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Alum gives \$5 million for environmental center

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The Williams' campus will be a little greener thanks to a \$5 million gift from Selim Zilkha '46 that will be put toward achieving the College's sustainability goals.

Shortly after his return to campus last year for his 60th reunion, Zilkha approached President Schapiro about his desire to give back to his alma mater. His motive, according to Schapiro, was not for the glory or the perpetuation of an already impressive legacy of environmental work in the business sector, but to exact the greatest impact possible on a college that Zilkha said he has never lost touch with. Coming just eight months after the Board of Trustees adopted sustainability and a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions as a College priority, Zilkha's gift will allow for a substantial leap in the College's ability to meet its goal of reducing its carbon footprint.

The money will fund the creation of a new center, along with an associated permanent director, to coordinate and oversee the various initiatives being taken by the College to reduce its emissions of greenhouse gases. Zikah's donation will also go towards sustainability programs including the study of energy conservation on campus, the purchase of cleaner fuels, the design and construction of sustainable building and the continuation of funding for the Center for Environmental Studies (CES). "This step represents the next exciting phase of Williams' commitment to environmental responsibility and builds upon long-standing and more recent commitments," said Stephanie Boyd, manager of special projects. Steve Klass, vice president of operations, added that the new center will focus cross-disciplinary sustainability initiatives and create an effective conduit for communicating information both internally and externally. "Leadership in this office will play an important centralized role as collaborator, integrator and information disseminator," Klass said.

The gift came in as news broke of the College's successful first steps in reducing emissions. According to a report on the College's 2007 fiscal year, there was a 23 percent reduction from 2006, a majority of which was achieved through purchasing cleaner energy and conserving energy in the heating plant and in dorms.

According to those involved in the implementation of the College's sustainability policy, the gift was hailed as a particularly exciting development. "I know that everyone who has been part of recent conversations with the Zilkhas feel similarly energized and humbled by the gift and by the family's interest in Williams' future," Klass said.

The story of Selim Zilkha '46 is an unusual one. Hailing from a prominent Middle Eastern banking family, Zilkha's family moved to America, where he received a B.A. in philosophy from the College in 1946. Having found success in finance and retail, Zilkha worked in the oil industry and moved into renewable energy in the late 1990s. Recently, he and his son Michael have been working together on converting biomass into energy.

"I care passionately about our planet and would like to protect it," Zilkha said. "Future graduates will hopefully leave with a very clear message and transmit sound environmental principles to the many people they come into contact with."