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ABSTRACT: Environmental Ethics and the Culture of Sustainability at Santa Clara University

Though Santa Clara University has made a strong commitment to sustainability—one that impacts University spending, building, and planning—little information exists on to what extent and in what forms sustainability has become part of the student culture. This anthropological study on the culture of sustainability examines how Santa Clara University students understand, define, and express environmental values as individuals and members of the campus community. Though students almost universally subscribe to a utilitarian ethic that privileges people over the environment, their ethical codes do not show a lack of concern for the environment, merely that they assign sustainability a practical position somewhere amongst their other ethical commitments. While SCU students can easily verbalize *why* sustainability is important, they are unable to define *what* sustainability means or *how* to become more sustainable. Similarly, they have little idea what a person who chooses to live sustainably but is not an “environmentalist” would look like or be called. Most importantly, environmental discourse at Santa Clara University suffers from divisiveness resulting from the mistaken conclusion that people who do not take action simply do not care. Thus, a misguided focus on raising awareness about environmental problems misses the opportunity for both capacity building and more complex discussions about sustainability in which debate and criticism is welcome—the very sort of discussions non-environmental students want.

Environmental Ethics and the Culture of Sustainability at Santa Clara University

I. Research Question

Santa Clara University was recently placed among the top twenty-five Campus Sustainability Leaders in the 2008 Campus Sustainability Report Card. With high scores in the categories of Administration, Climate Change & Energy and Food & Recycling, it is clear that the Santa Clara University administration has made a strong commitment to sustainability—one which impacts university spending, building and planning. What remains unclear is the state of the human climate on campus—to what extent and in what forms sustainability has become part of campus culture. This research is concerned with how Santa Clara University students understand, define, and express environmental values. Due to the applied nature of this research, I have situated environmental ethics conversations within a broader cultural context in an effort to provide valuable information on the sustainability debates, alliances, and divisions among the SCU community, as well as culturally appropriate suggestions for environmental programming on campus.

II. Methodology and Theoretical Positioning

As a qualitative researcher, I used participant observation, individual interviews and group interviews to provide a textured and in-depth understanding of variety within the Santa Clara University community. I aimed to uncover significant discourses, debates, ethical beliefs and personal narratives of decision-making, lifestyle choices and sustainable behavior. Selection of informants was strategic, rather than random. I chose students, staff, and faculty for interviews based on a number of criteria: 1) to represent a

diversity of majors, departments, and job positions; 2) because other informants suggested them as interesting potential interviewees (also known as a snowball sample); and 3) because we had little to no previous knowledge of one another, and thus might more easily avoid research bias. Near the end of my research, I selected some informants for an opposite reason, namely because I *did* have previous knowledge of their environmental beliefs and thought including them would provide interesting contrast to previous informants. Due to the practical nature of soliciting lengthy interviews, most informants were recruited through personal contacts and/or through participation in a campus group registered with the Center for Student Leadership.

Over the course of three months, I interviewed 58 students (51 in group interviews ranging in size from 4 to 14, and 7 individually), 2 faculty members, and 5 staff members. I had originally planned to interview a greater number of staff and faculty, but due to the limited hours faculty and staff are available on campus, and due to demands on their time, this portion of the population was much more difficult to access than the student body. However, as my research progressed, it became clearer that students were learning about sustainability from their peers more than in class—and that the majority of internal divisions and contested grounds in thought and action on campus are between students, not between students and staff or students and faculty. The faculty and staff interviews I conducted were too few to shed any concrete light on community beliefs; as such I will not include them in this paper. Though conducting further research on faculty and staff beliefs can only help shed further light on the realm of campus environmental ethics, I believe this study benefits from a narrowed focus on student culture. Any effective sustainability effort at SCU must be a sustainable part of

education, meaning it must last over time and continue to affect student thinking and behavior after graduation. An intensified focus on students allows me to draw more significant conclusions about the progress – and pitfalls – Santa Clara University is experiencing in incorporating sustainability into the education of the whole person.

Interviews were semi-structured, but relatively open-ended as I allowed informants to change the subject and allowed myself the freedom to follow up on interesting comments. I worked off of a basic sheet of questions (Appendix A), which I varied according to time constraints and informant responsiveness. I used storytelling questions to solicit personal narratives revealing an individual's relationship to sustainability, definition-based questions to uncover underlying explanatory structures for complex concepts such as “sustainability” and “environmentalist,” and situational questions to elicit responses to hypothetical situations in order to explore the boundaries of an individual's ethical reasoning. After each quotation, I have listed the student's major and anticipated year of graduation.

This research does not attempt to claim quantitative knowledge about the proportion of certain beliefs among the SCU community, and does not attempt to definitively extrapolate the beliefs of, for example, a group of engineers to the larger community of engineers on campus. I am aware that this type of disclaimer might lead to questions such as “well, how useful is this research anyway?” or “how can you claim to say anything about the larger community?” While I cannot approximate percentages of who believes what, qualitative research offers both breadth and depth in representing cultural beliefs and discourses, which are often difficult or impossible to quantify. A logical next step would be to use this research to develop a quantitative survey tool that

would measure the prevalence and intensity of the environmental beliefs discussed in this study.

III. Results

In order to situate this research, we must acknowledge the university student body as a cultural entity in itself. It is neither bounded nor homogenous, but rather a diverse collection of loosely connected individuals in constant dynamic interaction. In order to address this diversity, I will discuss the following main questions:

- 1 Is sustainability an issue of personal and ethical importance to the community?
- 2 How does the SCU community define and understand sustainability?
- 3 What do people think it means to be an environmentalist; do they consider themselves environmentalists?
- 4 Is there a strong or direct link between institutional programs and the values of the individual?

Environmental Ethics

With a few exceptions, environmental ethics at Santa Clara University are ethics of practicality; ethics of daily utility that appear fall on a spectrum of utilitarian ethics ranging from students who ask “how can I do the least harm with the least inconvenience to myself?” to students who ask “how can I do the most environmental good in the conditions of today’s society?”

Students in the first group generally believe that people should act sustainably as long as it does not unreasonably encroach on their lifestyle or livelihood, asking

themselves “what little thing can I do without incurring too much cost and harm upon myself?” (Political Science, Economics ’10). When asked to describe what happened during the last time they had an experience or conversation in which the topic of sustainability arose, or to describe a situation in which they had to make a decision with potential impacts on the environment, this group of informants responded with small-scale adjustments to daily habits, such as the following,

“I know a kid who never turns the light off in his room and I make it a point every time I go there to turn his light off for him.” (Civil Engineering ’08)

“My friend was trying to make extra money so she was collecting the bottles and cans from her house.” (Mechanical Engineering ’08)

“Today I ordered a tea and one of those pasta salads that comes in a plastic cup [in the library]. When I came downstairs there were different trashcans for each thing and the sign told me I couldn’t recycle my plastic cups and I was surprised. I thought, I could have recycled that, but I couldn’t.” (Psychology ’10)

“Today my friend and I went to recycle our bottles, because we live off campus. It was a pain to find the place, so we were saying it would be easier if the recycling centers were more accessible.” (Mechanical Engineering ’09)

“I make decisions every day, recycling...or whether we are going to walk or drive somewhere. Whether we are going to throw away certain things...a lot of little reasons.” (Communications, French ’08)

Students on this end of the spectrum generally believe that acting sustainably should not harm economic health or encroach on personal freedom—not in a selfishly individual manner, but in a manner that treats sustainability as one of a number of concerns in an individual’s total ethical worldview. Two students, in particular, brought this distinction to my attention and forced me to move past simplistic interpretations that they simply did not care much about the environment. After twenty minutes of highly

opinionated criticism of the idea of professors asking students to incorporate sustainability into coursework (“I would think it was a joke...I would go along with it but I would fake it”), and against radical environmentalists (“What do I care about more, do I care about helping the environment a little bit or do I want to be classified as a freak like some radical bozo living up in a tree, not shaving my armpits, and shouting down at cops?”), etc, I was finally able to coax my informant into elaborating. After the second or third time he said, “I don’t do much for the environment,” I asked him if he thought we all had a responsibility to act more sustainably, to which he responded,

“We all have a responsibility, but we don’t all have the leadership potential...you have to be really caring about things. Some people might really care about the environment while others might really care about feeding people, stopping war, stopping the spread of disease. I think that whatever you are passionate about, as long as it helps people and helps the world you should go ahead and follow it. You’re not wrong for not fighting to save the Amazon...I really care about people more than the environment, which is kind of sad in the context of this interview. I spend my time tutoring or caring for homeless or poor people.” (Finance ’09)

Throughout the early part of his interview, he had been willing to remain callous and critical of environmentalism, but it was only until I searched deeper that I realized it was not that this student does not care about the environment, but rather that his ethical worldview merely places environmentalism behind pressing human needs for food, shelter and education. Another student voiced her unhappiness regarding recent efforts by the university cafeteria to reduce waste by 1) offering only biodegradable plates for to-go meals (rather than bulky to-go boxes), and 2) encouraging students to request their meals on reusable for-here plates when eating within the cafeteria. This student was particularly incensed, saying, “When they have these signs that say ‘For the sake of the

environmental whatever, please request your meal for here,' [i.e. with a re-usable plate] they are asking me to change my lifestyle!" The other students participating in the group interview burst out in embarrassed but understanding laughter, prompting the informant to clarify why she does not want to be forced to eat off inconvenient to-go plates if she cannot eat off a re-usable plate in the cafeteria,

"No! Not in the sense that I don't want to help the environment, but in the sense that I am always busy; I work two jobs and have five classes...I have to eat in the car! I feel that they can make bigger biodegradable plates, or biodegradable boxes with tops like the old ones!" (Marketing, Religious Studies Minor '10)

Though her criticisms initially appeared to be based on a desire not to be inconvenienced, it became clear that she merely places her ethical concern for the environment behind her need to maintain the busy pace of her life—to move quickly between many classes and multiple jobs. The complexities in these responses remind us that environmental ethics are not a yes/no question and do not exist in isolation from an individual's many other concerns, both ethical and practical. Instead, individuals understand and situate the environment somewhere within their collection of ethical concerns. This conclusion has ramifications for on-campus sustainability programming, which often operates on the assumption that if students knew more about their environmental impact, they would care more and do something about it. Rather, responses such as the previous two remind us that people have many reasons for not acting sustainably—reasons that are potential entry points for new and creative environmental action. For example, how would the first student react if he saw "environmentalist" students on campus talking about how poor people often suffer the

health and economic effects of environmental degradation to a greater degree than the wealthy? How would the second student react if she saw sustainability efforts on campus cater to extremely busy students, for example by offering her preferred parking if she were to carpool to work?

On the other end of the spectrum are students who are often more deeply involved in sustainability on campus. These students rely on a code of ethics that asks, “How can I do the most environmental good under current social conditions?” They are engaged in a similar push-pull as the students on the other end of the spectrum, except instead of navigating changes on an individual level, they are concerned with instigating change on a societal-level without causing negative social upheaval.

Interviews with these students focus on the common good—on how a healthy environment will contribute to the well being of society, and on how to promote environmentalism without alienating others. When asked to describe the last experience or conversation in which the topic of sustainability or the environment arose, they speak about green consumerism as a necessary tool that they may not personally agree with, about encouraging sustainable living without alienating people who do not want to change their lifestyles, and about recycling as a simplistic, but important first step toward sustainability. Though motivated by ethical imperatives, their actions are shaped by practicality, by doing what they can without pushing for too much change too soon. As these students state,

“You can’t go to your neighbor and say ‘hey dude, turn off the lights.’ You just have to turn off the lights when you leave the room and promote that within your community and find a community of people who want to promote that too.” (Theater Arts ‘11)

“We limit the conversation to shallow examples of sustainability. I don’t mean we shouldn’t talk about it at all, just that the talks should encompass more than current conversations do...if anything we need to expand on the discourse as opposed to creating a top ten list of sustainability.” (Art, Environmental Studies ’08)

“I think that something like recycling makes our whole situation less bad. As part of this [environmental] group we should take something that can influence our whole lives and influence other people.” (Political Science, Environmental Studies, ’11)

“I think you can’t get anywhere without starting with something small. Lots of people just give up at the first show of difficulty, so you have to start with small things and try to get there from there.” (Environmental Studies ’11)

“I had this conversation this year about sustainability with a friend who was talking about how sustainability and the green movement on campus is a kind of religion...It made me think about how you can get people that aren’t really interested in sustainability to arrive at it on their own, perhaps appealing to their own freedom of behavior and thought.” (English, ’08)

“I’d like to comment on how environmental friendliness has become a sort of trend. You go to Target, or any place, and there are t-shirts saying something like ‘green is hot’ and the shirt itself is not organic or environmentally friendly...I feel like it’s so superficial. But it’s better than having the shirt say ‘capitalism rocks’ or some other negative thing.” (Communications, ’09)

A significant number of students who considered themselves outside the core group of environmental actors on campus expressed beliefs that environmental students are inflexible, rigid in their beliefs, and unwilling to compromise. However, contrary to popular belief, the above statements show that environmentally involved students are willing to work within society and compromise in order to instigate change. In fact, environmentally involved students often react just as harshly against rigid environmental thinking as do students who do not participate as avidly in environmental discourses. One

environmental studies and communication major urged the other students in her group interview, “We have to be able to see that the world doesn’t operate on a plan geared toward protecting the endangered species of wasps or whatever. We have to see the world from different perspectives,” (Environmental Studies, Communication ’10).

Understanding Sustainability

Though Santa Clara University students overwhelmingly voice an ethical concern for the environment and believe we should live more sustainably, they have very little idea what sustainability means and what actions to take in order to live more sustainably. Simply put, students have internalized the importance of sustainability but struggle to find an answer when asked what sustainability means to them. Informants routinely squirm uncomfortably for long periods of silence, ask for the next question, or say things such as,

“Something is sustainable when it is not harming the environment; it is...I’m trying to phrase it...I have a simple answer...I lost it.” (Civil Engineering ’08)

“It’s sustainable when you can get...actually someone else answer.” (Communications, Art ’10)

“It’s funny because I live in Cyphi and I feel like I am always surrounded by it—I even have it defined on my [Cyphi] shirt, but I am drawing a blank; you kind of tune it out.” (History ’10)

“I have a textbook definition in my head that I am trying to get out but it’s not coming out.” (Anthropology ’08)

“This is probably completely off and wrong from what it should be; I guess I think things are sustainable when they have some form of multiple

use or reuse...this is not a good question. It's so much broader than that that I don't know how to put it into words. It's a difficult thing to grasp and actually be able to throw out there. I think of things that are...recyclable...and...I don't know." (Economics, Sociology Minor '09)

Surprised by this near-universal reaction, I wondered if perhaps the confusion was due to how I phrased the question. I changed the wording of the question several times throughout the course of the research, asking, "When would you consider something to be sustainable?" "What comes to mind when you think of sustainability?" "What does the word 'sustainability' mean to you?" The majority of informants remained very uncomfortable generating a definition of sustainability, regardless of how I asked the question. The following transcript from a group interview with students who spoke extensively about the importance of sustainability, who have taken several classes with a sustainability component, and who verbalize the connection between sustainability and their majors and future careers, makes it clear that even students who strongly identify with sustainability as an ethical imperative have trouble understanding what it means and what practical action to take.

"That's a hard question."

"That *is* a hard question."

"Alright, well in the most simple terms, it means not to use excessively, and to reuse what can be reused, I guess."

"To harness what we have now, and to preserve it for future generations, without destroying it currently."

"I don't have any answer."

"I don't really know. I think of "green" and "recycled." That's all I think of when I think of sustainable. Brian, do you have a sustainability definition?"

"No..." (Group Interview, Engineering)

Though a few students in this interview were able to generate definitions of

sustainability, they were uncharacteristically inarticulate, particularly when considering the honest and compelling answers they supplied regarding the importance of sustainability and its place in their future careers as engineers. I wondered if they are exposed to so much sustainability talk that they have accepted its validity without fully understanding what it means or entails. As one student said,

“A lot of these words [sustainability, environmentally-friendly, etc] are thrown around like buzz words. There’s a lot of talk about sustainability on this campus, and I think it’s a great notion, but it’s often misconstrued as to what the word even means. It’s loosely used and often used out of context.” (Film, Communications, Political Science ’11)

Interview data supports this student’s claim that though students are exposed to sustainability on an almost daily basis at Santa Clara University, they do not truly understand what it means. Of the handful of students who did volunteer definitions of sustainability, the majority talked about materials being biodegradable or reusable, and available to us far into the future. Two students, both involved in environmental groups on campus, spoke about sustainability as a new way of thinking and relating to others. Aside from these students, the vast majority of informants cited recycling when asked to story-tell about sustainable decision-making or environmental experiences. When talking about on campus programs related to sustainability, students almost exclusively discussed recycling programming such as trash audits (in which students dig un-recycled bottles out of on campus dumpsters), color-coded bins in dorms, and recycling competitions. In a group interview, one informant commented that she thought “a lot of people, when they think of sustainability, just think about recycling, like it’s the first thing that comes to mind” (Accounting ’08). The other ten interviewees nodded thoughtfully and after a pause, immediately resumed volunteering examples referencing recycling, suggesting

they simply do not know what else they could do in addition to recycling to reduce their environmental impact.

Outside of the large group interview I conducted with students involved in environmental groups, there was very little reference in the interviews to reducing consumption or reusing materials. Within that group interview, environmentally involved students strongly emphasized a more all-encompassing understanding of sustainability. When I asked “Can you give me an example of a situation in which you made a decision with potential impacts on the environment?” one student responded, “Can you rephrase the question? Because my understanding is that every second of every day we are affecting the environment” (Environmental Studies, Studio Art '08). Other students emphasized that reducing and being more responsible with consumption is the most important step toward sustainability. Almost all of the twelve students in this interview began a discussion of responsible consumerism, excerpts of which follow,

“I ask myself ‘do I really need this?’ Because if I were to buy an organic, free-trade shirt, but I don’t need it, it’s still a waste of resources. For me, the most essential question is ‘do I need this?’ Do I have to have a car when I grow up, could I live in a city perhaps? For me it’s a lot of planning my lifestyle, or thinking ahead.” (English '08)

“I think the biggest thing that everyone seems to be agreeing upon is that there needs to be a change of culture. It’s not so much these companies are buying this, selling that; they’re green or not green. Everybody needs to come together so we’re just not buying and accessing things we don’t need. We have more waste than people have food.” (Environmental Studies & Political Science '11)

“Our culture is based on consumerism. Reducing that is important in any way possible. It’s wrong for us to just assume that we can simply trust everything that’s being thrown at us. We as consumers we have to be self-informed; we have to take initiative to educate ourselves about the products we’re going to invest in.” (Environmental Studies & Studio Art

'08)

“Used stuff is one of the best concepts that people have. Instead of going to the mall to buy a new outfit or something that you need, you can go to the thrift store and find something that someone has worn before and someone wanted to recycle instead of throw away.” (Communications '10)

“Just as consumers, the decisions you make on a daily basis have an effect on the environment...It's almost your job, your duty, if you are going to buy something to know what you are buying and what effect that is going to have.” (Environmental Studies & Political Science '10)

The vast difference between the responses of the students involved in environmental issues on campus and almost every other student I interviewed makes sense in that the former study or talk about environmental issues on an almost daily basis. However, the lack of overlap—the relative nonexistence of students who responded somewhere in between these two extremes suggests that there is a core group of environmental actors on campus, and there is relatively little cross-over of ideas about sustainability.

Environmentalists: Who are they? Am I one?

By far the most opinionated comments I heard throughout the bulk of my interviews were prompted by the question, “When would you call someone an environmentalist?” Informants laughed, argued, contradicted one another, shouted, mocked, sympathized, and identified. Definitions of environmentalists ranged from somebody who is the stereotype radical “hippie or tree hugger, who wears tie-dye shirts and rallies against people cutting down trees in Berkeley” (Mechanical Engineering '08) to a measured “somebody who cares about the environment” (Civil Engineering '08).

The wide variety of definitions fell under four main categories: 1) a person who simply

appreciates and cares about the environment, 2) a person who actively works to preserve the environment/fight for its protection, 3) a person who studies and researches the environment for a major/career, and lastly, 4) a radical activist regarded negatively by the rest of society.

Interestingly, many students simultaneously hold multiple definitions of what it means to be an environmentalist. At first many students described a stereotypical environmentalist, “someone very earthy, hippie-ish, nature-loving, some kind of vegetarian or vegan” but many then added to their definition, saying things like “but then I feel like a lot of people are environmentalists. If you care about the environment, you don’t go around trashing it and you are trying to be knowledgeable about what you can do, then you would be an environmentalist” (Communications, French ’08). Students both involved and not involved in environmental issues on campus are loathe to self-identify as a stereotypical environmentalist, though they generally have no problem identifying as the second type of environmentalist, the kind who appreciates the earth and tries to do what little things he/she can to protect it. One informant captured this confusion about environmentalist identity by saying,

“If we only have one word for this, then people don’t care enough. If I am describing myself and these kids out here picking through the garbage the same...Let me tell you, we are both environmentalists but we are not the same...When we really start to care, we’ll have a few different words, like ‘supporters,’ and, I don’t know. There will be bad words, too, like ‘brown-baggers.’” (Finance ’09)

This student touches upon a very important concept in cultural studies: linguistic definitions and categories. This informant suggests that when the environment becomes more culturally important and concern for it becomes more pervasive in our society, we

will develop more and better words to describe a person who lives and acts sustainably. Whether or not this hypothesis is correct, this comment sheds light on the limitations in environmental language that shape public thought and plague the environmental movement at large. At Santa Clara University, confusion about environmental identities is at the heart of missed opportunities for collaboration. The disconnect between initial perceptions of environmentalists on campus (“those kids digging through the dumpsters”) and the non-radical ways in which such supposed environmentalists spoke to me about the environment, is evidence that our language categories do not reflect reality and only serve to fuel misunderstanding. More importantly, the fact that almost all informants were willing to go past the stereotypical definition of environmentalist and admit that there could be multiple positive and negative meanings to such an identity shows that students recognize complexity and would be willing to reevaluate their stereotypes if presented with alternate words for living such a lifestyle.

Cultural Politics: The Institution and the Individual

When I began the interviewing process, I expected students to discuss their environmental ethics, their thoughts on sustainability and their own experience of sustainability as an SCU student. However, I did not anticipate the extent to which students would jump at the opportunity to critique the beliefs and behaviors of their fellow students. My most interesting interview in this regard was a large group interview of business students. Immediately after I asked my very first question (“Can you describe what happened the last time you had an experience or conversation in which the topic of sustainability or the environment came up?”) one student passionately volunteered,

“I had a conversation with a friend and I told him to come to the Solar Panel [upcoming business panel on renewable energy] and he said ‘Oh, it’s funny how the business students are getting into sustainability now,’ and I was offended because he was assuming things about me.” (Marketing ’08)

Many business students I interviewed felt misunderstood and misrepresented in environmental discourse, saying “environmentalist students at SCU make generalized assumptions about business students and our ‘need’ for profit when they don’t really have a solid understanding about the process by which a lot of sustainability products are brought to market,” (Finance, Economics ’10). In addition to a less than full understanding of sustainable business, business students criticized environmentalist students for failing to represent the complexity of environmental issues in their messaging, and for fostering a culture that silences opposition or dialogue about the best way to pursue sustainability,

“I find the trash audits particularly offensive [group interview participants chorus agreement]...they take the regular trash and empty it in front of Benson Lawn and make these giant pyramidal heaps of recyclables. The whole idea is that it is like a public shaming—shame on you for not recycling! And I think this plays into the idea of environmentalism as a dogma, almost like a new religion. If you question any of the assumptions that go into the environmental movement, you are automatically confronted with ‘you are just a business student.’ It’s the identity politics of 10 years ago...Recycling isn’t even profitable right now; the school runs at a loss because they are forced by county ordinances to recycle. But you don’t have any discussions of this; instead you have the public shamings of the trash audits. There is always complexity!” (Political Science, Philosophy ’08)

“I’m not saying all environmentalists do this, but people say, ‘there’s no time to act, you have to act now!’ To me, that equates that there’s no time to think about global warming, and if there’s no time to think then it’s just stupid because you won’t be able to figure out the best way to act...The cool thing [sarcasm] about global warming is this self defense mechanism that means anyone who stops to think about it is a heretic and is going to

kill us all by thinking!” (Finance ’09)

Though they appear divisive, these comments have more to do with *how* sustainability is done, rather than *why* it is done, an important distinction with implications for sustainability programming on campus. Almost all the business students in the group interview agree that in their personal experience, environmental students believe that business students simply do not care about the environment, and are driven merely by a desire for profit. However, in reality the business students I spoke with merely disagree with how environmental students present sustainability. The bulk of my interviews with business students (that I cannot present here due to their length), reveal that these students have a well-researched understanding of sustainability, realize an ethical imperative to make sustainable changes in life, and relate a commitment to sustainability to their future lives as business leaders.

A large group interview with environmental students revealed that most believe raising awareness about the importance of sustainability will encourage people to take action—all people need is more information. A commitment to awareness raising leads some environmental students to think programs like the trash audits (so hated by the business students I interviewed), and on-campus events like Earth Day (which informants have stated as fuel for the “hippie, granola, tie-dye” stereotype of environmentalists) are appropriate and effective ways of addressing sustainability in the SCU community. In light of the earlier comments from business students, it seems likely that this type of environmental action is not what students want or need; they want more complex discussions of sustainability, not simplistic awareness raising of existing environmental problems. Additionally, the overwhelming amount of students who could not explain the

concept of sustainability or name sustainable behaviors suggests that current on-campus programming is not adequately preparing students to continue living sustainability after they leave Santa Clara University. It appears that many students would benefit from an increased emphasis on capacity building—on programs focused on complex discussions of the concept of sustainability, and on providing action-oriented tools for navigating a more sustainable lifestyle. Simply put, we need to shift our attention from “why” in favor of starting practical and collaborative discussions about “how”—discussions that are open to criticism and debate from groups not traditionally involved in sustainability on campus. Additionally, campus leaders involved in programming should be sure to clearly articulate “what” they mean by sustainability—beyond the basic definition “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs”—in order to increase student understanding and prompt discussion about the variety of ways people think about sustainability.

IV. Discussion and Suggestions for Further Work:

After interviewing nearly 60 individuals, I am left with one overarching impression: more research must be done to fully understand students’ complex reactions to sustainability. Though almost all informants exhibit an ethical and practical understanding of the need to live more sustainably, they either do not know how to live more sustainably, or feel alienated by the environmentalist discourse on campus. As far as offering suggestions, I hope that environmental action on campus takes into consideration that students do not need to be convinced of existing environmental degradation or their responsibility to do something about it. They need to know what the

“something” they could do is, and they want environmental discourse to be less dogmatic and more open to discussion and criticism of the best way to approach sustainability.

While environmental programmers on campus will probably respond that programs like this do exist on campus (for example, the student-run sustainability workshops that use a wedge model to quantify the amount of carbon reduced for a variety of habits), students outside of the core group of environmental actors on campus are primarily aware of programs having to do with recycling, and unaware of much else. Existing capacity-building programs need better publicity (meaning publicity that advertises an authentic openness to dialogue and dissent, not merely sustainability as a buzzword). While conducting this research, I found great receptiveness when working through existing clubs and groups on campus. Perhaps this approach would work to broaden environmental messaging and create open debate on campus, as well as tailor sustainability messages to students who place sustainability behind other ethical concerns. For example, what about work with a campus group concerned with poverty to address the issue of low-income workers being exposed to environmental toxins?

Successful future programming will take advantage of the startling common ground (both ethical and practical) that exists between students of various backgrounds and interests, while addressing the practical and detail-oriented concerns of such students, namely the lack of complexity presented in current programs. In my opinion, an open debate series in which students discuss major issues in environmental discourse would be very helpful to breaking down the barriers students perceive to separate them. A debate about environmental discourse would be very different from a debate about environmental issues, primarily in that a debate about environmental discourse would

cover issues such as those discussed in this research, rather than issues meant to raise awareness and instigate an ethical concern, such as “is global warming affecting human life?” This type of debate would be very helpful in opening dialogue and hopefully enabling students to see that their environmental beliefs are more similar than they are different.

It is my hope that this research serves as a jumping-off point for further research on the culture of sustainability. A quantitative study built from the responses to the interview questions asked in this research would be invaluable at providing information on the proportions of students who hold certain beliefs about the environment. Survey structure should take into consideration the results of this study, and be guided by an understanding that students have very complex reactions to sustainability and environmental issues that are not easily quantified.

A qualitative study with a tighter focus on one of the main conflicts in environmental ethics would be productive in providing more in-depth analysis without attempting to chart the whole cultural landscape (the necessary weakness of this research). Important topics would include investigating the place of sustainability in the hierarchy of an individual’s ethics, examining the culture change vs. technological advances debate, more closely looking at the interaction between ethics and practicality, or further testing the conclusion of this research that Santa Clara University students ethically sympathize with the goals and concerns of sustainability but either do not know what to do to live more sustainably or disagree with how others approach and act out sustainability on campus.

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Appendix A

- 1) Can you tell me your name, year and position at Santa Clara University?
- 2) Can you describe what happened during the last time you had an experience or conversation in which the topic of sustainability or the environment came up—from start to finish, including surprises, highlights, expectations, confusions, and so forth?

Was this a typical experience of this sort?

Was this experience memorable in any way?

Why do you think the topic of sustainability arose during that conversation/interaction/event?

- 3) Can you give me an example of a situation—small or large—in which you had to make a decision with potential effects on the environment?

Why did you come to the decision you did?

What were you trying to accomplish?

- 4) How would you respond if a professor asked you to incorporate sustainability into a paper or project?

What if the class has nothing to do with the environment?

- 5) How would you respond if an employer asked you to incorporate sustainability into your daily tasks at work?

What if the job has nothing to do with the environment?

- 6) Do you think your major/job/position relates to sustainability?

What are all of the different ways sustainability relates to your major/job/position?

- 7) When would you call someone an “environmentalist?”

- 8) When would you call something “sustainable?”

- 9) What are all the different ways to define sustainability?

How do you think other people define sustainability?

- 10) It appears, in many cases I’ve heard about, that people think sustainability is a special interest issue. How does that fit with your experience?

- 11) Why should students who aren’t involved in environmental studies care about the environment?

12) What do you think has affected your beliefs about the environment?

13) Can you think of a person or an experience that motivated or turned you off to sustainability?

Why do you think that experience had such an effect on you?

14) Is there anything further you'd like to say?

15) Is there anything we've missed that would be important for me to know?