
Cutting emissions from air travel poses challenges

University could struggle to balance globalization, stability goals

By Nelly Desmarattes

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Air travel is responsible for releasing about 14 percent of all campus greenhouse gas emissions, according to a new report from the Center for Integrative Environmental Research.

About 43 percent of all transportation greenhouse gas emissions from July 2007 to June 2008 can be accounted for in air travel by faculty, staff and students, the Campus Greenhouse Gas Inventory Report revealed. About 30 percent of all air travel is comprised of students in study abroad programs, which were factored into the total travel emissions count for the first time, said Ramy Serour, a research assistant in CIER.

The university must therefore strike a delicate balance between globalizing the university and becoming a model of a sustainable campus, both of which are key points in the university's strategic plan, researchers said.

"It is challenging to balance these priorities, and certainly for things like study abroad, there is no substitute for being there in person," said Heather Lair, project manager for the Office of Sustainability. "But there are ways to reduce our travel footprint without compromising the educational and research aspects of our mission."

According to the study, the total campus emissions for the 2008 fiscal year — extending from July 2007 to July 2008 — there were 311,345 metric tons released, or the equivalent of emissions from about 52,590 cars.

Released two weeks ago, the report concluded that air travel emitted more than 42,000 metric tons of greenhouse gases during the same fiscal year. In total, nearly 95 percent of the university's greenhouse gas emissions in 2008 could be attributed to energy and transportation.

To calculate the amount of greenhouse gas emitted by air travel, researchers calculated the distance traveled by faculty and staff for business reasons, the Athletic Department and students in study abroad programs, which contributed 30 percent of all air travel, Serour said.

To cut down on these emissions, the Office of Sustainability is issuing possible solutions to the air

travel conundrum.

One main target for reduction is faculty and staff air travel, Serour said. Emerging technologies like videoconferencing would eliminate the need to travel for interviews, training and meetings and would help reduce emissions, he said. The university has eight on-campus locations that are available for videoconferencing.

“Faculty and staff should make use of available technology like videoconferencing instead of traveling,” Serour said. “We have to promote the idea because a lot of people are not even aware of the facilities we have available.”

Another way to reduce air travel emissions would be for the university to focus on study abroad programs closer to the U.S. instead of in distant places like China and Australia, Lair said.

The new report is a revised version of a flawed report from last year that was created to fulfill biannual report requirements instituted by the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment, which the university is a part of.

The 2009 report focuses on the 2008 fiscal year and modifies the information released last year on the 2002 to 2007 fiscal years. The study used a new and more accurate system to calculate the greenhouse emissions from transportation that changed the way commuting and air travel was calculated.

The study was conducted by the CIER with the support of the Office of Sustainability and the Department of Environmental Science.

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