

Universidad del Norte

Community Engagment

Ecocampus Uninorte Program: between the knowledge and action to obtain the knowhow



About the project

Summary

Ecocampus Uninorte program is a strategy created at *Universidad del Norte* in 2014 to visualize and optimize the environmental management of its campus and increase environmental awareness through education, research and promotion to generate well-being and harmonious development of the university community. The program frames multiple initiatives that range from the sustainable management of technical aspects of the campus to the execution of projects designed to empower the university community on its path to more responsible conducts towards the environment.

Profile

Universidad del Norte is a non-profit foundation established as a centre for higher education on July 11th 1966. Since then, *Uninorte* has become one of the most important and prestigious universities in Colombia, achieving very important national and international accreditations in various academic circles. Its 15.573 students and 2.039 staff members spend their day-to-day in a green campus which operates in harmony with its surroundings and also holds a unique and rich biodiversity.

Project partners

The initiatives of the Ecocampus program are driven, planned, coordinated and evaluated by members of the Ecocampus Committee which is an internal organization including representatives of different departments and groups with environmental responsibilities and interests inside the institution, among them: the Basic Science Division, the Chemistry and Biology department, the Facilities office and representatives of students. Ecocampus also carries out activities in partnership with other offices such as the Communications and Public Relations office, the Planning office, the volunteering program "Univoluntarios" and the museum "Mapuka".

Through the program, the institution has also established and maintained external partnerships with universities, NGOs, institutes and organizations like the Zoo of Barranquilla, the cotton-top tamarin conservation program *Proyecto Tití*, the number one research institute in biodiversity of Colombia *Instituto Humboldt* and the national natural Park *Vía Parque Isla de Salamanca*.

The results

The problem

Higher education institutions have a protagonist role to play in the formation process of the leaders and decision makers that will operate under the increasingly changing and challenging environmental conditions of our times. Similarly, institutions face huge challenges trying to educate, empower and sensitize a generation that seems to be more distant from nature than it was some years ago. Knowing this, and also aware of the reality that surrounds the socio-environmental sphere of the Colombian Caribbean region, the *Universidad del Norte* cannot help but be part of the solution to the ecological crisis that now resides within this territory and promote the participation of the community university in the process.

The approach

Through the establishment of the program Ecocampus Uninorte the institution aims to reduce the impacts of its campus operation on the environment through the optimization of its environmental management processes and also seeks to increase the awareness of the community university through education, research and participative initiatives.

The above is reached through the constant development of projects, strategies and activities within 4 main spheres: Community Engagement; Social Outreach; Research; and Environmental Management (of waste, energy, water, biodiversity and green areas, mobility and infrastructure).

As our institution has a long way implementing environmental criteria to its campus planning and management, the program is currently strengthening its Community Engagement and Social Outreach spheres, without this meaning a reduction in the implementation of new strategies related to campus management and research.

Some of our most significant initiatives are:

1. **Living Classroom:** In what we call “*Aula Viva*” we create spaces that favor environmental education, research and social cohesion within our community members. This project is led by the Chemistry and Biology department with the support of the Facilities Office and the institutional volunteering program “Univoluntarios”.
2. **Participation and sensitization activities:** Our program has been constantly developing educative, participative and awareness activities. Some of them are: Photo-Marathon Ecocampus Uninorte; the consolidation of an environmental students group; and Environmental Volunteering Plan (in two years two international volunteers have worked with the program).
3. **Biodiversity:** In association with the Botanical and Zoological Foundation of Barranquilla the Chemistry and Biology Department of our university carried out in 2013 a one year project to characterize the fauna and flora of the campus and develop strategies for its social appropriation. The information generated by the research has been updated by teachers and students of classes as Biology, Flora of the tropical dry forest and Birds of the Colombian Caribe. Also, the program financed and lead to the creation of a Guide of the campus birds, a book that took as an input the observations made by teachers and students. All this is complemented with the efforts made by students and teachers through the “Felinorte Program” which creates I+D+i projects related to the specie-ecosystem relations in our campus and constantly develops activities oriented to guarantee the wellness of the animals on campus.
4. **Research:** Ecocampus Uninorte frames the consolidation of a strategic research line in “Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services”, currently recognized and supported by our institution’s research department.
5. **Environmental Management:** In terms of solid waste management the Facilities Office developed a project for the construction of a Solid Waste Collection Center, leading a nationwide project at universities. This office also runs strategies for water recycling and reuse, energy saving and maintenance of a high degree of forestation on campus.

Our goals

- Guarantee harmony between the campus operation and the biodiversity that it supports in the surrounding area and, of course, the university community.
- Contribute to the formation of a community increasingly more informed, aware and willing to take action on the environmental challenges of the region.
- Offer an example of responsible behavior towards the environment that can be useful and replicable by any city, organization, university or citizen.

Obstacles and solutions

Obstacles	Solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of knowledge about the environmental progress and activities undertaken inside the institution and duplication of efforts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of a committee integrated by representatives of the environmental stakeholders inside the university.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of activities that require special tools or permission for campus intervention or exploration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication and collaborative work with the corresponding offices in charge of campus management.

Performance and results

Between 2015 and 2016 more than 1500 students, staff members and guests have visited our “Living Classroom” and participated in educative processes and practical sessions. Since 2014 we have developed a “Mangrove restoration” project through which students and staff members have collaborated to sow around 1200 mangrove trees in a natural park affected by illegal burning nearby our campus. Approximately 70 students, staff members and guests have participated in the activity since 2014. Besides this, since last year students and staff members helped to create the first community garden on campus, activity that promoted the enrolment of near 100 students and also the consolidation of the first network of urban farmers of Barranquilla, which reunited and made visible the most remarkable sustainable agriculture projects in the city. The network has developed two meetings since then with a participation of approximately 60 people, from university and school students to staff members, guests and kids.

Benefits have been reflected also on our campus biodiversity. The study led in 2013 generated valuable information concerning “what we have” on campus, specifically trees and animal species (terrestrial vertebrates). This knowledge has been used for administrative decision making (as we know the exact location of every tree on campus, Facilities office can make decisions related to green zones management and tree welfare) and to launch educative and sensitization activities with the community (e.g. our photography contest has helped 160 professional and amateur photographers to learn about some of the most common and distinctive trees and animals on campus).

In terms of Research, the efforts held on this topic have resulted in the consolidation of the first Caribbean Biodiversity Research Center.

About environmental management, concerning waste management the construction of the collection center allowed in 2015 to increment the recyclable material in an 80% (67.1 metric tons on waste were recycled), as well as decrease in a 70% the volume of waste delivered to landfills. Besides this, for years recyclable waste has been sold to a union of ex informal recyclers and organic waste to an enterprise dedicated to produce organic fertilizer (about 11.9 metric tons in 2015).

The future

Lessons learned

- In order to achieve sustainability in higher education institutions academy and administration must work hand in hand: Correct environmental management of the campus won't be possible if the university community is not involved in the process and, equally, environmental education won't be effective if campus itself does not work as an example of good environmental practices.

2. Easily replicable initiatives such as restoration and urban agriculture projects proved to be great platforms for environmental education and also created valuable spaces for social cohesion within the university community.

3. Through some of the activities of the program we found out that there's a natural interest from university community members, especially students, to take part in environmental projects and be informed about the different environmental problems occurring in their territory. New generations really want to make positive changes on the planet.

Sharing your project

One of the main objectives of the program is to make visible the progress reached by the university on the topic. We have achieved this mainly by creating and disseminating information on the web through social media and an official web page where people can read more about the program, the activities undertaken and, what's more important, how to join them. Also, projects like "Mangrove Restoration" have had coverage in local media through newspapers and magazines.

Participating in national and international meetings on the subject is also one of the strategies that the program has been implementing to make visible its actions and share its successful experiences. We started last year by assisting at the II Colombian Forum of Universities and Sustainability celebrated in Bogotá, an event that allowed us to publish an article to share our experience in the Iberoamerican University Journal in Environment, Society and Sustainability (AMBIENS).

Sharing our progress and activities has increased the level of participation among the university community, has helped us to create new partnerships and has also improved the synchronization among the environmental stakeholders inside the institution.

What has it meant to your institution to be a GUPES Green Gown Award finalist?

Being a finalist is certainly a recognition of the efforts of every single person that once got involved in our activities motivated by the wish of making a positive change in the world. It would also celebrate the long commitment of our institution with the preservation of the environment and the sustainable development of our region.

Further information

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- For more information about the program, please visit: <http://www.uninorte.edu.co/web/ecocampus>