When I picture a university, I immediately envision the quad: an area of grass and trees surrounded by campus buildings, like the photo from one of America's oldest universities accompanying this post. But those beautiful lawns may need to go. That would be a bit sad, and not just because the students could lose a place to sunbathe and play frisbee. The quad could still be a campus focal point, and it might still be a place of beauty, but it won't look the same.

These thoughts were triggered by three chance occurrences within a few days of each other.Last week, I received a reprint of Sarah Schindler's article, "Banning Lawns." I had seen her present the paper previously, but hadn't given it much thought recently. Her article points out that "conventional turfgrass is a non-native monocrop that contributes to a loss of biodiversity and typically requires vast amounts of water, pesticides, and gas-powered mowing." I probably wouldn't have connected her argument with university quads, except for a comment by our new Interim Executive Director, Areca Smith. Areca said she had been surprised to see that Berkeley was still maintaining such large lawns during a severe drought. Then yesterday, the NY Times carried an article about the failure of Californians to reduce water use during our extreme drought.

I realize that there may be practical problems to making the change. Universities would have to find hardy new plants that could thrive locally without expensive maintenance or watering. Landscaping would have to take into account a variety of possible uses for the area, and students might need different kinds of spaces for casual recreation. And some of us would have to live with our nostalgia for the quads of the past. There would be transition costs, although over time money would be saved from reduced use of water, pesticides, herbicides and fossil fuels for mowing. But going down this road would not only have direct benefits for the environment, it would also provide demonstration projects about how other public spaces could be similarly redesigned.

Lawns are becoming scarce in my neighborhood as the drought continues and as people realize the aesthetic appeal of other kinds of plantings. (Admittedly, most lawns were small to begin with, which makes the transition easier.) In parts of the Southwest, xerciscapes have been replacing lawns on a broader scale in many communities. Universities may find themselves going down this path, leaving the traditional quad a thing of the past.

CORRECTION: An earlier version of the post misidentified the author of “Banning Lawns.” Apologies for the error..