



Attracting and Developing Diverse and Socially-Minded Sustainability Officers



About the Authors

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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.

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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.



“Climate action cannot move forward until there is an active desire to transform the green movement to be more inclusive and to give black environmentalists the platform to share their innovation and unique perspectives. It’s about time that our voices and stories were no longer silenced and cast aside within the environmental community. It’s time for black people to claim their rightful seat at the green table.”

- Lauren Ritchie

Introduction

Environmental staff in the United States are less diverse than staff in other areas within higher education. According to a report from Green 2.0, “Despite increasing racial diversity in the United States, the racial composition in environmental organizations and agencies has not broken the 12-16% ‘green ceiling’ that has been in place for decades.” (Taylor, 2014.) The racial composition of sustainability staff in higher education has fared no better. In AASHE’s [2020 Sustainability Staffing Survey report](#), 83% of respondents identified as white or caucasian, down from 88% in 2017. Higher education as a whole has a slightly more diverse rate of racial composition: the American Council on Education’s status report in 2016 found that “People of Color made up 20-25% of faculty, academic staff, and executive leadership.” The same survey also found “students were more likely to encounter People of Color in service roles than in faculty or leadership positions.” The new [STARS Sustainability Officer Diversity Program exemplary practice credit](#) awards recognition for many of the strategies covered below. [Saint Mary’s College of California](#), [George Washington University](#) and [Hobart and William Smith Colleges](#) have all pursued this credit and are good examples of putting these practices in place.

Attracting Talent

It will be difficult to attract diverse and/or social-justice minded sustainability professionals to your workplace if DEI is not a demonstrated priority for the institution or your office, or you are unable to demonstrate that your community is welcoming to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in this traditionally white-dominated field. Most job postings include a description of the campus when shared externally. Do positions in your sustainability office mention a commitment to DEI beyond being an equal opportunity employer? If possible, name some practices of the campus like an inclusive excellence plan, required employee training or student courses. In the description about your office, commit to advancing social justice in addition to environmental sustainability efforts. Be as specific as possible. For example, a recent job posting from [University of California, Santa Cruz](#) stated a commitment to working to advance environmental sustainability and social justice, “with a central focus on advancing multi-culturally relevant and inclusive approaches to caring for the environment.”

Integrating social justice and sustainability is not the work of one person but instead needs to be embedded into all programs and practices. Hiring a dedicated DEI position for a sustainability office can be helpful in developing that ethic, but the work cannot exist only within a DEI role. It is especially not the responsibility of non-DEI dedicated staff of color to take on the extra unpaid time and emotional labor of filling that void. The median size of a sustainability office is two full time non-student staff, (AASHE, 2020) so it is unlikely for a dedicated DEI role to exist, reinforcing the need for collective responsibility. Because of these small sizes, there are also limited hiring opportunities and the diversity of the office’s staff should be seriously evaluated during hiring processes. Formally adding DEI responsibilities into an existing position and incorporating them into the job description is a way to develop your current staff’s skill set when you aren’t currently hiring. It also demonstrates a commitment that may help you attract diverse and/or DEI-minded applicants in the future.

Developing Skills to Connect Environmentalism with Social Justice

As outlined in [Equity is Great, but What Does it Have to Do with Sustainability?](#), the environmental movement has not always included a social justice orientation and has even been overtly hostile by framing social issues as roadblocks slowing down progress on policy or technology. Not all existing sustainability officers see this connection or feel like it is part of their role to act on it. Offering or requiring training on this topic can help current staff develop their competencies in this area. Working toward anti-racism is a lifelong journey, so those with competence should also continue to refine and exercise their skills.



Competency Table

The table below organizes competencies around specific topics to help identify the practices and knowledge that can demonstrate capacity in each topic. These competencies can be included in position descriptions for hiring, used in performance reviews or as a tool to assess gaps and identify professional development opportunities for yourself or existing employees. These are goals to strive for and it is not realistic that each employee will meet each competency in full. Individual identity will play into this as well, as these competencies are an inherent mode of operation for some and an intentionally developed ethic and practice for others. Use discretion to interpret the applicability and relevance of these competencies in your own workplace.

Topic Area	Competency
Inclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitates/designs inclusive meetings, decision-making processes, programs and policies Able to center those negatively impacted by racism and/or is able to speak from personal experience and apply that to other situations
Culturally Competent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness of one's own cultural heritage, how it affects their worldview, values and assumptions Has a positive attitude towards difference and effectively communicates, interacts and builds collaborations with people across difference
Embodies a Learning Stance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Committed to ongoing learning and improvement in the constantly evolving areas of sustainability and DEI Open to change with the belief that it is necessary and positive
Understands DEI in Higher Education & Sustainability Contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands the nature of institutional power and systemic oppression Understands the history of higher education institutions and how white supremacy and settler-colonialism manifests on campuses today Understands the history of racism in the environmental movement and the connections between systemic racism and environmental issues today
Integrates DEI into Sustainability Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Able to frame and integrate social equity considerations into sustainability projects and programs Able to identify common goals between campus sustainability and DEI efforts Seeks partnerships with community and institutional DEI experts/groups to advance common goals Experienced in diverse stakeholder engagement processes and able to make connections beyond the environmental community
Personal Commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listens, learns, and has done the work to research injustices from different perspectives, analyze them, unpack their own role in oppression, and commit to improving/advancing. Acts and is seen as an ally Dedication to justice, social change, and combating oppression Competent in bystander intervention skills Is able to define and takes an anti-racist stance.

Example Interview Questions

If you are looking for these competencies in the person you hire, it's important to explicitly include them in your hiring process. It is best to integrate these topics throughout the process instead of relegating them to a separate section. Here are some ways to assess a candidate's competence, adapted from [The Management Center](#):

Integration: Make DEI abundant and integrated throughout.

- Have candidates demonstrate their understanding in the context of other topics by asking specific follow-up questions, e.g., "How did you account for racial equity and inclusion in that project?"
- Have candidates interact with a cross-section of your team that is diverse both in role and across identities. Then observe and ask for feedback from those people, with an eye for patterns or discrepancies.

Articulated understanding: Ask candidates to explain one of the knowledge-based competencies by rephrasing it into a question. For example:

- "Explain the connection between systemic racism and environmental/sustainability issues as you understand it"
- "What does environmental/climate justice mean to you?"
- "How would you explain why our office considers DEI and sustainability to be inextricably linked to a new stakeholder?"

Demonstrated experience: To go deeper than an articulation of the issues, ask questions about experience with DEI in the workplace. Be mindful that some people, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, could have very personal and negative experiences and not want to dwell on these retellings in an interview. This is another place where discretion is important and candidates shouldn't be rated based on the detail of their storytelling.

- "To what extent has pursuing racial or other types of equity and inclusion been a priority in your work, and how did you approach it?"
- "Can you talk about a time you navigated tricky dynamics around race or other identities in your work?"
- "What have you learned from your experiences addressing DEI in the workplace?"

Scenarios and simulations: Ask candidates to complete an exercise or run through a situation similar to what they'd be doing on the job, and include an equity and inclusion challenge. If your office or the institution already have goals or values in this area, you could build off of those.

- “Here’s a recent newsletter we sent. We’d like to get better at weaving in social justice and DEI content in this outlet. How would you make that better?”
- “Our programs serve students and employees of many different ages, backgrounds and experiences. How would you approach doing outreach to our diverse audience?”
- “We rely on partnerships across and beyond campus to be successful in our work. What stakeholders (beyond the typical environmental community) do you see as critical to campus sustainability work?”

Closing Thoughts

While institutional practices around hiring vary, as hiring managers and members of hiring committees, we have the power to ensure that we hire candidates with a strong understanding of the connection between equity and sustainability and who are drawn from diverse candidate pools. Even if hiring new sustainability staff is not possible, offering professional development opportunities to existing employees can ensure that sustainability programs and offerings meet the needs of everyone, but especially those that have been historically marginalized.

References:

- AASHE. (2020). [Salaries and Statuses of Sustainability Professionals in Higher Education](#).
Taylor, D. (2014, June). [The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations](#). *Mainstream NGOs, Foundations & Government Agencies*. Prepared for Green 2.0.
- The Management Center. (n.d.). [3 Ways to Test for Racial Equity & Inclusion Competency](#). Retrieved October 02, 2020.

Key Points

- Higher education and sustainability are traditionally white-dominated fields. To attract diverse and/or social-justice minded talent, a commitment to DEI/RESJ should be demonstrated by your office/campus throughout the hiring process.
- Competency Table can be used to identify areas to provide professional development and training for existing employees.
- Competencies can be transformed into interview questions to assess the knowledge, experience, and commitment of applicants.