



The background features a stylized illustration of a white wind turbine on the left side, set against a light blue sky with soft, abstract shapes. Below the sky, there are rolling green hills and a white horizon line. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern, with a focus on environmental themes.

# The Community College Perspective in the Emerging

# green economy

By Leith Sharp

**A**lmost half of all students entering higher education now do so through the community college sector. These institutions are a trusted and vital source of education, training, and information for their communities. They are also at the front-line in our society's never ending battle to provide the skills and capacities necessary to ensure our economic, social and environmental well being.

One of today's most important battles involves preparing society for the emerging green economy. The United States is falling behind in realizing the job growth potential that other nations are realizing. Many cost-effective and viable green innovations are failing to take hold due to a lack of related training and education. By addressing this problem, the community college sector will provide a vital stimulus to the green economy.

In Illinois, the community college presidents have created one of the most important green economy initiatives in the country, the **Illinois Green Economy Network**, a partnership of the 48 community colleges of Illinois. See a video clip of our Presidents talking about IGEN at [www.igencc.org](http://www.igencc.org).



This Network brings community colleges together to expand employment opportunities, improve human and environmental health, foster community engagement and accelerate market competitiveness to drive Illinois's emerging green economy. It also provides a vital statewide platform for partnering with government, business, trade organizations, and many others.

Through this Network our 48 colleges are collaborating to offer large numbers of people clear and accelerated education and training pathways into the green economy so that they can take charge of their own future, whatever their age or profession. We are also transforming our own colleges into demonstration facilities and community models for energy efficiency, green building, renewable energy, organic landscaping, waste minimization, and much more. This is the first president-led and statewide community college network of its kind in the U.S.

The green economy is a larger system or context that will drive a variety of changes in our society, one of which will relate to workforce migration and green job growth.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF THE ILLINOIS GREEN ECONOMY NETWORK

All 48 Illinois community college presidents have signed on as members. A Steering Committee of five presidents and representatives from the Illinois Community College Board provide oversight. IGEN is co-chaired by President Jerry Weber (Kankakee Community College) and President Georgia Costello (Southwestern Illinois College).

IGEN has a coordinating team working across all 48 colleges. We have established 12 college sustainability centers to date with full-time professional staff in each college structured to dedicate 70 percent of their time on the college and 30 percent on Network-related program and service development. We hope to continue to expand the number of centers in coming years. Each sustainability center acts as a hub of sustainability coordination for workforce development, campus, community, and curriculum greening activities. In addition to our college sustainability centers, IGEN has three green economy centers established in three colleges. Green Econ-

omy Centers have a core focus on green workforce and green economic development. For our remaining 36 colleges, IGEN has provided seed funding to each in so they can participate in Network programs, training activities, data collection, and marketing efforts. Our current base annual cost is around \$2.5 million. In FY11, with the support of Illinois Governor Quinn, we received state funding from the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity along with two federal appropriations. Going forward, we hope secure additional state funding and support from the utilities of Illinois. In addition, we have applied for a variety of federal grants while also working with corporate sponsors.

#### WHY IS IGEN IMPORTANT TO ILLINOIS?

Growing the green economy of this state will have a substantial positive impact on job growth. Data from several states (CA, OR, MI, WA) show that green jobs account for 3 or more percent of their workforce, and that this percentage has been growing rapidly. Illinois is not yet benefiting enough from this opportunity, and some data actually shows a loss of green jobs in this state.

Through IGEN, we are positioning our colleges to drive the green economy by providing statewide access to affordable training and education for the green economy. In a recent survey we found that our 48 colleges are already offering over 412 green economy related certificates, associated degrees, and courses related to energy efficiency (weatherization, auditing etc.), renewable energy (geothermal, solar, wind, biofuels), environmental engineering, green construction, organic farming, green auto mechanics, green IT, green fuels, and more. Prior to the creation of the Network, we found several colleges in the state developing new wind technician certificate programs or environmental engineering associate degrees without knowing about one another. The Network can now connect faculty to one another and support collaborative efforts to develop courses, offer accelerated and flexible online programs with stronger employer involvement and more entrepreneurial content to help grow the state's small business base.

Beyond the creation of new courses and credential, the Network of collaborating college are now infusing sustainability and green economy content into all curriculum, enabling our students to enact informed consumer, workplace, and civic choices. In July 2010 we ran a highly successful train-the-trainer pilot in which we trained 14 college teams to offer a "Green your Curriculum" training program for their faculty. Within three months more than 130 faculty had received the training and have since integrated the new content into their existing courses to the benefit of thousands of students. This pilot will be expanded in the coming semester and is likely to reach a much larger number of faculty again. Visit [www.igencc.org/gyc](http://www.igencc.org/gyc) for more information on this program.

The Network has enabled our colleges to start convening businesses, unions, professional associations, schools, churches,





and community groups within each college district to foster engagement and leadership in growing the green economy of the state. One community college has established a working green committee of over 120 representatives from their local community and businesses. Another has convened a mayoral group focusing on greening the region.

All of our collaborating colleges are working to utilize their campus as sustainability teaching and demonstration facilities, setting an example for the one million people that come through our gates each year. Within our Network, we have LEED platinum certified buildings, one of the largest geothermal systems in the U.S., wind turbines, solar voltaic systems, working organic farms, energy efficient building, recycling and composting programs, electric vehicles, and more. We have an example of almost everything that is possible in relation to greening the campus, but prior to IGEN nobody knew and nobody was sharing the lessons learned. We are sharing these best practices across the collaborating colleges through a variety of peer-to-peer exchanges including webinars, retreats, case studies, and focused training efforts. Recently the Network established a dedicated task force to drive the integration of sustainability into all college strategy plans and campus master plans.

IGEN is less than one year old, and the successes have been many already. We hope that this model will open the way for funding of state networks of this kind in other states. The small investment required to unleash the collaborative potential of the community college sector is one of the best investments the nation can make at this time.

**THE STRATEGY OF IGEN**

America has a long history of meeting its greatest challenges from the community level on up. This is why we are working to drive green economic growth from the regional level up by addressing the four areas detailed below.

**Green Workforce Development:** *Drive Job Growth in the Green Economy*

*Key Strategies:*

1. Provide a variety of new green workforce related online and class taught courses
2. Expand demand for new green services & products by working directly with large businesses and targeted sectors across Illinois to identify and remove related training & education barriers
3. Identify and support key policy instruments that could drive demand for green services & products
4. Support growth in small green business sector to meet demand (In California, 70 percent of new green jobs have been created in the small business sector)
5. Work with business groups to convene new green economy related partnerships and programs

**Green Curriculum:** *Preparing Students for Their Role in the Green Economy*

*Key Strategies:*

1. Institute ‘Green Your Curriculum’ Training for faculty in all Colleges
2. Provide incentives to all faculty to integrate relevant sustainability and green economy content into existing courses (There is potential for it to be integrated into almost all courses)
3. Run an annual state conference to convene faculty, students, and employers to drive progress in greening the curriculum across the state (Plans are underway for the inaugural conference to occur in June, 2011)

**Green Campuses:** *Demonstration of the Green Economy in Action*

*Key Strategies:*

1. Institute a targeted energy efficiency program for the Department of Commerce and Economy Opportunity to drive the energy use of our colleges down by ~10 percent within three years
2. Work with campus staff in our 48 member colleges to institute a large number of green campus projects and programs, from green buildings, renewable energy and smart grid applications, electric vehicles, local and organic food, green cleaning, public transportation and more (Almost all of our colleges have signed the Illinois Governors Sustainability Compact)



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**Green Communities:** *Engaging the Community as Partners in the Green Economy*

*Key Strategies:*

1. Our colleges will be the convening platform for a variety of new green community partnerships and programs aimed at fostering engagement and leadership in greening our communities
2. Provide training and education for the community
3. Work in partnership with utilities to drive community energy efficiency

**A NEW ROLE FOR THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SECTOR**

The green economy and green jobs are often discussed as if they are the same thing. It is important to distinguish between them. The green economy is a larger system or context that will drive a variety of changes in our society, one of which will relate to workforce migration and green job growth.

The relatively slow progress in producing new green jobs is largely the result of our collective failure to ensure that enough of the right conditions, incentives, and drivers are in place at once before pressing forward with any one of the key conditions. In some communities, for example, colleges have done their part in training new solar technicians, only to find that jobs are not there for students because of a lack of regulatory incentives and consumer priorities.

In other communities, political and institutional leaders have pressed for green policy/regulation, still only to find that local business and the general community is not educated adequately to support and/or enact them successfully. In still other communities, businesses have provided new green services only to find that consumers and institutions do not have the right capabilities or training to change their practices fast enough or they are unwilling to make the upfront investment regardless of a guaranteed good payback. The invaluable lesson to take from these frontier failures is how crucial it is to build up enough of the right conditions before pressing too far forward in any one arena.

For the community college sector to play a meaningful role in driving the emerging green economy to produce green jobs for our students, we must acknowledge and embrace the interdependence that exists between these efforts. If we continue to view our role in the emerging green economy only by way of providing training for a green workforce that may or may not be in demand, we will risk setting our students up for failure.

Initiatives like IGEN are emerging within the community college sector to implement a broader role in transforming communities through: market innovation and demonstration, community values, education and training, financial investment, policy, and regulation. At the national level, the American Association of Community Colleges recently

launched its SEED center, an online platform for sharing curriculum for the green economy, igniting a new level of national collaboration amongst community colleges. Learn more at [www.theseedcenter.org](http://www.theseedcenter.org) and in the article on page 31.

I firmly believe that the community college is one of America's greatest inventions. The two things that stand out amongst their many favorable attributes are their commitment to building great communities and their ability to foster meaningful and productive collaboration to the benefit of all. These attributes will be the foundation of enormous success as our community college sector takes its rightful place as a central player in the nation's emerging green economy. It is a great honor to work with them. ☺

Leith Sharp is the founding executive director of the Illinois Green Economy Network, Grayslake, IL. Prior to taking on this role, she was the founding director of the Harvard Green Campus Initiative (now the Office for Sustainability). E-mail her at [Isharp@clc.illinois.edu](mailto:Isharp@clc.illinois.edu). This is her first article for *Facilities Manager*.

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