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Shower head giveaway helps Duke save water

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DURHAM - Darick Biondi and other Duke divinity students call it "Bedhead Tuesday," the one day a week they skip showering to help conserve water.

For the other six days of the week, Biondi and several of his classmates joined a slow but steady trickle of people lined up outside Duke Chapel on Monday to help make their showers a little more guilt-free.

University officials distributed 3,200 free, low-flow shower heads to Duke faculty, staff and off-campus students -- a nod to the region's continuing drought. The promise of saving an estimated 7,300 gallons of water a year per shower head, plus the irresistibility of getting something free, lured people in on an unseasonably balmy December day.

"As a community, it's not a big deal when everybody smells a little," Biondi joked about the Divinity School's Bedhead Tuesdays. "Just having that integrated into your week, you naturally already realize the impact of this drought. So when you hear of something like this [shower head giveaway], you just want to walk over."

Duke spent about \$15,000 on 5,000 shower heads for Monday's promotion. The university will continue to distribute the remaining 1,800 shower heads, and it plans to buy more. The money for the project came from a \$5 million fund established by Duke for water-conservation efforts.

The largest water consumer in Durham County, Duke has set out to reduce its water consumption by 30 percent. The measures include replacing more than 1,000 shower heads in campus residence halls with efficient ones that use only 1.5 gallons per minute. (Standard fixtures use about 2.5 gallons a minute.)

Replacing the shower heads could save thousands of gallons of water daily. About 11 percent of the university's water consumption is generated by the residence halls, while the medical school and hospital account for about 40 percent.

The popularity of low-flow shower heads as a conservation measure has mushroomed recently.

At Saturday's Christmas parade in Chapel Hill, Orange County water officials gave out free low-flow shower heads. The city of Durham has begun holding shower head exchanges and selling low-flow ones to residents at a discounted \$3. In area hardware stores, many models sell for about \$17.

Locally, plumbing supply companies have reported a spike in consumer demand for low-flow shower heads.

It was Eben Polk's brainchild to distribute the free shower heads at Duke. A research associate for Duke's Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions, Polk installed low-flow shower heads and faucets in his Durham apartment this year and was pleased with the result.

"It would have a huge impact if every Duke employee put one of these in," Polk said. "I was pretty blown away that they said they were going to do 5,000, because I didn't imagine that they would be able to give out that many."

(Staff researchers Peggy Neal and Lamara Williams contributed to this report.)

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