LEED certification gives UCSD students a hands-on learning experience

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Mision Bay Aquatic Center earns LEED EB: O&M Platinum certification thanks to hands-on work of students.

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Did you know that the Mission Bay Aquatic Center (MBAC) at UC San Diego is the largest waterfront instructional facility in the world? Well lucky for us, we now have another bragging right. MBAC recently achieved LEED EB: O&M Platinum certification, quite the milestone for both the students and faculty involved in the process. The best part about it? The certification was coordinated by only two staff members, with the help of over 30 student volunteers. As an active member of UCSD's USGBC Students group, I was fortunate to serve as the student lead on this amazing and unique project.

This project is interesting because MBAC is the only facility jointly owned and operated by UCSD and San Diego State University (SDSU). The two faculty members on the project, Glen Brandenburg, director of MBAC, and Michelle Perez, sustainability analyst at UCSD, suggested that the USGBC student groups at both schools work together to certify the project. Thus began the first joint LEED project between the two largest universities in San Diego County!As president of USGBC Students at UCSD, I was elated to hear about this project. I knew it was going to be an amazing experience, especially since the goal was to achieve LEED Platinum certification. We gathered 30 student volunteers from both schools who wanted to get involved for the professional experience they would certainly gain from working on a LEED project.

Over the next several months, we completed almost every credit possible in the LEED EB: O&M rating system. We worked on everything from diligently analyzing receipts for MBAC's exclusively-sustainable supplies, to demonstrating an ENERGY STAR score of 100, resulting from MBAC's highly efficient operations and use of renewable energy to include a 40.7kW photovoltaic system and solar water heating system.

We Skyped, emailed, texted, called, and met in person. Our bi-weekly meetings were Fridays at 5 p.m. and, believe it or not, students happily attended to present the results of their work and ask questions. We also worked on weekends. One weekend in particular we traveled one and a half hours away to Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve (SMER) to pull invasive weeds from the ground for 5 hours. The SMER event was a total hit, drawing about 25 students and resulting in compliance with Sustainable Sites Credit 5 – Protect or Restore Open Habitat. We all loved every aspect of the MBAC project, and many of the student volunteers later shared how beneficial the experience was to landing a job after graduation.

As student lead of MBAC, it was my job to coordinate the efforts of 30 students who were split into five teams, each working on different credits with different timelines, all while streamlining the interaction between the project manager, building director and student volunteers. I frequently found myself making decisions and handling situations to which I was not accustomed. Most of the time things worked well, sometimes they didn't. However, the experiences I gained in leadership, project management, communication and sustainability are truly invaluable to me now.

Our collective dedication to sustainability, project management efforts, and relentless work culminated in the final verdict received on April 2013 when we learned that MBAC earned LEED Platinum certification. It's difficult to express the amount of gratitude I have for being part of this LEED project. Not only did it give me the tools and connections to land a dream job four months before graduation, it gave me professional experiences far beyond most internships/project opportunities. I like to tell prospective members of USGBC Students at UC San

Diego that LEED touches upon every aspect of sustainability. Whether you are interested in drafting policies or analyzing HVAC systems, LEED has something for you. That was my experience and, I must say, it was a darn good one!

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