

MIT community takes the Earth Day Challenge

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Earth Day has been reinvented at MIT. The Institute has a long history of Earth Day fairs, film series, colloquia, and other activities designed to celebrate the day and spread information about energy and the environment. This year marked a shift from providing information to providing an organized program to motivate green action within the MIT community with the pilot of the [MIT Earth Day Challenge](#) [1]. MIT students and staff participated in the Challenge to "take action, earn points, and win prizes".

Between April 1 and April 25, nearly 100 participants engaged in 151 individual green actions. Participation in the pilot program surpassed the Challenge organizers' expectations and established an excellent foundation for future Earth Days.

The Earth Day Challenge was structured around a series of action projects sponsored by student organizations, departments, community groups, and businesses. With 32 sponsored action projects to choose from, participants engaged in activities that ranged from taking public transportation to joining a Charles River cleanup to performing an energy upgrade of a local community building, earning green points and prizes along the way. Due to its decentralized design, the Challenge enabled many organizations to more actively contribute to Earth Day at MIT than in past years. The focus on individual action through a behavioral challenge was inspired in part by other successful MIT community challenges such as [getfit](#) [2], and the program provided a unique opportunity for individuals to have a positive environmental impact on the MIT campus and nearby community.

The [MIT Energy Initiative](#) [3] sponsored a particularly relevant project for the Earth Day Challenge. On April 23, Andrew Revkin of the [New York Times Dot Earth blog](#) [4] presented a colloquium entitled *Building the #Knowosphere*: How new ways to share and shape ideas can help build durable progress on a finite planet. Revkin spoke of 21st century methods of communication and information-sharing designed to break boundaries and encourage action. The Challenge itself similarly provided a novel method for the MIT community to put environmental knowledge into action.

Many of the projects required individuals to take physical action. For example, participants in the Streamline Lab Recycling Signage project helped the [Environment, Health, & Safety Office](#) [5] (EHS) distribute new recycling labels to lab spaces and affix them to receptacles to help increase proper recycling of special materials such as glass chemical bottles and pipette tip boxes. Niamh Kelly, officer in the Hazardous Waste Program in EHS and sponsor of the project remarked, "The Earth Day Challenge presented a great way to add value to our lab recycling program and get new people involved in helping to create sustainable lab spaces."

After nearly a month of sustainable action projects, the Challenge culminated on April 26 with the Earth Day Bash, where participants, sponsors, and organizers

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celebrated Earth Day and their collective achievements. The six highest point earners were announced and awarded green prizes furnished by local businesses and organizations. First place winner, Jennifer Apell, graduate student in Civil and Environmental Engineering, received the grand prize of \$500 provided by the [Sustainability Program of the Environment, Health, and Safety Headquarters Office](#) [6] at MIT. "The Earth Day Challenge is a great program for informing the MIT community about how to participate in sustainable initiatives and inspires staff and students like myself to take part," Apell said.

The winners were:

- 1st Place (\$500 grand prize): Jennifer Apell, student, Civil and Environmental Engineering, 188 green points
- 2nd Place: Weijia Zhang, staff, David H. Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research, 155 green points
- 3rd Place: Irene Hu, student, Civil and Environmental Engineering, 126 green points
- 4th Place: Michelle Miller, staff, Libraries, 112 green points
- 5th Place: Gracie Dorneus, staff, Chemical Engineering, 70 green points
- 6th Place: Niamh Kelly, staff, Environment, Health, and Safety Office, 55 green points

The MIT Earth Day Challenge was organized by the Environment, Health & Safety Headquarters Office, the MIT Energy Initiative, the [Department of Facilities](#) [7], [Working Green](#) [8], and [Sustainability@MIT](#) [9] with the help of many action project sponsors. The organizers are now reflecting on participant feedback and lessons learned to prepare for the 2013 MIT Earth Day Challenge with an aim to encourage wider participation and increased action. William VanSchalkwyk, managing director of Environment, Health, and Safety, has seen many Earth Day celebrations at MIT. He looks forward to next year's Challenge and notes, "The MIT Earth Day Challenge was a great success. It creates a new paradigm for Earth Day and campus sustainability engagement that other universities and communities can model their celebrations on, encouraging action. We welcome new ideas and fresh energy as we look ahead to Earth Day 2013!"

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<http://www.ecnmag.com/news/2012/06/mit-community-takes-earth-day-challenge>

Links:

- [1] <http://web.mit.edu/earthday/>
- [2] <http://getfit.mit.edu>
- [3] <http://web.mit.edu/mitei>
- [4] <http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/>
- [5] <http://ehs.mit.edu/site/>
- [6] <https://ehs.mit.edu/site/sustainability>
- [7] <http://web.mit.edu/facilities/index.html>

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[8] <http://web.mit.edu/workinggreen/>

[9] <http://sustainabilityatmit.wordpress.com/>