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Grad students vie to make campus buildings greener

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Published: Tuesday, April 14, 2009

Updated: Tuesday, April 14, 2009

An ongoing competition at UT is focusing on making University buildings more energy-efficient.

Graduate students participating in the Competitive Energy Reduction project have been working since April 1 and will complete their projects in the next two weeks.

The project is sponsored by the UT chapter of Scientists & Engineers for America, whose mission is to ensure that government policy is based on scientific evidence. The chapter formed in January and is required to fulfill two projects that incorporate this semester's theme of energy.

"After brainstorming, we started looking at lab equipment and identified buildings that used a lot of energy or that we could have an impact on," said Jamie Vernon, a cell and molecular biology graduate student.

The competition put a five-member team at the Chemical and Petroleum Engineering Building and another at the Sarah M. and Charles E. Seay Building. Beginning April 1, the teams spent two weeks coming up with strategies for implementing energy-conservation methods in their buildings. Today, the teams will begin to use data from the power plant to improve their conservation ideas.

UTakeCharge, an energy conservation program adopted by the University, influenced the plan for conservation steps that influence people's habits.

"UTakeCharge addresses hardware in campus buildings, but not necessarily the impact of occupant behavior," Vernon said. "We realized that this was something we could do."

One example of excess energy consumption is leaving computers on, Vernon said.

"With 40,000 computers on campus, you could save \$40 per computer by implementing our techniques, amounting to a savings of over \$1.5 million in a year," Vernon said.

The team at the Chemical and Petroleum Engineering Building has focused on e-mails, flyers and face-to-face contact to encourage energy reduction among building occupants.

"Reactors, refrigerators, freezers, centrifuges and chemical hoods are all large pieces of equipment that people keep on and don't think about," said team leader Rebecca Knight, a plant biology graduate student. "If people think about this for just two weeks, I predict that energy conservation may be significant."

This idea translates into policy, Vernon said.

"What we've provided is an opportunity to stimulate conversation about things such as air conditioning, climate control and system-wide checks where there would be a regular policy of an audit system," Vernon said.

Chapter members hope that one day there will be a Web site that students could interactively view energy usage in their buildings. They also plan to expand UTakeCharge to all state universities in Texas through a Student Government resolution.

"Through the great cooperation we've had, small efforts have been amplified," Vernon said. "People are taking ownership in their behavior. It's important to get scientists and engineers involved in the policy-making process."

The winning team will be recognized at the end of the competition, which chapter members hope will encourage the adoption of small energy-conservation steps in other campus buildings.

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