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Powering Purpose

HOW THE CAMPUS CHALLENGE IS TRANSFORMING UNIVERSITY RECREATION

BY CONTRIBUTED BY SPORTS ART

From student-led grants to energy-generating fitness equipment, colleges are turning recreation centers into high-impact hubs for sustainability, engagement, and institutional value.

Across higher education, the role of campus recreation is evolving. No longer confined to fitness and wellness alone, recreation centers are becoming powerful platforms for student engagement, institutional identity, and, perhaps most importantly, sustainability leadership.

At the intersection of these priorities is the SportsArt Campus Challenge, an initiative that is redefining how universities activate their missions through recreation spaces.

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By combining grant funding for student-led sustainability initiatives with sweepstakes awards of energy-generating fitness equipment, the program is helping campuses transform intention into action and ideas into measurable impact.

Now in its third year, the Campus Challenge has grown into a catalyst for change, empowering students, administrators, and recreation professionals to rethink what's possible when wellness and sustainability converge.

A Program Built for Impact

The Campus Challenge operates on a simple but powerful premise: give campuses the tools and resources to bring sustainability to life.

Through its dual-entry model, the program offers both competitive grants, ranging from $2,500 to $10,000, and sweepstakes prizes that award ECO-POWR™ energy-generating cardio equipment to campus recreation centers.

This structure is intentional. Grants fuel grassroots innovation, often led by students and sustainability organizations, while the equipment transforms recreation spaces into visible demonstrations of environmental stewardship.

"The Campus Challenge empowers students and administrators to take an active role in sustainability while rethinking how fitness spaces contribute to a larger mission," said Ruben Mejia, Executive Vice President of SportsArt Americas.

That "larger mission" is one most universities know well: creating environments that support student success, foster community, and reflect institutional values, including a growing commitment to sustainability.

Turning Student Ideas into Institutional Change

For many campuses, the most transformative aspect of the Campus Challenge is its emphasis on student-led initiatives.

At Seattle University, a 2026 grant recipient, the program is helping launch a student sustainability fund designed to remove one of the biggest barriers to progress: access to

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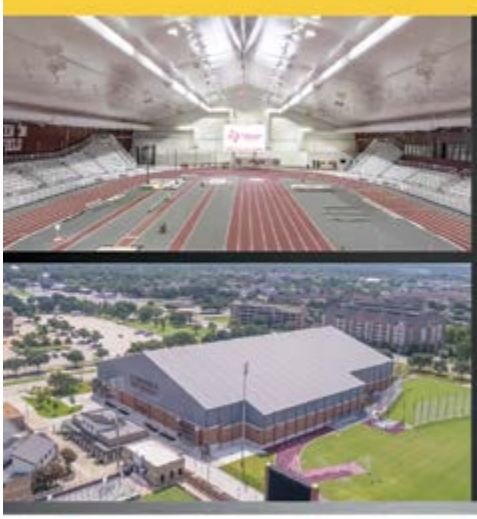
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The initiative will provide small-scale funding for student organizations to implement greener practices, from hosting sustainable events to improving procurement decisions.

The idea emerged from a simple observation: sustainability is often limited not by interest, but by affordability.

Student leaders recognized that clubs and organizations frequently default to less sustainable options due to budget constraints. By lowering the barrier to entry, the new fund aims to make sustainability accessible across campus, including for groups not traditionally focused on environmental issues.

"This funding allows us to bring that mission to life by empowering students across campus to make more sustainable choices," said Jacob Caddali, a student sustainability delegate.

From Pilot Projects to Scalable Models

At Wayne State University, the Campus Challenge is driving systems-level change through a zero-waste athletics initiative focused on reducing landfill waste at basketball games.

With a goal of achieving a 90 percent diversion rate, the project includes waste audits, behavior analysis, and student-led composting and recycling efforts. Early results show a diversion rate of approximately 50 percent, which is proof of concept for a scalable model.

"Through partnerships with campus groups and local organizations, we're tackling issues like food waste and landfill diversion in a way that reflects both our responsibility and our opportunity to create change," said Wayne State student Dylan McNay.

Operational Sustainability Meets Campus Engagement

At Wilfrid Laurier University, sustainability is being addressed from both operational and strategic angles, ranging from compostable game-day materials to infrastructure modernization.

"This grant is a catalyst for what we believe can be a transformative shift, creating a roadmap for sustainability that is both practical and impactful," said Chad Van Dyk, Manager Business & Service Operations, Wilfrid Laurier University.

Across these institutions, a common thread has emerged: sustainability is most effective when it is embedded into daily campus life and not treated as a standalone initiative.

Where It All Comes Together: Recreation as a Visibility Engine

If grants drive innovation behind the scenes, the sweepstakes component brings sustainability front and center into one of the most visible and highly trafficked spaces on campus: the recreation center.

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At Pacific Lutheran University, the 2026 Grand Prize sweepstakes winner, that visibility is exactly what makes the impact so powerful.

"At PLU, sustainability is something that's consistently talked about and embedded across departments," said Rob Thompson, Associate Athletic Director for Recreation, Pacific Lutheran University. "When we saw the Campus Challenge, it felt like a great opportunity to bring in new sustainable, green-friendly fitness equipment that would directly benefit our students and campus community."

For Thompson, the value isn't just in the equipment itself, it's in what it represents.

"I think it helped reinforce that sustainability is a shared value across campus, including within our fitness and recreation spaces," Thompson added. "The bigger impact will really come once students see and experience the new equipment. It makes sustainability tangible and directly connected to their everyday use."

That concept of making sustainability tangible is central to the Campus Challenge model.

From Concept to Connection

ECO-POWR™ equipment converts human energy into usable electricity, allowing students to see the direct impact of their workouts in real time. At PLU, that feature is expected to resonate strongly.

"The ECO-POWR™ feature that converts usage into clean, renewable energy is something I think students will really connect with and get excited about," Thompson said.

This type of engagement is difficult to achieve through policy or messaging alone. It requires an experience, which is something recreation spaces are uniquely positioned to deliver.

"Campus recreation plays a really important role because it's such a high-traffic, highly visible space for students," Thompson added. "Bringing that same sustainability mindset into the fitness center helps extend that culture even further across campus."

A Shared Challenge: Access and Resources

Despite growing interest in sustainability, many institutions, particularly smaller private universities, face a common barrier: funding.

"One of the biggest challenges is access to resources for higher-cost sustainable upgrades," Thompson said. "Programs like the Campus Challenge help bridge that gap by creating opportunity and momentum."

This aligns directly with what student leaders are experiencing on campuses like Seattle University, where funding limitations often dictate decision-making.

By addressing both student-led ideas and institutional infrastructure the Campus Challenge creates a more complete pathway to progress.

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Activation in Action Across Campuses

Other sweestakes winners are already demonstrating how this plays out in practice.

At the University of South Alabama, ECO-POWR™ steppers are being integrated into a broader engagement strategy, complete with signage and programming that highlights the energy generated during workouts.

"The ECO-POWR™ Steppers are a perfect fit for our rec center and will allow us to highlight how individual actions can contribute to collective change," said Daphne Tyson, Director of Campus Recreation and Wellness at South Alabama.

At Lafayette University, the addition of ECO-POWR™ rowers has energized both the facility and student interest in sustainability. "Students are excited to see our rec center align with the university's larger sustainability goals," said Tyler Weiss, Associate Director of Fitness, Lafayette University.

And at Pearl River Community College, the transformation has been immediate.

"Our Wellness Center now has a new energy and sense of excitement," said Tara Rouse, Director of the Wellness Center at Pearl River.

Reimagining the Role of Campus Recreation

Taken together, these examples point to a broader shift: recreation centers are no longer just amenities, they are strategic assets.

They serve as:

- High-visibility platforms for institutional values
- Daily touchpoints for student engagement
- Living demonstrations of sustainability in action

"Campus recreation is evolving into a platform for purpose-driven engagement," Mejia said.

For universities, this evolution supports key priorities, from student recruitment and retention to ESG commitments and donor storytelling. For students, it creates a more meaningful connection to campus life.

A Blueprint for Private Universities

For private institutions in particular, the Campus Challenge offers a compelling model.

It demonstrates that:

- Sustainability initiatives don't have to start large
- Visible, experiential solutions drive engagement
- Cross-campus collaboration amplifies impact

Thompson's advice reflects this pragmatic approach: "Lean into what already exists on your campus and build from there," he said. "Start small with practical, visible changes that students can engage with. When people can see and experience sustainability in action, it becomes much more meaningful and lasting."

A Movement, Not Just a Program

Ultimately, the Campus Challenge is succeeding because it meets campuses where they are and helps them move forward. It empowers students as changemakers, equips recreation leaders with innovative tools, and gives institutions a powerful way to bring their sustainability missions to life.

"College students are taking the initiative to change our shared world, and the Campus Challenge demonstrates the importance of sustainability in their lives," Mejia said.

The Future of Campus Recreation Is Purpose-Driven

As sustainability becomes an increasingly central priority in higher education, the role of campus recreation will continue to expand. The question is no longer whether recreation spaces can support institutional goals, it's how effectively they can deliver on them.

Programs like the Campus Challenge are providing the answer. By turning workouts into energy, ideas into action, and spaces into statements, they are redefining what campus recreation can be: not just a place to exercise, but a place to engage, to educate, and to lead

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: SportsArt delivers innovative, sustainable fitness solutions for campus recreation and wellness facilities, including **ECO-POWR™**, energy-generating equipment that reduces operational costs. With premium cardio, strength, and rehab systems, SportsArt supports student health while advancing institutional sustainability goals.

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