Letter to the Editor, Oberlin News Tribune
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Many in this community believe that the photovoltaic (PV) arrays associated with Oberlin College’s Adam Joseph Lewis Center for Environmental Studies annually generate more energy than the building consumes. It is no wonder that people believe this. The claim has appeared on the College’s web site, in its literature, in articles written by Oberlin College faculty, and is repeated in hundreds if not thousands of publications and web sites. The claim is so commonly repeated that it has become an integral part of modern green building mythology. Indeed, since 2007 the Lewis Center has been listed by the U.S. Department of Energy as the largest U.S. commercial zero energy building (ZEB) whose status is confirmed by actual performance data.

There’s just one problem – it isn’t true. Since its construction twelve years ago there is not one year in which the Lewis Center’s PV arrays have produced as much energy as the building has consumed. The building is not a zero energy building at all – it is a “ZEB wannabe.” Year after year the College has purchased electric energy from the City to meet the building’s energy demands. In 2011 alone the College purchased 70,000 kWh of electricity for the Lewis Center and its Annex – enough to power 6-10 homes.

From the beginning it was intended that the building would be powered by a PV array mounted on its roof – truly making it a ZEB. But the building consumed far more energy than projected and even after $250,000 of building improvements, the rooftop array provided, at best, half of the building’s energy. So in 2006, under the misguided notion that additional PV generation outside the footprint of the building could make it a ZEB, $1,000,000 was spent to construct a second, much larger PV array over the adjacent parking lot. With the construction of this PV parking pavilion Oberlin College Environmental Studies personnel who manage the building’s web-based dashboard energy display began claiming the building had finally become a net-energy exporter or ZEB. Data from this sophisticated energy monitoring system apparently obscured the simple truth found in the building’s monthly electric bills.

I became aware of the discrepancy between the Lewis Center electric billing records and its energy claims more than 18 months ago. I initially contacted the Environmental Studies Program Director, John Petersen, author of the dubious energy claims, and attempted to clarify the discrepancy. When this effort failed I worked with the College Dean in hopes that the College would resolve the matter and correct the public record. For months Mr. Petersen refused to answer questions while holding firm to his energy claims – even suggesting that his $200 electric meters were more accurate than those used by the City’s municipal power company. Finally in December Mr. Petersen conceded that his data and claims were incorrect and that the Lewis Center PV arrays, indeed, had never produced as much energy as the building annually consumed.

It was my expectation that the College would move swiftly to correct the public record. But this has not been the case. At my request false statements were quietly removed from the College’s web site but the College has issued no public retraction and has done essentially nothing to correct misinformation spread by numerous media outlets which this last five years obtained
their (false) information from Oberlin College sources. The College has not even informed its own faculty, staff, students or alumni of the false energy claim. Eight months after the College President and Dean were notified by Mr. Petersen that his energy claims were incorrect the Oberlin College Admissions Office continues to distribute materials which include these very claims. And during this same period national media outlets have released new articles perpetuating Oberlin College’s ZEB myth – most recently a 2012 *Scientific American* article – all while the College remains silent, reaping the marketing benefits of this false information. The College Administration may not be to blame for five years of false claims made by the Environmental Studies Program but with its continued silence the Administration takes responsibility for further propagation of this myth. (The College Administration informs me they are working on a story that “describes the Lewis Center energy profile in accurate and up-to-date terms.” I can’t wait to read it – seriously.)

At some point in the future the Lewis Center’s two PV arrays may produce more energy than the building consumes. That will be a positive development, but unsurprising since there has never been any question that any building, no matter how inefficient, can be powered by a sufficiently large PV array. But it will have no bearing on the central issues here which are ones of scientific integrity, competence, and transparency.

Why does any of this matter? Why does it matter that a vice presidential candidate claims to have run a marathon in three hours when it really took four, or that a television preacher claims to heal people with his touch when there is no medical evidence to support the claim? Is anyone really hurt by these lapses in truth?

The issues raised here have some importance for the Oberlin community. The people behind Oberlin College’s Lewis Center are seeking to expand its “success” to the entire Oberlin community through the *Oberlin Project*. Oberlin residents are already paying for this effort in the form of higher electric rates and lost productivity of city employees who devote a large fraction of their time to this project. These residents have a right to know the truth about the “success” on which the Oberlin Project builds and the credibility of the people behind it.

John H. Scofield