Applying LEED to higher education projects

March 2026

What are the advantages of using LEED for institutions of higher education?

In addition to the benefits that are seen across all sectors (such as building and operating a resource-efficient, healthy building and the value of obtaining rigorous third-party certification) institutions of higher education have increasing pressure from prospective students and donors to demonstrate commitment to environmental sustainability.

The Princeton Review publishes the 50 Top Green Colleges recognizing and ranking sustainability efforts of institutions of higher education. One of the 10 questions that is covered in their rankings directly asks, "are school buildings that were constructed or underwent major renovations in the past three years LEED-certified?"

Since we debuted our *Green Guide* 14 years ago, we have also seen dramatic growth in the number of colleges committing to sustainability-related practices—from sourcing food from local purveyors to constructing LEED- certified buildings to making fossil fuel-free commitments," https://www.princetonreview.com/press/green-guide/press-release-2024

How can higher education projects earn LEED certification?

Higher Education projects can be certified under different LEED rating systems at various stages of the building's lifecycle.

- **LEED for Building Design and Construction (BD+C)**: New Construction and Major Renovation is the most appropriate rating type for buildings that are new construction or major renovation. At least 60% of the project's gross floor area must be complete by the time of certification and must include the entire building's gross floor area in the project. For manufacturing spaces, this may include areas dedicated to administrative, warehouse and distribution (if less than 60% of the total GFA), and production-related functions.
- **LEED for Operations and Maintenance (O+M)**: Existing Buildings can be applied to existing buildings that are fully operational and occupied for at least one year. The project may be undergoing improvement work or little to no construction and must include the entire building's gross floor area

How many projects in higher education are registered and certified under LEED?

As of March 2026, there are over 9,616 LEED-certified and registered higher education projects representing over 1.1Billion square feet (106 Million square meters) of built spaces. This includes projects certified through the one-off process and those certified through multiple building applications such as campus.

What issues are unique to projects in higher education?

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Many campuses do not have whole building meters for energy and water use as their buildings are connected to a larger energy/water loop. To pursue LEED all individual buildings must install energy and water meters (for indoor water use) at the building level. Irrigation water use can be prorated and does not need to be metered at the building level.

How does LEED address the unique challenges of higher education projects?

LEED v5 is the most current version of the rating system and is available for all commercial projects pursuing certification under New Construction, Core and Shell, Commercial Interiors and Existing Buildings. Many of the strategies developed for higher education projects under previous versions of LEED, have been adapted for LEED v5 or can be found in the new Project Priorities and Innovation credit category. Credits in this category offer greater flexibility to address unique project contexts and priorities, including typology, culture, location, areas of innovation and individual performance objectives. Sector specific Project Priority credits are continuously being developed and will be released in the Project Priority Library for use.

How does the Arc platform relate to higher education?

The LEED v4.1 O+M rating system offers a unique performance-based pathway to certify your existing buildings and interior spaces that use Arc, a state-of-the-art platform designed to collect, manage and benchmark your building across five performance categories: energy, water, waste, transportation, and human experience.

And what does this mean for higher education? LEED v4.1 can be used to compare projects to other similar facilities pursuing high-performance measures from around the world. LEED v4.1 O+M is not dependent on space type so falling into an ENERGY STAR space type category is no longer necessary.

Campus facility managers and other stakeholders can continuously monitor the data and make informed decisions to optimize the building performance based on real-time data and analytics. This performance pathway can then be used to certify and recertify the project every 3 years. Learn more.

LEED v5 BD+C, ID+C and O+M rating systems allow for all space types to certify utilizing the new Arc experience, which offers fluidity and flexibility for users. All performance, certification and reporting will be delivered in one place.

How can multiple buildings and structures in a campus setting earn LEED certification?

Higher education projects often operate on a large scale with multiple buildings spread across a single site. All the buildings, people, and processes are interconnected with each other. To address this, the LEED Campus Guidance was introduced for projects that are on a shared site under the control of a single entity. Its application to LEED projects in higher education represents the complexity and commonality of buildings and infrastructure on a site. LEED Campus Guidance is a useful tool for campuses with multiple buildings, common utilities, and campus-wide management policies. By utilizing LEED Campus Guidance, project teams can benefit from an increase in streamlined review

process, and reduced certification fees under the Master Site approach, leading to successful implementation of LEED projects.

What is LEED Lab and how does it relate to higher education?

LEED Lab is a multidisciplinary immersion course that utilizes project-based learning and the built environment to educate and prepare students to become green building leaders and sustainability-focused citizens. In the course, students assess the performance of existing facilities on campus and choose one building where they will facilitate the LEED O+M process with the goal of certifying the facility.

To be recognized as having a LEED Lab and receive the LEED Lab benefits from USGBC and GBCI, institutions commit to the following:

1. Offer the LEED Lab course for credit. The instructor determines the number of credits earned for the work and the type of class (e.g. elective, special topics).
2. Register a LEED O+M project. The institution decides the location of the project. If an on-campus project is not possible, USGBC is amenable to having the students work on an off-campus project.

Students that successfully complete a LEED Lab course may take the LEED AP exam at a discounted rate.

Resources:

- LEED Lab Landing Page
- LEED Lab One Pager
- LEED Lab Curriculum Toolkit

What technical resources are available for higher education projects pursuing LEED?

Learn more about higher education and LEED as well as integrating green building into curriculum.

Where can I find owner profiles and case studies on higher education projects?

- Reuse and Renovation projects create thriving education spaces
- Boston University's Center for Computing and Data Sciences
- Case Study: UC Davis Peter J. Shields Library
- Case Study: Sustainability at Bentley University
- WSU Elson Floyd Cultural Center Social Equity Case Study
- Ball State Pilot Materials - Chevrolet Campus Clean Energy
- ASU brings a sustainable landscape to the student experience
- Georgia Tech Engineered Biosystem Building (EBB) - A Case Study

Does USGBC offer any education for project teams wanting to learn more about higher education facilities pursuing green building?

Yes! Check out the following sessions in the USGBC online course catalog:

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- Bringing New Life to Higher Education Campuses with Green Building
- Composting: A Biological Solution for University Composting Programs
- Every School Can Be Green: Platinum in Unexpected Places
- Healthy and Sustainable Purchasing for Schools
- Master Planning in Higher Education
- Certifying Buildings in Higher Education

Who can I contact for more information?

For more information about LEED and how it applies to higher education contact us.