



Applying LEED to higher education projects

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

In addition to benefits seen across all sectors—such as designing and operating resource-efficient, healthy buildings and obtaining rigorous third-party certification—institutions of higher education face increasing pressure from prospective students and donors to demonstrate a commitment to environmental sustainability. The Princeton Review publishes the Top 50 Green Colleges, recognizing and ranking sustainability efforts at institutions of higher education. One of the 10 questions in their ranking asks, “Are school buildings that were constructed or underwent major renovations in the past three years LEED-certified?” Since the Green Guide debuted 14 years ago, The Princeton Review has observed 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. See: <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 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 undergoing a major renovation. At least 60% of the project’s gross floor area (GFA) must be complete by the time of certification, and the entire building’s GFA must be included in the project. For manufacturing type buildings on campus, this may include areas dedicated to administrative, warehouse and distribution (if less than 60% of total GFA), and production related functions.
- LEED for Operations and Maintenance (O+M): Existing Buildings applies to 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 GFA.

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

As of June 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?

Many campuses do not have whole building energy and water meters because buildings are connected to larger district energy and/or water loops. To pursue LEED, individual buildings must have energy and water (indoor) meters at the building level. Irrigation water use may be prorated and does not need to be metered at the building level.

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

LEED v5 is the current version of the rating system and is available for commercial projects pursuing certification under New Construction, Core and Shell, Commercial Interiors, and Existing Buildings. Many strategies developed for higher education projects under previous versions of LEED have been adapted for LEED v5 or incorporated into 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 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 performance based pathway to certify existing buildings and interior spaces using [Arc](#), a platform designed to collect, manage, and benchmark building performance across five categories: energy, water, waste, transportation, and human experience. For higher education, LEED v4.1 enables comparisons to similar facilities pursuing high performance worldwide. 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 data and make informed decisions to optimize building performance with real time analytics. This performance pathway can be used to certify and recertify the project every three years. [Learn more.](#) [LEED v5 BD+C](#), [ID+C](#), and [O+M](#) rating systems allow all space types to certify using the new [Arc experience](#), with performance, certification, and reporting 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 and interconnected people, buildings, and processes. [LEED Campus Guidance](#) applies to projects on a shared site under the control of a single entity. It supports the complexity and commonality of campus buildings and infrastructure. Campuses with multiple buildings, common utilities, and campuswide management policies can streamline reviews and reduce certification fees under the Master Site approach, helping teams implement LEED efficiently.

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

LEED Lab is a multidisciplinary immersion course that uses project based learning and the built environment to prepare students to become green building leaders and sustainability focused citizens. Students assess the performance of existing facilities on campus and select 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 LEED Lab benefits from USGBC and GBCI, institutions commit to:

- Offer the LEED Lab course for credit. The instructor determines the number of credits and course type (e.g., elective, special topics).

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Register a LEED O+M project. The institution decides the project location. If an on campus project is not possible, students may work on an off campus project with USGBC's approval. Students who successfully complete LEED Lab 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:

- [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](#).