# Sustainable Practices and LEED Certification

## AT SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

BY DAVID VINSON, PhD

Located approximately five miles south of the vibrant metropolitan area of Birmingham, Alabama, Samford University is Alabama's top-ranked private university. Its alumni include more than 60 members of the U.S. Congress, two U.S. Supreme Court justices, and a Secretary of State, in addition to recipients of the Pulitzer and Nobel Peace prizes. This is a remarkable output given the modest size of Samford's student body (currently 5,700+), and it serves as a testament to the university's long-standing culture of preparing its students for success following graduation.

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Its 180-acre campus is home to more than 50 Georgian-Colonial buildings and has been cited by multiple sources as one of the most beautiful campuses in America. Samford is also committed to advancing sustainability by identifying areas for improvement, collaborating across campus to support green initiatives, programs, and progress, and providing leadership and guidance for sustainability efforts.

In November of 2022, Samford's Office of Sustainability partnered with its local environmental commission in the Birmingham suburb of Homewood to host its annual Green Skies initiative. The Green Skies initiative is an ongoing project to rebuild Homewood's tree canopy. Volunteers planted hundreds of tree seedlings and other vegetation with the goals of improving stream bank erosion and increasing tree diversity. The program aligns with Samford's sustainability mission, which benefits the environment and functions as an educational tool for college and visiting high school students. The Green Skies initiative allows for Samford to be recognized by the Alabama Forestry Commission as a Tree Campus USA university, a distinction it has earned by meeting five core standards for effective campus forest management: the establishment of a tree advisory committee, evidence of a campus tree care plan, dedicated expenditures for its campus tree program, an Arbor Day observance, and sponsorship of student service-learning projects. Samford has even developed a plan for repurposing and integrating into new facilities wood that been removed due to construction.

The university's Office of Sustainability also offers grants to members of the community who aspire to grow awareness for sustainability and cultivate a sustainable culture on campus. In 2023, a grant was awarded to Dr. Clara Darling, a professor in the Department of Nutrition, to develop Samford's Wellness Garden. Students who participated in the project gained invaluable knowledge about stewardship of their environments. Students learned how to take care of soil by adopting regenerative techniques such as planting flowers that provide food for natural pollinators. A growing practice essential to conservation and sustainable practices in farming, regenerative agriculture teaches students sustainability principles on a small scale, which then empowers them to understand environmental stewardship on a much larger scale.

### LEED Certification of Samford's Campus Recreation, Wellness and Athletic Complex

Samford's commitment to extending its sustainability efforts is perhaps most evident in the renovation and construction of its new Campus Recreation, Wellness and Athletic Complex. The university is pursuing Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, a globally recognized symbol of sustainability achievement, energy efficiency, and environmental stewardship. The $65 million venture is the largest capital project in Samford's history, one inspired by campus-wide recognition

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that students look to the university to provide opportunities to lead a healthy lifestyle. The project will provide ideal options for physical fitness, recreation, counseling, and health services, all of which can facilitate student development in mind, body, and spirit. Expected to be completed prior to the start of the Fall 2024 semester, the complex includes investments in four separate buildings totaling 165,000 square feet. Students will enjoy completely redesigned basketball courts, a new multi-use court, studios for fitness classes, an e-sports studio, dance studios, state-of-the-art weight and cardio machines, a multi-purpose workout area, a coffee house, a 24-hour convenience store, and lounge areas. Student-athletes will benefit from a fully refurbished facility with new training spaces for teams. The complex will likewise encompass a 20,000 square feet recreation and event space, a suspended indoor track, sound and staging to host campus events, a catering kitchen, covered outdoor athletic space, as well as a covered balcony that overlooks Samford football's home of Bobby Bowden Field, located in F. Page Seibert Stadium. It is an enormous undertaking, and the historic project will not only enhance student wellness and life on campus but also aid in student recruitment and retention.



Achieving LEED certification for its Recreation, Wellness and Athletic Complex is an utmost priority at Samford, one signaling the university's dedication to creating a more sustainable campus. That Samford's mission also aligns with the city of Birmingham's Green New Deal campaign—which aims to develop a people-driven, justice-first climate action plan for the region—illustrates how a small, private university can positively impact its surrounding communities. The new complex will be among the first set of buildings on campus to earn LEED certification. Accordingly, Samford has integrated multiple sustainability features including open vegetated spaces (as opposed to standard roofing and parking materials), exterior fixtures that reduce light pollution, low-flow plumbing fixtures, and more efficient, enhanced indoor air mechanical systems and controls.

### Samford's Infrastructure Initiatives

The Recreation, Wellness and Athletic Complex is by no means the only example of Samford's adoption of green practices in the construction and improvement of its buildings. A plan for new residence halls, first presented in the Samford Horizons campus master plan, will implement similar practices ranging from energy saving equipment to green waste management. Samford has entered a multi-year, multi-phased partnership with Johnson Controls, Inc., a global leader in the manufacture and promotion of energy-efficient technologies. In support of the campus master plan, Samford and JCI have created a comprehensive campus infrastructure improvement program to improve the instructional

atmosphere. Through this program, Samford will implement necessary infrastructure and efficiency improvements across campus. The university has already rebuilt its chill water plant, modified much of its lighting campuswide to LED, replaced plumbing fixtures to reduce water consumption, and installed over 1,000 energy-efficient windows. The overarching goal is to generate significant energy savings while reducing the university's carbon footprint by more than 15,000 tons. Complementary strategies include decreasing water consumption on campus by more than 20 million gallons and promoting financial stability by using directed savings to fully fund the initiatives. The plan is expected to generate more than $1.65 million in savings annually.

### The Stewardship of All Resources

Samford's picturesque campus is an essential component of university life, one that impacts students, faculty, and staff alike. The Office of

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Sustainability emphasizes that efficient maintenance of Samford's buildings, facilities, and grounds is foundational to the campus community's well-being. The university's dedication to sustainability is an extension of this philosophy. In its stewardship of all available resources, Samford has embraced sustainable development to address the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Samford understands that environmental stewardship gives each of us a meaningful role in guiding nature in a positive direction, and further, that environmental stewardship is a fundamental, ethical responsibility of university leadership. Its implementation of regenerative agriculture, student outreach programs, Green Skies initiative, and certainly its commitment to developing LEED-certified buildings all illustrate why Samford rightly stands as a model for other institutions as they may endeavor to transform their campuses into healthy and sustainable environments.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** David Vinson, PUPN staff writer, has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, husband, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.

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