



Building Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Into Your Sustainability Program



About the Authors

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Nina Morris is the Sustainability Director for the University of Pennsylvania. She and her team lead and implement university-wide sustainability efforts and work to complete the Climate Action Plan. Previously, Nina worked for ten years at the University of Virginia's Office for Sustainability. There, she served as co-chair of the Civic Engagement Subcommittee and helped found and run the Equity & Environment Fund, host environmental justice events, served as co-chair of the Facilities Management Diversity Council, and worked closely with community partners on food justice efforts.

Caylin McCamp

Caylin McCamp's previous employer required monthly full/half day DEI training. Caylin learned a lot and started to see many shared challenges and values between DEI and sustainability work. However, it was not until five years later in Caylin's master's program that the connection was made between sustainability issues are not standalone issues but symptoms of systems of domination and oppression. This was a paradigm shift for Caylin who is now working to weave this new understanding into work. Right now, that looks like rethinking the content and focus of the University of Vermont's Eco-Reps program.



“Racist power, hoarding wealth and resources, has the most to lose in the building of an equitable society.”

- Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, How to Be An Antiracist

The previous essay, *Collaboration Strategies for Sustainability Officers*, lays a strong foundation of understanding both personal and institutional relationships between sustainability and DEI efforts. This essay builds on the foundational knowledge of both individual and institutional relationships and collaborations to further define how sustainability programs can intentionally align and center DEI into sustainability programs. This essay intends to help sustainability practitioners evaluate their programs and their institutional connections so that DEI is essential and core to the work, particularly in traditional “green” programs that can be broadened to truly create sustainable change. This essay focuses on programmatic strategies, whereas the next essay covers recruitment and professional development. While not exhaustive, the categories, questions and tools below can guide sustainability practitioners to benchmark and spark new ways to advance campus sustainability within common opportunity areas. The new [STARS Sustainability Office Diversity Program exemplary practice credit](#) awards recognition for several strategies covered below.

Culture

Establishing a culture where racial equity and social justice are an integral part of sustainability is an important step for many sustainability offices and practitioners, particularly for those where sustainability is predominantly viewed through an ecological lens. Consider both the internal culture of the office, committee or division, and its champions, as well as how the work of this office is viewed externally. For example, the sustainability office could already be incorporating DEI efforts into sustainability; however, students, academic and non-academic staff that interact with the sustainability office and its practitioners may not be aware of these practices. Diversity, equity and inclusion can be weaved into cultural and literacy assessments to help sustainability practitioners develop an understanding of how others across campus view the role of DEI within the sustainability office.

Below are some strategies to establish DEI within the sustainability office, or reinforce this connection:

- Use the [White Dominant Culture & Something Different Worksheet](#) to identify the characteristics of white dominant culture and see how they show up in your workplace at the office, department and/or campus level. This resource includes alternatives or antidotes to pivot away from a white dominant culture.
- Consider visually communicating your support for racial equity and social justice through hanging signs, email signature, training certifications, etc. These can be immediate positive signals for folks who are new to your space.
- Are any employees in your office expected to have a DEI-dedicated or -focused role? What are the professional development and training expectations of your office's staff? Is DEI included, and is it considered as important as other trainings?
- Recognize the labor and expertise of external partners by instituting a policy in your office or advocating for a policy or guideline that encourages paid opportunities for participation and contributions from students, community members and outside voices on committees or other positions.
- Set a policy that requires providing food at events, particularly if events overlap with mealtimes, to minimize hunger on your campus. A number of institutions have found creative ways to encourage food recovery after events through [social media](#) and [technology](#).
- Apply collaborative decision-making tools and consider whose voices are at your table to help make or influence decisions. Whose voices are missing and why are they not included?



Guiding Statements & Definitions

Sustainability practitioners can review written statements and standards both within the sustainability office as well as the institution as a whole to identify good practices and opportunities for strengthening the connection between sustainability and diversity, equity and inclusion. Identify both the social and environmental outcomes of your project initiatives.

- Revisit your office and/or campus definition of sustainability. Is it explicit about social components? Does it focus more on the environment than other aspects?
- Revisit your office's mission or vision statement. What does it say about equity and anti-racism? See [George Mason University's Office of Sustainability's definition](#) as an example.
- If your campus has a Black Lives Matter statement, consider how you can reiterate it through your office's website and other formal communications. If your campus doesn't, look to other offices or departments on your campus, such as the Diversity, Equity & Inclusion office, or research statements from other campus sustainability offices to create your own.
- If your campus has a Indigenous Land Acknowledgement, consider how it can be included in formal communications and center land acknowledgements in conversations and events, particularly around issues of land and food. If your campus doesn't, research statements from others in your geographic area and create your own.
- A more robust approach would be developing an anti-racism/justice plan for your office. [Princeton University](#) has taken this approach by drafting an Environmental Justice Framework.

Programming

Sustainability practitioners can review existing programs with an equity lens and establish programs that reinforce the connection between DEI and sustainability. Feedback from campus climate surveys or cultural assessments and learning about using culturally responsive teaching in creating co-curricular activities can be useful in prioritization of programming changes.

- Review DEI-focused content from sustainability reports, plans and STARS content to identify the work that the institution is doing, and highlight and recognize good practices.
- For green funds or green fees, add language that incentivizes or prioritizes projects that explore the intersection of equity and the environment. See University of [Virginia's Equity & Environment Fund review rubric](#).
- Intentionally center environmental justice and equity into the project requirements for Eco-Reps or office intern programming. This can include focusing projects related to [food justice](#), [environmental justice](#), and [energy/climate justice](#).
- Create or emphasize environmental justice themes in sustainability programming, either within your office or in partnership with DEI, BIPOC or other groups.
- Develop a mentorship program, formal or informal, for students from underrepresented groups or first generation college students to increase awareness of sustainability as a career path.

Here are some programming examples that respondents shared via AASHE's [2020 Sustainability Staffing Survey](#):

- Consulted with the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives in developing a decolonization walk.
- Developed an interactive simulation activity showing the links between sustainability and social justice that is facilitated regularly
- Facilitated a workshop on unpacking whiteness
- Facilitated teaching sustainability faculty learning communities with a focus on equity and social justice
- Organized a book club for faculty and staff on Environmental Social Justice
- Co-host monthly after-work meetup events for staff and faculty of color at my institution
- Hold an annual Sustainability & Social Justice inter-organizational retreat

University Influence & Partnerships

Through strategic planning and collaboration, sustainability practitioners can further reinforce the role that DEI plays within sustainability work on campus and beyond. Strategies for university influence and partnerships include the following:

- Apply an equity lens to existing and future climate action plans and other sustainability plans for your campus. Work to set measurable goals around equity & social justice within each plan and report progress toward said goals.
- If you are asked to be a guest speaker in classes or on panels, think about how sustainability is being defined in those spaces. Is it inclusive of social issues? How will you share about what your office does?
- Start a conversation with the appropriate groups or people on your campus. You may be looking for a Chief Diversity & Equity Officer, a representative from the Office of Multicultural Affairs, Multicultural Resource Center Coordinator, a Title IX Officer, or a faculty member. You may also wish to reach out to staff who run college access programs such as TRiO or the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP).
- After establishing strong relationships with university and/or community partners, consider building a formal partnership to advance common goals. An example of this is the [University of Virginia's Civic Engagement Subcommittee's](#) response to the alt-right attack and protest in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11 and 12, 2017.
- Identify both the social and environmental outcomes of your project initiatives. Consider those most impacted by environmental degradation as part of the problem-solving process and ensure that remedies and solutions are created in collaboration with those groups.



Some campuses have taken the work of building DEI into their sustainability offices even further by actually combining the two offices:

- [California State University Monterey Bay](#) merged their Sustainability Office and Office of Inclusive Excellence.
- [Truckee Meadows Community College](#) has a combined Equity, Inclusion and Sustainability Office.
- [Central Michigan University's](#) Office for Institutional Diversity, Equity and Inclusion coordinates that institution's sustainability work.
- [Ontario College of Art & Design](#) has an Office of Diversity, Equity and Sustainability Initiatives.

Operations

University operations have historically focused on ecological aspects of sustainability, such as the reduction of waste, energy, emissions and water. However, there are a number of areas within campus operations where an emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion can be incorporated.

The physical environment is one area where efforts focused on diversity, equity and inclusion can be amplified. Specific strategies include:

- Advocate for the removal of visual signifiers of white supremacy and colonization such as confederate statues from campus lands. Recent news stories on removal of confederate monuments can be found from [University of Mississippi](#), [University of Texas at Austin](#), and [University of Louisville](#).
- Advocate for adding visual signifiers that acknowledge the harmful legacy of white supremacy and colonization on campuses such as memorials to enslaved laborers, guided campus tours that highlight history of slavery or land stolen from indigenous peoples. For example, [Frostburg State University](#) erected a monument in August 2020 that recognizes the African American community that was displaced as the campus grew.
- Consider how accessible and welcoming your spaces are to all identifies and abilities. For example, some folks need an explicit invitation to enter a space, while others feel implicit that they can go wherever they please on campus.

Institutional purchasing is another area where diversity, equity and inclusion efforts can be interwoven alongside ecological efforts. Institutions can:

- Include equity requirements or preferences in RFPs; and/or include equity criteria in the evaluation of proposals. An example of a requirement might be no prison labor; an example of a preference might be Small, Women-owned, and Minority-owned Business (SWAM) providers.
- Conduct a comprehensive spend analysis and set a goal for purchases from BIPOC and SWAM providers compared to total spend.
- Track and address food insecurity, which is more commonly experienced by BIPOC, within campus and broader communities. Address food insecurity by providing assistance in [accessing support](#), [campus food pantries](#), and [free meal swipes](#).

Communications

Incorporating racial equity and social justice into communications about sustainability is among the most effective ways toward establishing a culture that views equity and social justice as integral to sustainability. By centering work in racial equity, sustainability practitioners can send a clear message that sustainability and social justice are interconnected. Communications through the sustainability office should reiterate that when the ecosystems suffer, members of historically underrepresented groups suffer disproportionately.

Specific strategies to incorporate DEI in sustainability communications include the following:

- Ensure that your programs are approachable to a diverse audience by incorporating a wide range of channels.
- Apply a social justice lens for all elements of marketing, including images, video, design, style and tone, and not just language.
- When content planning, highlight events, resources and articles that address environmental justice and the connections between racial inequity and environmental issues.
- Consider using a weekly or monthly theme to highlight DEI and environmental justice conversations.
- Re-share and credit content from BIPOC experts on climate and sustainability.
- Identify ways to reach beyond the sustainability choir. This could involve reshare content from DEI offices, identity centers and similar groups, and developing campaigns in partnership with these groups.
- Before approving content, review material for implicit bias or white privilege. Consider how the material will be perceived by the full spectrum of your audience, if any identities are being excluded or overrepresented, and who the content primarily benefits. Ensure the images you use are reflective of your campus community.

Closing Thoughts

Incorporating diversity, equity and inclusion into sustainability programs is a critical step in advancing sustainability, particularly for those institutions where sustainability has been traditionally viewed through a “green” lens. In addition to introducing DEI programs and standards, the way that these offerings are communicated to the broader campus community is just as important to consider. The strategies outlined in this essay and within Attracting and Developing Diverse and/or Socially-Minded Sustainability Officers, can serve as a guide toward achieving the goal of establishing a campus culture that is truly just and sustainable for all.



Key Points

- Outlines how to evaluate sustainability programs to ensure DEI essential and core to the work.
- Offers questions, actions, and tools under the common program or institutional themes.
- Highlights best practices for both broad action plans and incremental opportunities.