



# Moving from “Sustaina-splaining” to Inclusion: Three Practitioners’ Learning Journeys

*By Elida Erickson, Ariel Stevenson, Juliana Goodlaw-Morris*



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Elida Erickson joined the University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC) campus in 2005, and the Sustainability Office in 2011. She has collaborated with the local Santa Cruz community, students, faculty and staff to support waste reduction and education, as well as reduce campus water usage by 25% at the height of the California statewide drought in 2014-15. In her current role as Sustainability Director, she is a strong advocate for student engagement and professional growth, and is passionate about challenging the sustainability movement to open up to multi-culturally relevant interpretations of how to care for the environment. She played a foundational role in the development of UCSC’s award-winning People of Color Sustainability Collective. Elida holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Loyola University New Orleans, and Master of Science in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration from Indiana University.

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Ariel Stevenson is the Director of Programs & Initiatives for the Office of Inclusive Excellence at California State University, San Marcos (CSUSM). She has over 15 years of experience in higher education as a facilitator, instructor and practitioner in the area of equity and social justice. She is a co-creator of the Environmental Justice Internship program, received the 2021 President’s Award for Inclusive Excellence & Diversity and the 2021 Employee of the Year at CSUSM. She currently works closely with students, faculty, staff and the wider campus community. Ariel received her M.A. in Sociological Practice from CSU San Marcos and her dual B.A. degrees in Sociology and Political Science with a minor in Latin American studies from Albright College in Pennsylvania. Currently, she is an educational doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign.

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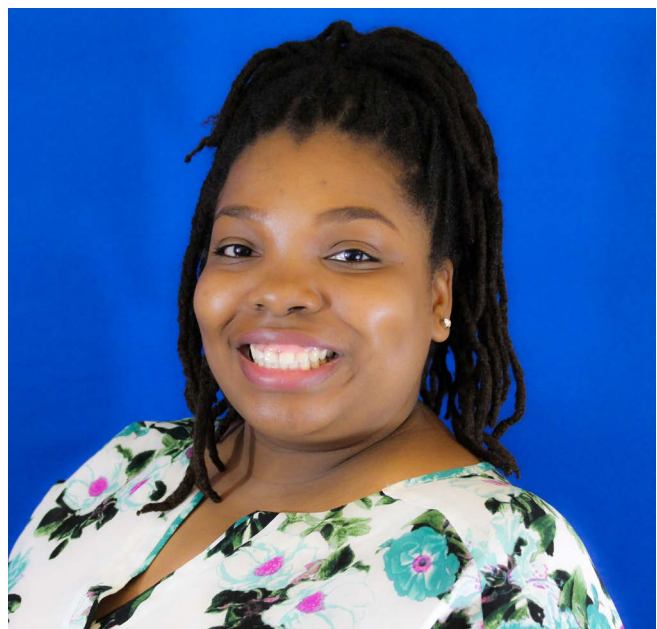
Juliana Goodlaw-Morris joined California State University San Marcos (CSUSM) as the Sustainability Manager in 2015. Juliana works with students, staff, and faculty to create a culture of inclusive sustainability. She engages with faculty to create transformative academic opportunities for students to connect their education to real-life learning through developing the campus as a living laboratory. Juliana is a mentor and advisor to many students and is committed to connecting sustainability with social justice and diversity and collaborates closely with the Office of Inclusive Excellence, including the development of the award winning Environmental Justice internship program. In demonstration of her inclusive sustainability efforts, Juliana was honored with CSUSM President’s Award for Inclusive Excellence and Diversity. Juliana holds a M.A. in Sustainable Community Development and a B.A. in Environmental Studies from the UC Santa Cruz.

## Three Practitioners' Stories

How can our campuses become more socially and environmentally just? As practitioners at CSU San Marcos and UC Santa Cruz, we have been exploring this question through a framework that we call Inclusive Sustainability. Before we deep dive into this theoretical concept and explore critical questions, we'd like to share our own personal stories and learning journeys along the way. These stories are being shared to emphasize the importance of multiple perspectives and contextualize the Inclusive Sustainability discussion.

### *Ariel's Story: Weed and Seed*

I grew up in a community where Blackness was honored and celebrated. My entire identity was shaped around being a Black woman, not a woman who happens to be Black. For some, it may not be a distinction at all, but for me, it is the very thing that has shaped my life. The difference for me is emancipatory in the same way that Frantz Fanon distinguished Blackness in itself and Blackness for itself (Welcome, 2007). That very concept offers my entrée into justice work as I posit Blackness for myself in the work of environmental justice. Environmental justice work is already rooted in the fight for racial justice. As a youth, local leaders taught me about Black identity and the importance of resiliency. While the Department of Justice used the ["Weed and Seed" program](#) to remove men and women who were deemed "criminal" in my neighborhood (U.S Department of Justice, 2008), they were only successful in furthering the distrust of law enforcement and the mass incarceration of Black men and women.



Formerly incarcerated men re-entered my neighborhoods, and when they returned, they returned as [Pan-African](#) community scholars (American Historical Association). Through the community center, they took children to open fields and planted gardens. I know this now as guerrilla gardening. They reimagined what "weed and seed" meant. They weeded out harmful ideals of Blackness and criminality. They seeded in me the importance of having fresh, healthy food that was homegrown and taking care of our own community. These community scholars showed me what Black leadership looked like and introduced me to the notion of sustainability without ever using the term while connecting me to a life-long passion. Environmental and racial justice work are bound together, therefore there is no liberation of the earth without the liberation of Black people.

## *Juliana's Story: A Sense of Place and No to Grapes*

One of my first memories was when my mother signed up for an edible nature hike in the mountains behind our house outside of Los Angeles. We foraged for all sorts of vegetables and then cooked them on the mountaintop with other families that were a part of this experience. At the time, my brothers, sister and I thought it was outlandish, yet now I recognize that my mother was trying to instill a sense of place and how a community can be formed through a connection to the land. A second memory that is imprinted in my mind was when I learned that my mom wouldn't buy grapes when available at the grocery store. I asked my mother to buy them, but she just said "no, we don't buy grapes." Later, she told the story of Cesar Chavez and how many of our family members marched with him during the [farm workers strikes in the 1960-1970's](#) (Kim, 2017). She shared the importance of supporting farm workers, pay equity and justice. This story expanded my understanding of our world and gave me my social justice foundation. My last memory I want to share connects the importance of place, justice and nature. I was lucky enough to have grandparents that lived next to a butterfly grove and when I was in high school, I learned that they were spearheading a community fight to protect the monarch grove from development. This fight lasted many years, but now the [Coronado Butterfly Preserve](#) is open space in perpetuity. My world has been shaped by these memories and so many other moments - but one thing has remained constant, connecting people with nature, fighting for social justice and ensuring a sense of place have shaped my sustainability understanding.



## *Elida's Story: Students' Lived Experiences Matter*

When I joined the Sustainability Office in 2011, our work was viewed as separate from diversity, equity and inclusion. The gap was noticeable to me, following a 7-year career in student affairs where we had regularly prioritized diversity and inclusion training and discussions. Something was clearly missing.

It comes as no surprise that it was the students who challenged this. As our student population became increasingly diverse, it was difficult for staff to ignore the glaring fact that sustainability spaces across campus were predominantly white. BIPOC students were regularly experiencing microaggressions - often within campus environmental spaces that espoused the values of being open and accepting - and [they were speaking up about it](#).



In one instance, a student felt shamed by a student employee at a zero waste station about how to properly sort their recycling. My colleagues at the [Ethnic Resource Centers](#) shared that this incident made them feel so unwelcome that they were seriously considering leaving campus. I was troubled to learn that my work had the potential to negatively impact a student's success in such a profound way, and I wanted to dig deeper.

I have learned that the "environment" is not something that many of today's students see as separate from their lived experiences. Whether they are literally over-policed by law enforcement - or figuratively over-policed in an environment that shames people for different ways of knowing - it directly impacts their success as a student. Students' lived experiences matter. This realization was the start of a journey that led to amazing collaborations with colleagues across campus and the UC system in the years to follow, including the development of the concept of [Inclusive Sustainability](#).



## Inclusive Sustainability

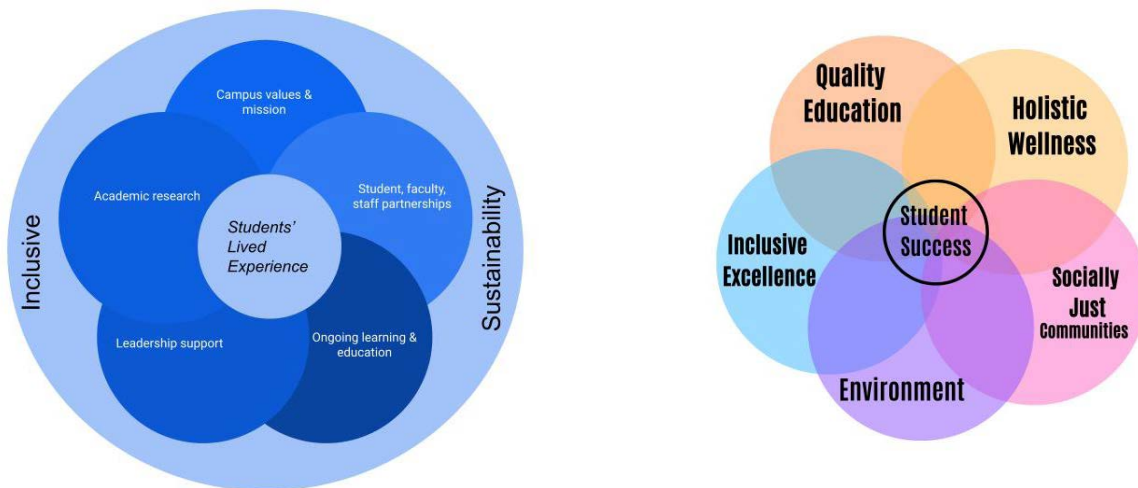
The theoretical framework for Inclusive Sustainability (IS) recognizes that historically, the work of sustainability alone rarely addresses environmental injustices, intersectionality or social justice. This has changed in recent years and conversations are expanding. For example, social movements like [Black Lives Matter](#) or the "Water is Life" [Mní Wičóni Movement](#) have played a part in jolting the conversations forward. Coined by the University of California Santa Cruz in 2015, Inclusive Sustainability denotes the connection between sustainability and social justice in higher education (Lu et al., 2017). There was a need to actively strive to advance different cultural definitions of how to care for environmental spaces and human communities, and promote multicultural inclusion in sustainability initiatives across the campus.

California State University San Marcos (CSUSM) utilizes the IS framework by directly connecting the work of the [Office of Inclusive Excellence and the Sustainability Program](#). Inclusive Sustainability attempts to offer institutions the ability to examine and consider environmental systemic and institutional barriers that prevent student success, as it is normally not included when identifying equity gaps for students. Institutions often use data and other demographics such as race, ethnicity, first generation or other indicators of underrepresentation. Including IS as an intersectional indicator can offer a deeper analysis of what it means to provide students with what they need to succeed.

Similar to how the U.S. Department of Education’s [College Assistant Migrant Programs \(CAMP\)](#) identifies and addresses the needs of students who come from migrant farmer worker families, IS can be utilized to support students who come to our campuses from environmentally disproportionately burdened communities. Some environmental barriers range from exposure to air pollution leaving many students with asthma or breathing problems, transportation issues leaving some students and families with limited to or no access to public transportation, or communities that are impacted by poor water quality leaving them no option but to buy single use water plastic bottles.

Programs that are already dealing with environmental injustices - whether intentionally or unintentionally - can be examined to help sustainability and social justice practitioners think creatively on how we can expand to serve additional student populations that face different forms of environmental injustice. Over the last year, we unfortunately saw firsthand what it means when a virus such as Covid-19 exposes the environmental injustices that disproportionately affect low-income neighborhoods or large portions of our student communities and their families (Koma et al., 2020).

The IS model applied very similarly at CSUSM and UCSC uses the following graphics to center student success, their lived experiences, and contributions of knowledge that advance and are foundational to the work of sustainability. [Academic research](#) conducted through the [People of](#)



[Color Sustainability Collective \(PoCSC\)](#) at UCSC demonstrates how students experience the issues of diversity and sustainability.

When approaching the work of IS while centering students, it is important to understand that students themselves are cognizant that institutions of higher education have not fully confronted their own racial-colonial foundations (Stein, 2018). Students are challenging and pushing the way that everyday institutional business is conducted. They are demanding that institutions that have ancestral remains on display return them to appropriate ancestral communities for proper burial, they are pushing to stop burning fossil fuels, and they want institutions to refuse to do business with companies and places that are devastating people and the planet. IS offers the opportunity for students to reimagine and “vision forward” what it means to advance environmental justice in higher education.

# Exploring Critical Questions: Opportunities to Reframe the Conversation

What does it look like and feel like to put IS into practice? Opportunities abound on the path ahead, and so do stumbling blocks. Common missteps by traditional sustainability practitioners may include:

- Assuming that one's own understanding of sustainability applies to everyone
- Not prioritizing growth and learning around diversity and social justice issues
- Not learning other languages, lived experiences, and ways of knowing to effectively interact with local communities
- "Sustaina-splaining" environmental justice to folks who own it as their own lived experience
- Viewing "diversity, equity, inclusion, justice (DEIJ)" and "sustainability" as separate issues

It is important to approach IS work with an open mind and a willingness to learn from mistakes. Sustainability practitioners at CSUSM and UCSC have found it helpful to adopt a mindset of being on a continual learning journey. One approach to help enable that mindset is by exploring critical questions, such as the ones offered in this [self-assessment developed by UCSC](#).

One way that traditional sustainability practitioners, particularly [well-meaning white folks](#) (Kendall, 2010) have been known to make missteps is through the art of "sustaina-splaining" (think [mansplaining](#) or [whitesplaining](#)). Sustaina-splaining is the tendency to oversimplify an environmental issue that we're passionate about with someone (often BIPOC or a member of an under-resourced group) whom one assumes is a sustainability novice. Sustainability enthusiasts tend to do most of the talking and continually walk a fine line between being enthusiastic and condescending. The conversation often ends with some kind of "invitation" to engage further, such as:

- Join our sustainability strategic planning process
- Participate in a research project
- Fill out a survey
- Attend our event
- Try to care more about the environment

This well-meaning approach usually results in more damage than good, by centering our own approach to sustainability without leaving space for other ways of knowing. The message being communicated is: "Come get involved in our solution because we think it will save you and your community". Let's unpack that.



University of California, Santa Cruz's 2018 "Dig In" conference co-hosted by People of Color Sustainability Collective. Courtesy of University of California, Santa Cruz

Critical questions for you and your institution to consider:

- Are we being inclusive when we reach out to under-resourced groups on campus or in our local communities? What are our intentions?
- Do under-resourced groups see themselves represented in the work that we are doing?
- Do we see ourselves showing up to support the work that under-resourced groups are already doing?
- What is our current understanding of different cultural interpretations on how to care for the environment, and how can we learn more?

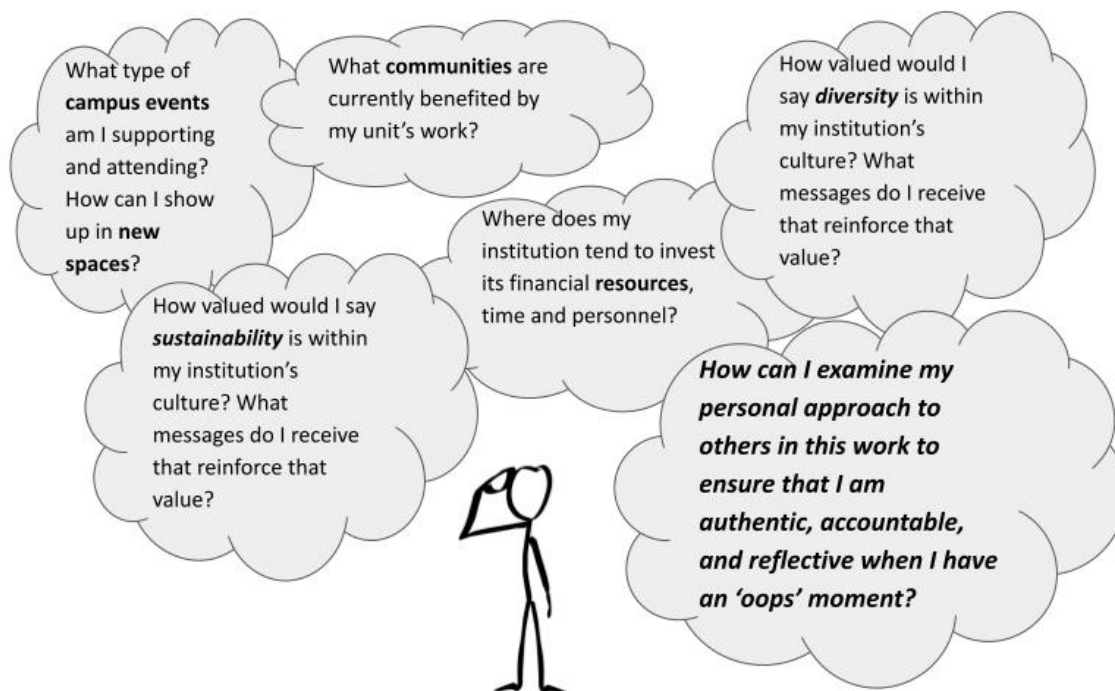
Through the lens of IS, the equation can be flipped to center under-resourced community member voices, build meaningful relationships over time, and learn how to most effectively support the work that is already happening.

Another common misstep is viewing sustainability and DEIJ as separate issues. By approaching our work through an IS framework that centers student success and their lived experiences, the intersection of these issues becomes impossible to miss. Today's students have grown up in an environment of structural inequities within an extractive consumer economy that has been actively feeding off of the planet, as well as BIPOC folks.

In a [TedTalk](#), Van Jones (2010) said "In order to trash the planet, you have to trash people. But if you create a world where you don't trash people, you can't trash the planet." By centering the goal of student success, a core value at most academic institutions, this opens up avenues for conversations with campus colleagues and administrators, and encourages them to start viewing diversity and sustainability as intersectional issues. For example, CSU Monterey Bay recently merged their diversity and sustainability offices and are now the [Office of Inclusive Excellence and Sustainability](#).

At CSUSM and UCSC, building collaborative relationships across diversity offices, resource centers and sustainability offices has been a good starting point. This takes time, often years. That can be hard to grasp for sustainability practitioners in particular, who are accustomed to enacting solutions in a race against the clock of climate change.

There are several critical questions that can be explored to ensure success as these important relationships are being built:



## The Learning Journey Is Ongoing

Inclusive Sustainability is designed as an approach to support the diverse student populations that are entering our universities. It seeks to address racial and [colonial implications of environmental injustice](#) (United Nations, 2021). It is not the answer to all environmental justice issues, however it provides a lens for the wider campus community to examine itself.

The cornerstone to success for this work is building strong relationships across units, departments, divisions and the community. This work can be cyclical, and re-education is continuous when “champions” leave the campus or find themselves in new roles. Therefore, there is a need to institutionalize intersectional work within campus strategic planning, department goals and potential funding opportunities. As easy as it can be to sustaina-splain, the real work is never easy. Inclusive Sustainability goals aren’t always comprehended and accepted in institutions that have not taken the time to realize their own complicated history. The work itself is sometimes constrained by the very system it seeks to change. The journey is ongoing and incremental. Celebrating large and small wins alike helps to “sustain” sustainability practitioners and inspires students to move forward.

Let’s re-imagine how our campuses and communities can be more socially and environmentally just. Personal stories like those shared at the beginning of this essay can help make meaning, establish connections, and express different ways of knowing. For sustainability and social justice practitioners, stories can be a powerful tool to connect the work that we do with each other, and with the students who come to our campuses with their own stories. Through the lens of Inclusive Sustainability, students’ stories and lived experiences are centered to enhance our everyday work as practitioners in higher education.



Climate justice rally at University of California, San Marcos. Photo credit: Juliana Goodlaw-Morris



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