



# Collaboration Strategies for Sustainability Officers



## About the Authors

### David Havelick

In Harvard's Office for Sustainability, David helps to develop and advance the University-wide goals, standards, and commitments that are contained in the Harvard University Sustainability Plan. He works with faculty, students, staff, senior leaders, and alumni to translate cutting edge research into practice and to ensure that research informs the priorities of the Sustainability Office. He is helping to manage the process under the auspices of the Presidential Committee on Sustainability to create Harvard's second-generation Sustainability Plan, which will include more explicit connections between the sustainable development definition of intergenerational well-being and broader justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion issues.

### Stephania Fregosi

As the Portland Community College Sustainability Analyst, Stephania Fregosi maintains the utility database, completes the greenhouse gas inventories, and the STARS report. Stephania conducts policy and program research and provide other program support. This year, other program support included co-creating an ecosocial justice training for student leaders and co-leading our Climate Action Plan Update. The update focuses on integrating equity into climate action planning, rooting climate equity efforts in the understanding that power, place, purpose, people, and process each have a role in ensuring equitable outcomes in our community and across our locations.



This essay is intended to help sustainability practitioners think about how to partner around social justice and DEI with others on their campuses and in their local communities. Those people include, but are not limited to, multicultural groups, affinity groups, DEI staff, and community organizations. This essay sets out principles for establishing relationships and working in collaboration. Many of these principles can be extended to working with community partners more generally. Beneath each principle is a list of possible approaches to collaboration. We can use our collective influence to make social change, as many are already doing through mechanisms such as Second Nature’s Climate Commitment and We Are Still In. These collaborative relationships should not be limited to external partnerships, and can begin within our organizations in the form of partnerships across departments and divisions.

As outlined in the preceding essay, “Equity is Great, but What Does it Have to Do with Sustainability?”, it is crucial for sustainability practitioners to make the case that diversity, equity, and inclusion are bound up with the goals and priorities of a sustainable future. They are not separate. And yet, they are almost always split into separate offices and divisions in the higher education context. On average, engagement of sustainability offices with offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion are relatively low in comparison with other campus entities (AASHE, 2020). Some organizations, such as [California State University, San Marcos](#), are beginning to more formally connect the work of sustainability and DEI offices.

The magnifying impact of climate change and other environmental challenges to existing social inequities makes it more important than ever to convey the links between racism, poverty, and environmental harm. This was effectively conveyed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include “reduced inequalities” as a major priority. Cities are also increasingly addressing equity issues within their climate plans, like Boston’s [Social Equity Report](#). Second Nature’s work on [climate resilience](#) also includes social equity and governance as a core component.

## Responsibility

Before entering into new relationships, be sure that you have done the groundwork to build those relationships. It is everyone's individual responsibility to identify what they do not already know and seek answers to fill in those gaps. We recommend starting with AASHE's community resources on [Racial Equity and Social Justice](#) and/or resources at your own institution. It is not the responsibility of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to be educators on race, particularly as many people have a long experience with personal trauma or experience trauma through those conversations.

### *Examine Your Privilege*

- The trust you have in the system working for you may not be shared by others who have a history of the system not working for them.
- Enter into new relationships without an agenda or expectation other than getting to know a colleague and see if you can support their work later on. In order for relationships to be meaningful, they cannot be transactional. At the same time, it is important to compensate people fairly for their contributions.

### *Educate Yourself*

- Develop an understanding of the historical and current challenges that face the demographics of your student body, your faculty, staff and the community your institution inhabits. This will help you serve it better and move your programs toward justice.
- Research and familiarize yourself with existing DEI efforts at your institution. This could look like identifying dedicated offices, identity centers, affinity groups, student organizations, or administrative committees.
- Take DEI and racial equity trainings, ideally ones that address personal and professional contexts and provide the opportunity for reflection on both levels. Look to [AASHE's RESJ Resources for the Higher Education Community](#) if training is not available.
- Learn more about how a history of racist social practices and environmental racism has affected communities of color near your school. Use resilience tools to find maps to identify unequal harms and distribution of benefits. Who has benefitted from community improvements and who hasn't?

## Repairing Trust

Sustainability practitioners should approach new relationships with humility and humbleness; this is not something dominant business culture does well. In the United States, we are immersed in a culture that centers the importance of self, and too often, we fail to recognize the importance of ourselves as members of larger groups and circles. Communities of color have historically been given empty promises that have been broken, or no action has been taken by those in power. Examples include broken promises of the federal government with regards to tribal sovereignty (Wang, 2015) and the one-sided relationship of anthropology (Bishop, 2005), ministries (Cole, 2012), and scientists (Skloot, 2010) to minority populations where one group is studying and "serving" the other according to their own agenda.

Even if you were not the person to break that trust, your membership in the group that broke that trust matters (e.g., whites, or other high-level members of pigmentocracies, the wealthy, administrators, or other members of groups that make up the majority in power). It is better to start with the idea that trust has been broken in the past, and move forward from there.

- Show up authentically and communicate from the heart.
- Rather than making an immediate offer of assistance, provide opportunities to participate in planning and decision-making; those groups are often experts in determining for themselves what best serves their needs.
- Think about what you are actually able to offer directly, versus what you think the project could accomplish. Be honest and direct about how change will happen to avoid miscommunication.
- Implement what suggestions you can.

## Establishing Trust

Increasing trust and understanding with the diversity, equity, and inclusion staff and/or multicultural resource center staff will strengthen your problem-solving ability and increase the quality of collaborative work at your institution.

- Incorporating a variety of perspectives tends to strengthen your work, rather than diluting it.
- If you are positioned differently within your institution than the office(s) you are seeking to work with, you may be able to share your own resources and networks in order to build more support for social equity projects.
- Try a casual face-to-face introduction in which you can establish a working style preference. Some people prefer working face-to-face or phone calls over email and other digital communications. This could take the form of supporting that person's event or taking advantage of an all-college event to do some networking.
- Supporting the work of others allows them to see your genuine interest, without asking for anything (i.e., reciprocity), which creates space for collaborations to take place organically.
- Face-to-face meetings also allow you to read non-verbal cues and understand more about how your colleagues work and what they value.
- When you establish trust, there are things your colleagues may say one-on-one that they would not put into writing or say to someone they have not met in person.
- See if you have an opportunity to bring historically underrepresented voices to any decision-making table you are at. This could also look like giving up your seat.

## Find Comonalities

Sustainability, multicultural, diversity, equity and inclusion staff implicitly share the role of defining your institution's position on social responsibility, along with faculty and senior administration. Both also face the challenge of working on complex topics where dissenting views loudly express that the problem is overblown or does not exist, or the work is politicized by groups with a different agenda. The techniques and means to overcome these challenges share a lot in common:

- Roles can include administrator, supporter, counselor, role-model, activist, and teacher.
- Shared tools can include education, engagement, empowerment, communication, negotiation, mediation and collaboration.
- Institutions are facing changing demographics. Projections indicate fewer students entering higher ed overall but higher percentages of students of color, first-generation, and poorer students. This necessitates colleges and universities to stay relevant to prospective students by creating inclusive spaces for all students to participate and offering appropriate role models.
- Both fields have experience in creating behavioral change in the face of dissent.
- The need for self-care is shared, given the contentious, challenging and overwhelming nature of these roles.
- Some solutions and initiatives are positioned to solve challenges being faced by both types of offices, such as programs aimed at reducing food insecurity.

## Collaborate

Modeling partnerships will increase collaboration at the institution as a whole and needs to be both from the bottom-up and the top-down.

- Documenting your partnership and sharing stories will make your qualitative outcomes tangible and relatable and serve to inspire others.
- With real budget and time constraints, collaboration can sometimes seem like more people trying to access the same small resource pool, but it is better thought of as a smarter leveraging of resources.



## Elevating Voices

One way to integrate racial equity into your work is to elevate the voices of members of underrepresented communities and non-governmental organizations whose focus is on social justice, racial equity, civil rights and ending poverty. Be mindful of the potential to increase someone's burden or trigger trauma when approaching people with conversations around racial equity and social justice. Remind yourself to check your biases before starting a conversation with someone you do not know well; everyone has a unique lived experience. Everyone has boundaries that should be respected even when the reasons for them aren't shared with you. Start by listening and showing your readiness to listen.

Creating and realizing a vision of a socially and environmentally sustainable future requires the work of many people and organizations working together on behalf of current and future generations. Many national civil rights organizations, such as the [NAACP \(National Association for the Advancement of Colored People\)](#), have long understood the negative impact that systemic ecological racism and environmental inequities have on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. There are multiple local and national coalitions that focus on grappling with these issues; yet within higher education our internal efforts to address issues of racism, multiculturalism, environmental impacts, and social barriers to student success remain fragmented and artificially divided between operational efforts and instructional ones. (Many of these organizations are listed in AASHE's community resource on Racial Equity & Social Justice.)

- Partnering with non-government organizations allows things to be said that you may not be able to say yourself.
- Providing other resources allows your message to come from a larger community
- Partnering outside your institution can reduce the tendency to think of social-environmental problems as abstract.
- Sharing campus resources in your community benefits everyone: students gain hands-on learning opportunities and communities may gain increased access to academic and financial resources.
- This work could help Town-Gown relationships, if done well.

## Center Programs around Social Justice

Many institutions of higher education include diversity, equity, and inclusion in their missions. Some approach this by working to uplift the voices of historically underrepresented and underinvested communities, whether through curriculum, service learning, programming, multicultural centers, or civic engagement. As practitioners, we understand that climate change, immigration, and the rise of fascism and right-wing nationalism are connected; as ethical practitioners, our responsibility is to protect disenfranchised and historically underrepresented groups. Quality of life issues that impact student retention and quality of student performance are highly likely to be both environmental and equity issues and involve social justice solutions. Examples include housing insecurity, poverty, access to public transportation, and health conditions such as diabetes and asthma.

- Help your students register to vote and inform them about how voter suppression has primarily impacted BIPOC communities. Communicate the importance of civic engagement beyond the national election cycle.
- Learn more about systemic racist practices that have contributed directly to the dominant social paradigm in sustainability and about people who have propagated those beliefs, even while acting for the benefit of the environment
- Attend, support and help promote diversity, social justice, and multicultural trainings, events and other opportunities on campus.
- Create projects and programming that highlight environmental justice concerns. A place to start is [The People's Ecochallenge](#), which can help generate ideas for pledges and student engagement.
- Recognize the ethnic and racial diversity of sustainability leaders and the often unsung or even erased (CNN, 2019) contributions that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color have made to the sustainability movement..
- Recognize how critical social justice leaders, principles and strategies have been to the environmental movement. This could look like acknowledging those traditionally recognized for their civil rights work along with others who are mentioned less frequently.

Sustainability practitioners can review their office's work to ensure and strengthen these efforts. *Building Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Into Your Sustainability Program* explores this concept further, offering some starting points and longer-term strategies. In taking all of these steps, remember that those facing challenges from institutional racism may be unused to having responsiveness from those in power, which underscores the importance of being authentic and sincere.

## Key Points

- Offers advice for forming true meaningful partnerships.
- Identifies potential ways to approach establishing collaborative synergistic relationships.
- Offers some ways for the reader to approach personal and professional growth.
- Gives examples of ways that these offices' missions may intersect and overlap.

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