The Biofuel Innovator

NANCY TUCHMAN, 54
Founding director, Institute of Environmental Sustainability
at Loyola University Chicago

Where everyone else saw cafeteria waste, the saw vats of biodiesel. When vacant university land languished, she envisioned a student-run farm. Tuchman, a forceful biology professor who is a regional expert in invasive species, has made a career of throwing out big ideas—and has inspired Loyola administrators and students to follow her lead. The university's president, Michael Garavente, calls her a "giant pipe of sustainability."

This summer, on the southern end of its Rogers Park campus, Loyola plans to open a $60 million, 200,000-square-foot energy-efficient complex. The building will house the Institute of Environmental Sustainability, an interdisciplinary program exemplified by the Biodiesel Lab that Tuchman founded in 2007. In the lab, science students convert used cooking oil from the cafeteria into hand soap and fuel for the campus shuttle. Business majors, meanwhile, are working on making the center profitable in the next three years (the lab brought in around $25,000 in 2012). Loyola has already signed a deal with nearby Northwestern University to convert its grease into fuel for its campus shuttle service. And the lab recently extended its program to nearby restaurants such as Uncommon Ground on Devon Street, which donates its used cooking oil in exchange for biodiesel. Besides the lab—the only licensed facility of its kind at a university in the United States—the new building will feature a 3,900-square-foot greenhouse, a spacious green roof, and a 400-bed residence hall. (Tuchman's student-run farm is in Woodstock.)

"On one hand, it seems like we're moving a thousand miles per hour. But there's also a sense where we wish it were quicker," says Tuchman, who sees her burgeoning institute one day growing into a standalone school within the university. "Then, she hopes, "I will have the gravitas to do more, and people will start to say, 'Ah, I see how that's working.'"

—S.H.