s students.

Led by Dr. Cantelmo, participants were able to see up-close how too much fertilizer lowers underwater oxygen and harms marine life. “We discussed how Vincentian service to the poor is connected with caring for every living thing on the planet,” he said.