



# Change Comes from the Margins: Sustainability Efforts in Community-Campus Partnerships

*By Spoma Jovanovic and Etsuko Kinefuchi*



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## Coming to Terms with Racial Inequalities and Social Injustices

The past year brought with it unprecedented disruption, turmoil and change fueled by unsettling police brutality and ongoing racial tensions, an attempted political coup at our nation's Capitol in Washington, DC, and the reverberating impacts worldwide of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, civic engagement in communities and on college campuses soared.

The murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer brought racial injustices into sharp relief. In tandem with the pandemic, many saw more clearly how racial disparities relate to economic and physical well-being as evidenced by mortality rates that soared among Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other historically marginalized communities. Confronted with these horrific losses came troubling ontological questions. Looking inward requires that we ask, who are we, individually, as communities, and as a society? How can we best express what we value? Looking outward, we wonder how our public policies and practices demonstrate appreciation for diversity, inclusion, and sustainability? What authentic moves, if any, can each of us make to amplify voices from the margins that can lead us to needed changes?

Amid strife, community members in some cases joined with, and in others, pressured institutions of higher learning to plan and attend protests, advance social justice education, challenge legislation deliberately undermining free speech and dissent, and implement creative solutions to address complex issues in a country seemingly at war with itself. Statements supporting equity, diversity, and justice poured forth, with anxious eyes wondering if genuine change would follow. Time will tell.



Survivors of the Greensboro Massacre, and friends, walk to the first of three public hearings hosted by the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Photo credit: International Center for Transitional Justice

These epic disruptions caused some to reconsider what should be the focus of higher education in advancing sustainability to address unjust economic, political, health, gender, environmental, racial, and cultural conditions. A distant or neutral approach to teaching and learning no longer suffices; it ignores the material conditions of students and community members unable to pay their rent, get medical care, afford the rising costs of food, and manage the state of fear in which they are living. It also fails to examine how these conditions are entangled with anthropogenic ecological crises such as climate change and diminishing biodiversity. Instead, the time is right for radical, local changes to name the oppressions built into the fabric of our systems, on our campuses, and in our communities.

For academic staff not yet involved in their communities, as well as those already active in communities, redoubling efforts to teach how democracy works is a crucial step toward achieving sustainable social change. Students (and in some cases, academic and non-academic staff) benefit when instructors: present language, arguments, and research that illuminate the interlocking nature of oppressions; introduce students to local places and people where they can actively work with others to address injustices perpetrated against under-resourced populations; educate about the many advances in our society that have historically come from community organizers and activists; and provide the instruction needed for students and community members to confidently express themselves in contested public spaces and build empowering relationships.

## Cultivating Resilient Community Collaborations

One of the profound lessons of this past year of concurrent public health crises and racial injustices is the imperative of cultivating resilient community collaborations to advance sustainability. For colleges and universities, this means heightening the importance of community engagement that focuses on building knowledge and power to create social change (Stoecker, 2016). Indeed, sustainability is just only when communities actively collaborate in “setting the table” (Agyeman, 2013, p. 148). Sustainability is strengthened when community engaged academic staff and students work as allies, with deep respect for community members who resist oppression and domination. Iris Marion Young persuasively writes that while respect needs to be reciprocal in the encounter, the relationship itself remains “asymmetrical in terms of the history each has” (1997, p. 41). Colleges are large and integral to the human and ecological systems of the communities in which they reside and thus bear a greater responsibility to sustainability efforts than the under-resourced organizations with whom they partner. Community allies are uniquely positioned to guide society in identifying the social justice issues to which higher education ought to pay attention, and in animating how the issues can be best addressed through strong partnerships.



Community members, 16 years and older, cast votes for favored projects in final phase of Greensboro's Participatory Budgeting. Photo credit: Spoma Jovanovic

We all benefit when we pay attention to how larger societal and ecological problems manifest themselves in our communities and the ways in which communities respond to those problems. The racial and public health crises, for example, have magnified already existing problems. The shutdowns due to COVID-19 exacerbated the financial hardships of vulnerable segments of our communities, compromising their ability to maintain the most basic human needs such as food and housing. Feeding America (2021) estimates that the food-insecure population in the United States jumped from 35 million in 2019 to 45 million in 2020. While food insecurity is complex, consisting of multiple concomitant social and individual factors, research shows that people of color are at higher risk for food insecurity even when other factors are removed, thus signaling the impact of structural racism (Odoms-Young, 2018; Morales, Morales, & Beltran, 2020).

## Greensboro, NC Partnerships

Across the country, community organizations have stepped up to address these urgent needs. In our city, Greensboro, North Carolina, for instance, amid the pandemic, a new non-profit organization, [the Guilford Urban Farming Initiative](#) (GUFI), set up a weekly farmers market featuring mainly Black farmers and vendors. In a largely Black, low-income neighborhood, the market offers affordable fresh food access to the residents and provides additional income opportunities for [historically marginalized Black farmers](#). GUFI also partnered with a Black church to transform its expansive lawn into a dynamic urban farm offering a myriad of fresh vegetables, nutrition education programs, and community-building activities. Local university students and academic staff have been integral to these efforts by investing time through service-learning courses, internships, and research. In the process, the students, instructors, and staff have increased their knowledge about racial and social inequities by becoming part of important, place-based solutions that are already making positive impacts, and in the future, could be adapted for campus programming as well. The community is leading the way in demonstrating how sustainable change happens.



GUFI volunteers weeding at the Garden of Peace. Photo credit: Etsuko Kinefuchi

The racial injustice exposed through the killing of Black Americans by police officers across the country is another sustainability exigency where colleges can play a critical role with student and academic involvement. [The Beloved Community Center](#) (BCC), also in Greensboro, has been on the front lines of community organizing for police accountability since its founding more than 30 years ago. The organization's doors are open to students and community members for weekly inter-generational dialogues, where people from different backgrounds and races share their personal stories of injustice, part of a larger discourse that too often is denied to People of Color in our society. The process leads young people to a social justice consciousness even if they have been previously sheltered from the experience of prejudice and discrimination (Sanford, 2019). The weekly dialogues are a base that the BCC uses to support grassroots coalitions prioritizing change targeted at the systemic roots of injustice. That the effort is Black-led in a country dominated by white ideology is significant, and offers a prime learning ground for students of all ages and races. It illustrates how campus sustainability efforts will proceed best when led by those whose voices have previously been silenced (and are often most heavily impacted).

Taking cues from community members ensures that their experiences of how power operates and how ethics are advanced or undermined are the bases of social change action. In Greensboro, two major efforts in the 21st century, both led by ordinary people and supported by area students who invested their time and efforts over a period of years, brought democracy directly to the people: first, a truth and reconciliation process and second, participatory budgeting.

As it would turn out, the [United States' first Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) (TRC) launched in 2004 in Greensboro. For two years, and using a variety of discourse models, approximately 10,000 members of the community considered how policing, race, political ideology, and economics led to the fatal [Greensboro Massacre](#) 25 years earlier. In seeking truth, the community secured sustained changes including new government anti-racism programming, a commitment to pay a living wage, a new media-community board, development of related educational materials, long overdue apologies and a historical marker (Jovanovic, 2012).

Buoyed by the impact of the TRC, residents organized again, this time to secure a [participatory budgeting](#) (PB) process in 2016. PB empowers communities through a social justice model of dialogue, deliberation, and change to impact how the city's budget is used (Russell & Jovanovic, 2019). People begin by brainstorming together to surface ideas they believe will benefit their community before narrowing those down to detailed project proposals for voting by anyone 16 years or older. In Greensboro's first PB process, 26 projects totalling \$500,000 were implemented at the direction of the people, using money in the city's general funds. Residents educated each other about the city and neighborhood needs, as well as how to navigate the processes of government to secure the projects desired, in a cycle to repeat every two years.

## The Impacts of Strong Partnerships and Deep Listening

Environmental educator-scholar David Orr (2004) writes that "we cannot say that we know something until we understand the effects of this knowledge on real people and their communities" (p. 13). This suggests the primacy of community and campus-community partnerships in generating and validating knowledge as shown in the above examples. Such partnerships require authentic and sustained presence in the community - presence that begins with listening. Darby Ray (2016), director of the Harvard Center for Community Partnerships at Bates College, emphasizes the importance of deep listening, where our preconceived purposes are bracketed, and listening occurs for the sake of others and on others' own terms. Deep listening, Ray observes, can be both unsettling and emancipatory as it can expose blind spots in our thinking and inspire new approaches and priorities.

Racial equity education and action emerge from deep listening to local communities, and can spark meaningful campus equity, diversity, and inclusion programming. Similarly, working with local organizations to address fundamental community needs such as food security, offers a pathway for generating grounded knowledge and putting into practice changes in the community and on campus that focus on social and environmental justice. Students and academic staff who work to address food insecurity, for instance, may learn that the lack of affordable, fresh, nutritious food in particular neighborhoods is not best called a "food desert" but instead is a problem of the food system entangled with racial, economic, and other injustices that is better understood as [food apartheid](#). This knowledge and new language, in turn, can invigorate new food programs and related pedagogy, as well as actions on campus to feed hungry students and community members as a communal responsibility and a matter requiring structural change. Educating students on how to communicate ethically about food policy builds confidence and skills needed for advocacy and social change.

AASHE defines sustainability as “encompassing human and ecological health, racial equity and social justice, secure livelihoods, and a better world for all generations.” It is important to note that none of these goals can be achieved without also examining how power is woven throughout decision making and the ways in which the ethical stance of responsibility for others is forwarded, recognizing that all spheres of the lifeworld are interconnected. In fact, the notion of interconnectedness is one of the most primary ecological principles (Commoner, 1974) to which humans are also subjected. This principle needs to guide the relationship between colleges and their surrounding communities.

College campuses may be able to elevate their sustainability status by increasing the number of environmental and social justice-related courses and improving campus operations. However, campus sustainability is not fully addressed without engaging the members of the local communities. If they are struggling with inequities that do not directly impact our campus cultures, we must not ignore or turn away from our neighbors’ plight, for sustainability is linked to our collective, not individual well-being. Deep listening to community voices is vital for changing the discourse of sustainability on campus to reflect complex rather than simple solutions. This latter point is worth emphasizing, more specifically by following the advice of scholar Henry Giroux (2021) who says we need to question and find in language the narratives of resistance that challenge inequities.



Neighbors gather to brainstorm about what their community needs in the first phase of Greensboro’s Participatory Budgeting. Photo credit: Spoma Jovanovic

# Higher Education's Role in Supporting Social Change

Social change comes from coordinated and collective action, over time. Institutions of higher education can be more active partners in the process by:

- Recognizing that community members are the experts in their own communities, and thus should be supported in leading social change efforts.
- Committing to concrete deeds in the community to publicly advance social justice that seeks to ensure equity for all.
- Making it a priority to build and sustain partnerships with under-resourced grassroots organizations in addition to well-established nonprofits and government entities.
- Supporting new and importantly, long-term academic-community partnerships with funding, recognition, and other forms of institutional support.
- Developing meaningful opportunities for community partners to be compensated fairly for assisting with instruction and research.
- Encouraging collaborative, diverse partnerships on campus and in community-campus projects.
- Prioritizing spaces for public expressions of dialogue, deliberation, debate, and decision-making.
- Providing resources and encouragement for academic staff, students, and community partners to participate in local, democratic processes that promote equitable, just community-building.



GUFI volunteers (students and community members) seeding on MLK day. Photo credit: Etsuko Kinefuchi

If we want educational institutions and the students who attend them to be active civic agents in advancing sustainable actions, ones resilient enough to withstand the difficult times in which we live, then we all “need to be exposed not only to social problems, but also to the democratic means by which change happens within political systems” (Jovanovic, Moretto & Edwards, 2017, p. 26). By doing so, we become members in what Benjamin Barber (1984) calls a strong democracy with involved citizens who recognize conflict as a means of airing differences worthy of consideration. Confronting conflict while also coming to a deep understanding of our communities, offers the most hopeful path to expressing principles of sustainability to resist injustice in all its forms. In this way, we can work collectively to bring about solutions befitting the human condition.

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