



# Decentering Whiteness, Growing Racial Equity, and Rethinking the Call to “Decolonize” Sustainability in Higher Education

*By Todd LeVasseur*



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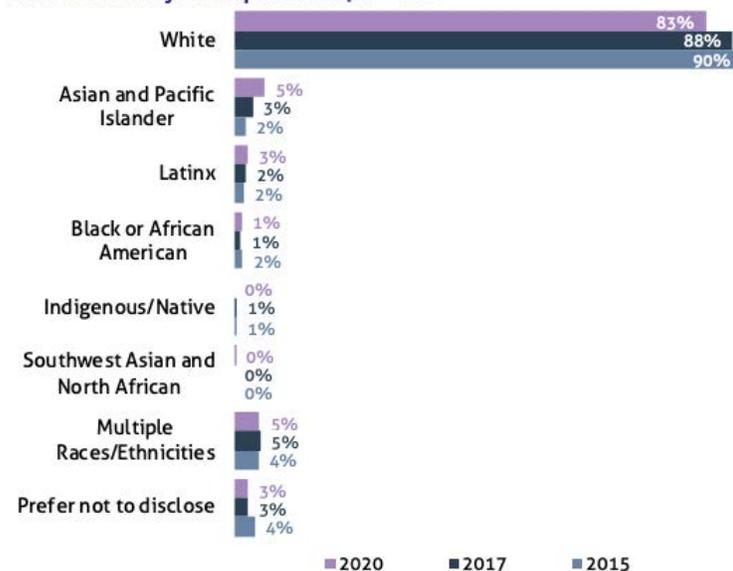
# Introduction

This essay reflects on experiences directing a sustainability-across-the-curricula reaccreditation project at the College of Charleston (CofC); and the growing calls to bring diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) competencies, practices, and policies into the Academy. The latter includes a growing recognition about the cost of emotional labor in DEI initiatives and the need to create spaces of emancipation and structural empowerment for those “otherized” within the to-date whiteness of the Academy (Ballard, et al 2020). The (sadly still) needed calls for DEI competencies (the ability to understand what diversity, equity, and inclusion are/are not), practices (how to create truly equitable spaces that center diversity and inclusion across the entirety of curricular, co-curricular, and operational spaces within a university), and policies (how to structurally and financially support DEI initiatives and embed them throughout an institute) have gained further impetus with the public lynching of George Floyd and subsequent global protests for Black lives in 2020. This essay begins with discussing whiteness in the Academy, including problematic calls to “decolonize” higher education. It then shares the author’s experience grappling with DEI/sustainability issues at CofC, and concludes with possible action items for those laboring within sustainability in higher education (SHE) spaces to address ongoing structural gaps around diversifying sustainability within SHE and in the Academy, more broadly.

## Whiteness in the Academy

To discuss the confluence of SHE and DEI issues in the Academy, it is important to recognize that the Academy is still a largely white space, perpetuating the pernicious ills, whether knowingly or unknowingly, of settler colonialisms. Here whiteness means the centering and privileging of white images/constructs of value, white knowledge systems, and white approaches to educational administration and research. This whiteness is derived from European antecedents and is historically codified in the formation of the Academy through publishing houses and tenure/promotion; and is structurally seen by the approximately 73% of faculty with tenure/faculty of teaching in the Academy who are white (Espinosa, et al., 2016). This whiteness is also in the built environment of higher education, with many of the US’s oldest campuses benefitting from enslaved labor in the construction of buildings, often on unceded and stolen lands of Indigenous peoples. Thus, the Academy is grafted onto the violent dispossession (past and present) of Indigenous communities. This means that those in DEI/SHE spaces must be honest about what the Academy has always been and still largely is: both a justification for and of settler colonialisms; and the still-ongoing violent takings of BIPOC bodies and the ecologies-of-alive places of a living earth. In short, the Academy, and for the most part the to-date history of SHE, are built on Eurocentric logics of extraction, domination, growthism, and fungibility of non-white bodies (Yusoff 2018), as well as poor white bodies.

Race & Ethnicity of Respondents | N = 439



Respondents to the question, “What is your race/ethnicity?” in AASHE’s 2020 Higher Education Sustainability Staffing Survey.

Within SHE, one immediate example of the to-date hegemonic centering of whiteness is seen in the demographics of those in attendance at most AASHE meetings, or the self-reported 83% of respondents to AASHE's most recent Sustainability Staffing Survey who identify as white (vs. 14% as BIPOC or mixed [2020]). One must ask why sustainability is demographically still seen as a thing largely for white faculty and administrators and campuses. And a follow up example, based on available data on the STARS reporting website: Why have so few HBCUs participated in generating a STARS report, if such a report is the standard reporting on SHE issues for any institution in the Academy (AASHE STARS, 2021)?

## The Colonization of "Decolonization"

This perpetuation of whiteness and settler inequalities is expertly shared by two scholars on the Academy's "ironic colonization" (my term) of the term "decolonization." As Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang write, using decolonization to update well-meaning concerns about social justice and racial justice issues to now include the need to address wrongs to Indigenous voices and agency as perpetrated by settler society, including in the Academy, is a "kind of inclusion [that] is a form of enclosure, dangerous in how it domesticates decolonization" (2012: 3). They continue, adroitly pointing out how decolonization as metaphor "kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future...The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation" (pg. 3). Given this, in their reading, "Decolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity" (pg. 35) and suggests (demands?) an "ethic of incommensurability" (pg. 28) between various liberation movements, including those in education (and thus the DEI movements as theorized in this collection of AASHE-sponsored essays), and the actual verb-and-noun needs and demands of decolonization.

For Tuck and Yang, doing/enacting decolonization in the Academy must be an Indigenous led movement based on Indigenous needs, futures, self-governance, and consensus. This does not mean that white and Black/Latinx/Asian/Pacific Islander advocates for equity and emancipation in educational spaces (including sustainability spaces) cannot partner with Indigenous decolonization movements in specific contexts. Here, Tuck and Yang end by explaining that where incommensurate temporary coalitions may be built is in "Breaking the settler colonial trifecta, [which] in direct terms, means repatriating land to sovereign Native tribes and nations, abolition of slavery in its contemporary forms, and the dismantling of the imperial metropole" (pg. 31).

The indigenous doctoral student Nikki McDaid (2021) continues in this vein, tweeting that "All y'all non-Indigenous 'decolonial' scholars aren't really doing decolonial work unless you are collaborating with Indigenous scholars and communities. If your work doesn't have Indigenous sovereignty as one of the end goals, it isn't decolonial." Campus and SHE leadership who are committed to decolonial coalitions must grapple with this sentiment, as well.



Nikki McDaid  
@nikkimcdaid1

All y'all non-Indigenous 'decolonial' scholars aren't really doing decolonial work unless you are collaborating with Indigenous scholars and communities. If your work doesn't have Indigenous sovereignty as one of the end goals, it isn't decolonial.

2:33 PM · Jun 12, 2021 · Twitter for Android

456 Retweets 15 Quote Tweets 1,985 Likes



Source: Twitter, 2021.



## Sustainability and DEI Issues at CofC

The issue of whiteness in the Academy is one that many in DEI/SHE spaces struggle with, and CofC is no exception. For example, CofC has found that students are not internalizing consistent messaging about social equity within the sustainability triple bottom line. One of the first topics covered during a triple bottom line presentation offered to all students during a first year experience (FYE) course is “Sustainability is not about just recycling, and it’s not about white environmental concerns.” This is strategically covered early in students’ first year to provide a pathway for discussing social and economic systems and environmental racism as sustainability issues, therefore making sustainability more relevant to the 20% of students at CofC who are BIPOC. It is also emphasized because sustainability has historically been collapsed into recycling by those who are not doing SHE work. Do CofC students internalize this message? Data from an end-of-semester survey of these same students suggests that they are not. When asked a question about ways they can be more sustainable in daily life and how those choices connect to the triple bottom line, 80% of answers are a succinct “Recycle, to protect the environment.” This suggests that CofC’s largely white student body carries with it the perception that sustainability is just about recycling, and despite efforts to broaden this understanding, students do not seem to dislodge this stereotype. The centering of whiteness stands, despite decentering whiteness throughout the 50-minute sustainability module and through other sustainability and social justice programming offered to first year students via partnerships with DEI offices on campus.

This collapsing of sustainability to recycling in order to protect the environment, seen consistently over five years of survey data, is a continual frustration, as Charleston is a rich location for numerous discussions about how social, environmental, and economic systems interact to have made unsustainable systems. Charleston was the key port of entry for enslaved African bodies to the United States; the 2015 Mother Emanuel terrorist attack by white supremacist Dylan Roof occurred 2 blocks from campus; and the city is going through rapid gentrification that has a strong climate justice component. Lastly, and as at many higher education institutions, the history of colonization and settler power is literally constructed into the landscape of both the city and the campus itself, where many buildings were made by enslaved labor, and where at CofC, the “inner sanctum” of the central administrative building has plaques on the wall glorifying white colonizers of the African continent who were CofC alum.

This FYE end-of-semester survey data from CofC suggests that SHE faculty and staff who support strengthening DEI goals in the Academy have their work cut out for them, as it will likely require consistent labor and messaging to educate faculty, staff, students, alum, and donors alike that sustainability is not just about recycling; and that sustainability must center DEI issues in order to have relevance. Those in SHE must challenge SHE as a structural whole, especially if those operating in a campus’s sustainability space are white, to proactively build capacity and partnerships around campus with those leading DEI efforts. This means sharing sustainability resources while decentering programming needs to support-from-behind those on campus leading DEI issues.



The central ceremonial space of the College, within one of its oldest continually used buildings. Photo credit: Todd LeVasseur

## Possible Pathways Towards Bridging DEI and SHE

To bridge the divide between DEI and SHE, SHE practitioners should advocate and argue for an imagined future of SHE that moves beyond its current construction as a largely white space featuring white techno-optimist moves (Zylinska, 2018) of carbon and zero waste management and piecemeal curricular interventions. Such a hoped shift actively centers social issues along with environmental concerns, and builds upon to-date ineffective criticisms of neoliberal capitalism. It would involve transitioning SHE to something deeper, more transformational, and more intersectionally just that decenters whiteness and advocates for degrowth (on degrowth, see Pilling, 2018, and how neoliberal capitalism negatively impacts BIPOC communities, see Chattopadhyay, 2019). Given the current demographics of SHE, this imagined future is in support of SHE “Being well and White [by] rejecting Whiteness for the good of humanity,” (Love 2019, 160). This rejection must be central to SHE in its staffing, goals, operations, and outcomes, as signaled by this larger collection of essays.

These efforts to decenter the inherited whiteness of SHE should be done based on DEI metrics with a focus on how climate change tipping points rapidly being crossed will exacerbate climate justice issues. Such a focus will allow for SHE to address the triad of Tuck and Yang shared earlier: “Breaking the settler colonial trifecta, [which] in direct terms, means repatriating land to sovereign Native tribes and nations, abolition of slavery in its contemporary forms, and the dismantling of the imperial metropole.” Are those in SHE/DEI spaces ready and willing to advocate for the active repatriation of resources at respective institutions and campuses back to Indigenous communities, first, and then to other communities of color? Will AASHE take the lead in advocating for repatriation or including it in STARS metrics? As for abolition of slavery--are those in SHE spaces ready to demand of Procurement/Business practices that campuses become Fair Trade and Fair Labor campuses, despite increases in costs this would entail? And what of the hidden enslavement tethered to the Academy’s collective use of fossil fuels, and the very real damages the violent extraction of such ancient sunlight has on frontline communities the world over, often through forced labor of those in such communities? And if these DEI-focused strategies are currently nonstarters, then how authentic are those in SHE spaces in enacting sustainability on campuses and throughout the Academy?

This brings SHE to a tension and inflection point. This collection of essays is a recognition by AASHE that on issues of DEI, SHE has failed, and is still failing. This is not an indictment of AASHE or SHE, but rather a reflection of systemic racism and the Academy’s to-date failing on these issues. As degrowth expert Jason Hickel explains, “We are not permitted to question capitalism and the conquest of nature. To do so is considered a kind of heresy” (2020, 248). Yet true sustainability requires a rapid degrowth and dematerialization of [Global North economies](#). It means stopping the use of fossil fuels, and redefining what counts as a good life while foregrounding climate repatriations and intersectional justice. This means rapid decarbonization, changing metrics of economic success, and moving to a closed-loop, steady state economy. The Academy must shift to supporting this new mandate, and those operating in SHE must catalyze these conversations and actions.



Diagram of Global North economies, as depicted by the Brandt Line. Source: Royal Geographical Society

Given the strong overlap between environmental racism, wealth inequalities based on race, and the ongoing power of whiteness in the Academy, the SHE movement must study “Whiteness, White rage, and violence [as] a fundamental step to moving from ally to coconspirator” (Love 2019, 144). What this study and teaching (Kernahan 2019) of whiteness will resemble is up for each campus to determine, but unless there is a deep commitment by sustainability leaders to incorporate a DEI presence, then SHE will remain complicit in the ongoing violence to BIPOC bodies while being stunted by white fragility (Diangelo 2018). A DEI focused SHE must also learn to co-become with the bioecological places where each campus dwells in its operation (Bawaka, et al. 2015, 2016), or SHE will remain complicit in the ongoing violence against earth and non-human earthen bodies, as well.

While repatriation may be a non-starter at this time at most higher education institutions, to aid in moving SHE into actively incorporating DEI insights, the following ideas, in no particular order, are offered (recognizing that some of these may also be non-starters for cultural, financial or other reasons). Nonetheless, a sustainable future requires efforts to bring these, or similar actions, to fruition:

- Establishing a student fee where monies raised will support a BIPOC-staffed and focused sustainability group; and/or be used to transition facilities to a decarbonized future through BIPOC student involvement;
- Working with students and Boards to pass resolutions that require a campus become Fair Trade and Fair Labor certified, and requiring a living wage for the lowest-paid workers;
- Working with Academic Affairs, Faculty Senates, and Deans to require all new teaching hires, at whatever level, to have basic fluency in DEI and Sustainability competencies, and ensuring that these competencies are taught, regardless of discipline;
- Working with Administrators and/or Advancement Officers to pass a resolution calling for the creation of a Center for Repatriations (or some such title) that offers scholarships to BIPOC students and that works with Indigenous communities to give back land;
- Combining the physical spaces, and eventually administrative support, for DEI and SHE efforts on a campus, to facilitate collaboration and alignment of mission, fit, and purpose;
- Advocating for STARS metrics that reward points for the above, and working toward improving performance for those DEI metrics that are already covered.

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