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In 2020, more people than ever before have become aware of the racial injustices that harm and kill Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. As racial injustices have become more visible to the public, throes of people—from those in private industry to public institutions—have begun the paramount task of questioning the quality and efficacy of prior organizational efforts to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

AASHE board directors and staff recognize that for us to meaningfully advance and accomplish our mission, we must question what it is about our work and ways of work that hinder diversity. Awakening to the systemic nature and prevalence of racism led AASHE to recognize that a frame of DEI would only get us so far and that we need to evolve and deepen our thinking to a frame of racial equity and social justice.

With this approach, AASHE staff are beginning to learn and use new ways of thinking that attempt to uncover blind spots that result from systemic racism and white supremacy culture. Many in our community have invested in this work too, and have advocated for AASHE to provide more opportunities to explore and learn about the intersectionality of sustainability with racial equity and social justice. Collectively, we need to understand that being a sustainability change agent must include being a champion of racial equity and social justice.

I am honored to share the following anthology of essays from members of the AASHE Advisory Council DEI Committee. The essays provide insight and guidance as to what sustainability change agents can do to champion racial equity and social justice. The anthology begins by delving into the how and, most importantly, the why of the essay project. The second essay answers the question of how equity is connected to sustainability. The next three put concepts into practice—collaborating with campus partners around racial equity, integrating equity into sustainability programs, and attracting and building socially-minded staff.

This project will evolve as AASHE continues its journey to center racial equity and social justice. We’ll be adding more resources and stories, and uplifting the voices of Black people and People of Color. AASHE is deeply committed to serving our community—by learning and engaging everyone in the work of becoming antiracist, and ultimately advancing sustainability in higher education. This is the bold next step.

On behalf of AASHE, my gratitude goes to the contributing authors of these essays and the members of the DEI committee. Thank you for supporting the growth of our community!

Sincerely,

Meghan Fay Zahniser, Executive Director, AASHE
Introduction to No Sustainability Without Justice

Author: Stephania Fregosi, Portland Community College

About the Author
Stephania Fregosi

As the Portland Community College Sustainability Analyst, Stephania Fregosi maintains the utility database, completes the greenhouse gas inventories, and the STARS report. Stephania conducts policy and program research and provides other program support. This year, other program support included co-creating an ecosocial justice training for student leaders and co-leading our Climate Action Plan Update. The update focuses on integrating equity into climate action planning, rooting climate equity efforts in the understanding that power, place, purpose, people, and process each have a role in ensuring equitable outcomes in our community and across our locations.
“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.”

-Van Jones

This inaugural essay supplies some context on the purpose of higher education and the history of who we serve. Higher education has always limited who can participate. At many times in the history of the United States, higher education has had many restrictions that have limited the participation of women and minorities, and thus, our access to participate as full members of society. As sustainability practitioners in higher education, we must acknowledge that we cannot create truly sustainable solutions without an equitable vision for distributing solutions.

Current events have underscored the importance of understanding how historical events have created inequities for our students. The United States is deeply engaged in a national conversation on race, racism, and power. An increase in highly-visible, racially motivated violence, along with recent racially discriminatory immigration policies, has led many to become more involved in anti-racism efforts. However, Americans are not just speaking out about nationalist and white power organizations. Across the country, Americans are awakening to the nuanced ways that racism shows up in our society and the ways that our own implicit biases cause harm to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. While Black Lives Matter is a movement that can trace its origins back to 2013, a news cycle over the 2020 Memorial Day weekend demonstrated to many Americans how deadly implicit bias can be, as well as the ease of which race can and is used as a weapon against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. These events: the murder in early 2020 of Ahmaud Arbery, false accusations against Christian Cooper while bird watching, and the police murder of George Floyd, combined with the captive audience created by the pandemic, reignited the Black Lives Matter movement (Noah) and have likely launched a period of social change that the United States hasn’t seen since the 1960s. (Buchanan et al.).
I should be clear too, that the impact of this violence is not limited to black men. Black women are among the many victims of police violence. 2020 also has shown an increase in the murder of transgendered individuals (National Center for Transgender Equality). Violent race-based attacks on Asian Americans have also grown since the early days of the pandemic (Human Rights Watch).

“While everyone is facing the battle against coronavirus, Black people in America are still facing racism and the coronavirus.”

-Trevor Noah

As if to further this conversation on race, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to demonstrate how systemic inequities disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. The COVID-19 pandemic, like climate change, is far deadlier for those with underlying conditions, many of which occur at a higher rate in Black Americans than for white Americans (Villarosa, L. & Harris, 2020). An article in the New York Times credits Mustafa Ali, vice president of environmental justice, climate and community revitalization for the National Wildlife Federation, with making the connection between the consequences of underlying conditions caused by environmental racism and an “increase[d] vulnerability to the coronavirus” (Friedman). We know, too, that the earliest impacts of climate change are also being felt at a disproportionate rate for Indigenous peoples and communities of color (Rysvay and Floyd).

What’s more disturbing is the possibility that the US Federal Government’s reaction to the coronavirus has further exacerbated the disproportionate impacts on Black, Indigenous and People of Color (Serwer). Serwer points out that US President Donald Trump’s actions to reopen the United States failed to protect the most vulnerable: Black and brown Americans, and essential workers.

“...America’s leaders have treated those workers as largely expendable, praising their valor while disregarding their safety.”

-Adam Serwer
In fact, rather than isolated incidents, the recent uptick in racial and sex and gender-based violence is part of a resurgence of fascist rhetoric aimed at creating a climate of hyper-competition meant to divide people along lines of race and class. The alt-right has carefully constructed a false narrative, in which anti-racism is a threat to white Americans. This narrative includes the use of demographic trends to show that there will soon no longer be a “white majority” as racist rhetoric inflames fears that this shift in racial demographics poses a threat to white people (Montanro). In addition, it intentionally mischaracterizes efforts to improve access and affordability to higher education as entitlements. Most recently, President Trump’s executive order, “Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping,” sets out guidelines for the content of diversity, equity and inclusion training (Exec. Order No. 13950.), limiting the content to one that espouses a narrative of a color-blind United States. The examples that are given of problematic DEI trainings and materials in federal institutions imply that anti-racism teachings around white supremacy are racist in nature. However, one of the tenets of anti-racism is that it is not possible for hard work to be the only factor in success when we don’t all have the same access to opportunity (Colson and Turner).

“Seeing systemic racism is foundational work. Historical context provides an understanding of the original dehumanization of African Americans that is the foundation upon which American racism is built.”
- Colson & Turner

In October 2020, the American Council on Education published a joint letter in opposition to Executive Order 13950: “Workplace diversity and inclusion training programs on our campuses align with federal and state anti-discrimination laws and, at institutions that are government contractors, the non-discrimination-in-employment mandates of Executive Order 11246. Executive Order 13950 is already disrupting the planning and delivery of these programs, creating a chilling effect on the good faith and lawful efforts of campus officials to build and sustain non-discriminatory and non-hostile workplaces and learning communities.” (American Council on Education).

“...our lived experiences with the environment are different. White people bring their experience to the discussion — that’s why they focus on the birds, trees, plants, and animals, because they don’t have the experience of being barred from parks and beaches. It’s just a different frame. But overall, we want the same thing: safe places to live, work and play, clean spaces and sustainable, long-lasting communities.”
- Dr. Dorceta Taylor
White supremacist ideology has always been present in the United States to some degree; however, the effect of this rhetoric is amplified by the influence of social media. The above-referenced Executive Order is only one of many examples of a coordinated multi-stage attack to destroy any pathways there might be to self-improvement for the have-nots in our society. These include attacks on education, science, the freedom of the press, the use of intimidation tactics to limit free speech and participatory governance, attempts to constrain the definitions of normal social behavior and identity, and verbal attempts to undermine the validity of the US election process. This is a recipe for societal collapse, all while we face a global pandemic and intensified local impacts from global climate change due to wildfires, hurricanes, flooding and more).

The rise in fascism is explicitly linked to climate change. A recent paper, “A Global Analysis of Cultural Tightness and its Relationship with Ecological Threat, Social Complexity and Social Structure,” (Jackson, et al.), examines the relationship between ecological threats and social complexity (Jackson, et al.). They show that society’s cultural response to ecological threats has led to stronger norms and harsher punishment of so-called deviant behaviors. A follow-up article in the International Policy Digest summarizes the links between a world-wide rise in nationalism and climate change (Jackson & Gelfand). In the case of climate change, the problem grows as Alt-Right nationalists tend to be climate deniers. This could lead to a vicious cycle whereby a government suffers heightened impacts as a result of failure to respond to climate change, resulting in increased nationalist behavior.

Sustainability in higher education cannot happen without unity. Racism is a crack embedded in our social and economic system that is easily exploited to divide all but the wealthy and privileged few who are largely white. We must unite to dismantle racism in all of its forms to have a sustainable society. For sustainability staff, this means having a thorough understanding of how racism and sustainability intersect, and the ways in which bias and structural racism obscure and even obstruct some students from full participation in programs.
The role of racial equity within sustainability is further obscured due to the challenges of defining sustainability and applying this term within higher education. We might refer to a few different constructions of sustainable development using the three-legged stool mode where viable economics, social equity, and healthy ecological systems support a sustainable society, or we might use a biological construction in which sustainability is a condition that allows both people and the planet to thrive over time. Despite the prolific use of the Venn diagram to display the interconnectedness of these systems, campus sustainability officer positions are more likely to be housed in facilities or physical plants than in any other office on campus (AASHE).

Sustainability professionals are frequently asked to analyze the returns on investment and for guidance on other economic questions as a way of justifying our programs and measuring our progress. It is no surprise when we provide guidance related to protecting natural resources or address other environmental issues in our communities. Yet, we are not usually expected or asked to address racial equity or social justice issues.

The idea that sustainability jobs are about solving environmental problems tends to ignore the fact that environmental issues do not take place in a vacuum, but demonstrate systems of exploitation, oppression, and domination. Solving environmental issues equitably necessitates looking at the other obstacles that bar Black, Indigenous and People of Color from full participation in our society. The narrowness of a sustainability construct that is purely environmental, as opposed to intersectional, also leaves out concepts like food justice, transportation and climate equity, or the links between poor environmental health, poverty, and race. Sustainability professionals must have a holistic understanding of the interconnectedness of our social and economic problems to environmental ones in order to make these connections for others, even when our school's commitment may be more narrowly constrained, so our solutions can address the root causes of problems, rather than create new ones.
Sustainability professionals have also inquired how they could better address social sustainability and support students of color on their campuses in the aftermath of racially motivated violence or on civil rights issues. For example, in the wake of Heather Heyer’s murder and multiple injuries suffered by peaceful counter-protesters during a “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, sustainability staff at the University of Virginia and across the nation were left asking how to respond and support students, particularly students of color. Sustainability professional networks, such as VASHE (Virginia Association for Sustainability in Higher Education) were filled with email messages asking for advice, examples of social media posts or event ideas that dealt with racial and social justice. Most wanted to learn how sustainability and Alt-Right violence connected and what they could do on their campus to raise awareness (University of Virginia).

Some sustainability professionals are actively detailing how their work is connected to DEI and to social justice; however, the severe political polarization of US politics often impacts how well we are able to center anti-racist practices in our work. Events like the Dakota Access Pipeline protests and the water disaster in Flint, Michigan have clear ties to our environmental work, and our interest and involvement are therefore less likely to be questioned. However, supporting students involved in social activism or other issues with less direct environmental implications has been more challenging.

Sustainability staff are housed in a wide variety of offices and have a multitude of job titles, and our connections to supporting other offices and activities can be fuzzy. What’s more, not all of our institutions have offices of equity and inclusion or their equivalent. This raises challenges for sustainability staff attempting to bring in the social side of sustainability in jobs that are perceived as being entirely environmental and operational. What can we do within the confines of budgets that are intended for operations or for program-specific purposes? Would we be overstepping our mandate to use our programming and offices in supporting vigils, speakers, and similar activities? How, when, and where could we provide support and when might we step back? What form does that support take? What are the dynamics in play related to our group identities? How might we work through any obstacles those identities may create in building a collaborative and supportive system?
Another aspect of this issue for sustainability offices is in addressing the shaping of our sustainability programs by social justice and DEI. In doing so, we can ensure that the need to respond to flagrant racism does not obscure the need to address more subtle forms of racism, including how institutional financial and educational systems perpetuate existing inequities. We must reflect on critical questions: How might we contribute to creating justice with sustainable solutions? To whom are we accountable? How do we know when we're doing it well? Whom can we work with to do more of it or do it better?

Despite any misapprehensions we may have about being politically involved, there is also a long history of activism in higher education that has worked to dismantle systems of power and oppression. Whether we recall the history of the admission of women and Blacks into US colleges and universities, the participation of college students in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the environmental movement of the 1970s, the apartheid divestment movement of the 1980s, or the Black Lives Matter movement, students have been and continue to be actively involved in social change. The national response to Black Lives Matter in the wake of George Floyd’s murder is having a deeper impact than these past movements. Dozens of seemingly neutral institutions have issued statements in support of the movement, though some have been accused of tokenizing their students or prioritizing commitment statements rather than addressing the inequities that Black, Indigenous and People of Color are facing. There are other signs that the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement is reaching Americans on a deeper level, including the fact that several of the country’s best-seller book lists took on topics about race and anti-racism for at least two weeks in June (Harris) or that sites like Etsy started to feature Black-owned shops. In the wake of the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha and shortly before their participation was expected in the NBA playoffs, the Milwaukee Bucks walked off the basketball court in protest, along with the other teams in the playoffs (Taylor).

We hope that in future essays, we will be able to delve deeper into topics such as ecoracial narratives, equity in climate action planning, accountability, immigration, labor, links between race and class, and qualitative metrics for diversity, teaching resources, equity, and inclusion in sustainability. More importantly, this essay series is missing your voice. We invite you to make contributions to this collection of essays, case studies, and other resources on racial equity, social justice and sustainability.

Key Points
- Identifies racial injustice as a common thread in Black Lives Matter, the rise of nationalism, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Climate Change.
- Outlines the connections between social justice and sustainability.
- Asks the reader to take an anti-racist stance in creating solutions for a sustainable future.
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Equity is Great, but What Does it Have to Do with Sustainability?

Authors: Clement Loo and Sarah Stoeckl

Clement Loo

Clement Loo is an Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies and the Student Success Coordinator for Equity, Diversity, and Intercultural Programs at the University of Minnesota Morris. He also serves on the Advisory Council and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) and is a fellow of the Institute on the Environment’s Educator program. His research and teaching focus on food justice and equitable/inclusive stakeholder consultation as a tool to improve the robustness of scholarship and practice within higher education.

Sarah Stoeckl

Sarah Stoeckl, PhD, Program Manager in the Office of Sustainability at the University of Oregon, focuses on outreach, engagement, and support for faculty, students, and staff, as well as the broader Eugene-Springfield community. Sarah is working to increase the office’s attention to issues of justice and equity as key to sustainability, and to enhance the university’s dialogue around the intersections between environmental and justice issues, including the need for racial justice. The overlapping crises of 2020, including the COVID-19 pandemic, mass uprisings against police brutality against Black communities and people, and increasing visibility of global warming’s effects, have only further clarified how essential it is to tackle social injustice and the climate crisis simultaneously.

About the Authors
“In a few decades, the relationship between the environment, resources and conflict may seem almost as obvious as the connection we see between human rights, democracy and peace.”

- Wangari Maathaiz

Historically, “environmentalism” and “social justice” have not always overlapped. Indeed, even today, we encounter colleagues who have explicitly argued that addressing social issues might serve as a roadblock that will slow down the environmental or climate movements. The general public tends to view, and media tends to depict, environmentalism as characterized by conservation efforts aimed at protecting or restoring wilderness, parklands, and wildlife, or else on technological and economic solutions to climate change, reducing individual consumption and waste, and maximizing efficiencies while saving money. A related area, environmental justice, has been characterized by a focus on human-centric issues including reducing toxics, urban planning, worker safety, labor issues, food security, and access to public transportation. Meanwhile, those focused on supporting Indigenous sovereignty, equity and access for people with disabilities, income inequality, LGBTQA rights, dismantling white supremacy, and related challenges remain lumped into the “social justice” category writ large, seemingly separated from environmental concerns. However, this separation need not continue, given that social concerns are knit into the definition of sustainability and sustainable development. Yet mainstream media depictions and the public understanding of sustainability and the environmental movement still tend to depict two separate pathways, one focused on “nature” as separate from humans and one focused on human cultures, needs, and social systems as separate from the non-human world.
Many of the historic focus areas of mainstream environmentalism in the world’s wealthy countries underscore privilege by focusing on areas of particular interest to those with greater wealth, for example, individual consumption habits, expensive technologies such as electric cars and solar panels, or preservation of recreational spaces (most with their own histories of Indigenous displacement and racial inequity). It has tended to not focus on issues that have an impact on the daily lives of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Mainstream environmentalism until very recently has paid relatively little attention (and perhaps continues to not pay sufficient attention) to topics such as environmental remediation (e.g., air and water quality) and social issues such as public transportation or equitable access to green spaces and healthy food. Environmental justice advocates have also argued that the mainstream environmental movement has failed to appreciate the disparate impact of pollution, climate change, and toxic waste on communities of color and lower-income communities (Bullard 2000; Cutter 1995), and lower- and middle-income countries (Loo 2015).

The tendency of affluent people that fail to appropriately recognize and consider the needs and concerns of marginalized individuals can be seen in the “no more than two degrees” target endorsed by many climate advocacy groups. Such a target fails to account for the unequal climate change impacts already being felt by the poorest countries and the poorest citizens of wealthy countries, despite being those who have contributed the least to global warming. For example, the sub-two degrees target, while perhaps achievable with limited economic difficulty for higher-income countries, leaves many Pacific island nations with much, or even all, of their land under water. There should be greater recognition of the role of Pacific Islanders and Pacific Island nations in shifting climate discourse in favor of adopting stricter mitigation standards. All of this is not to say that we should stop concerning ourselves with conservation or ecosystem health, but that the cry of communities of color is that of the canary in the coal mine for all of humanity. Concerning ourselves with the issues of human communities, especially those most impacted by environmental degradation as well as social, political, and economic exclusion, is a strategy that respects life. One example is the Paris Climate Accords, which sets a goal of keeping the global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius. While there are additional goals to try to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees, the framing of them as stretch goals puts the lives of those on the front lines of climate change at risk. Setting these goals more ambitiously to include the needs of all peoples would prioritize making the world safe for us all.
Skeptics of mainstream environmentalism come honestly by their concern about the motivations and safety of spaces and groups often called “environmental.” Many of mainstream environmentalisms’ heroes have a complex history that includes racist actions and attitudes. One notable example is Madison Grant, who was both a prominent conservationist and also a proponent of the scientifically-debunked and racist eugenics movement. The much-beloved John Muir described the Ahwahneechee people of Yosemite as “strange creatures,” who “seemed to have no right place in the landscape” (Johnson, 2014). Furthermore, several members of the DEI committee report personal anecdotes and anecdotes from students and People of Color who avoided working in sustainability because they believe it is an area that privileges the perspectives and concerns of affluent, white people.

In contrast, social justice advocates and activists tend to focus on conditions for people and the cities, towns, and neighborhoods in which they live. They have also focused on creating outreach, education, and actions that address structural injustices that oppress Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, the poor, people with disabilities, and other historically underrepresented groups. Often those injustices are environmental in nature yet they may not be thought of that way by those with power and influence. People in historically underrepresented groups are more likely to live in areas riddled with pollution from heavy industry and landfills, blighted by mining or fracking, or overheated from a lack of public greenspace. They are also more likely to experience poor health outcomes due to lack of access to fresh food, health care services, health insurance, exposure to unclean air and water, and to be underserved or even ignored by governmental entities tasked with regulations that benefit public health and protect the public. Last but certainly not least, climate change is an inequality amplifier, meaning that people already living under unequal conditions will experience the effects of climate change first and worst, both in wealthy nations and poor countries around the world. The impacts of this social neglect and hostility are connected to environmental health problems such as type II diabetes, asthma, heart disease and increased risk of stroke, and certain birth defects and cancers. The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbates and further emphasizes these disparities.

Of course, these divisions are not entirely clear-cut. Many activists and advocates share overlapping concerns and interests. Several Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have embraced environmental issues and concerns. More and more, organizations that are conservation- or environmentally-focused are incorporating justice into their vision statements. 350.org was an early “mainstream” adopter and many others have followed suit in recent years. The social uprisings decrying police violence against Black people in the US during 2020, in particular, led a myriad of organizations and businesses that are primarily white-led, to issue statements in support of racial justice and to refocus their energies to account for this history of systemic oppression (Osaka 2020). This series is informed by the work of organizations that have been at the forefront of integrating environmentalism and equity into their sustainability work. Such organizations include several of those listed in the community resource on Racial Equity and Social Justice, including the Center for Diversity and the Environment, the Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy, Resolutions Northwest, the Portland State University Student Sustainability Center, and Green 2.0.
Sustainability as a concept has the potential to connect the perspectives of mainstream environmentalism and social justice. Julian Agyeman, Robert Bullard, and Bob Evans (2003, 5) define sustainability as, “the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems.” As Agyeman notes in a follow-up to the definition he crafted with Bullard and Evans, this definition “prioritizes justice and equity, but does not downplay the environment, our life support system” (Agyeman, 2007, 120). Agyeman is a Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University, and he argues that a paradigm of “just sustainability” can be a conceptual bridge for the many passionate people engaged in environmental or social justice work.

In much of the industrialized West, “sustainability” has been criticized for being a watered-down buzzword that reinforces the social and economic status quo and fails to center those most impacted by past harms. Globally, however, sustainability has been understood more holistically, and it very explicitly and forcefully includes elements of equity, social justice, and human well-being. Consider, for example, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The SDGs focus on human thriving and equality; a healthy planet for all; inclusive and responsible business and economic practices; and functional government, institutions, and infrastructure. Their focus areas go well beyond environmentalism, focusing on gender equality, high-quality education, and the elimination of poverty. The SDGs can be a tool to nudge colleges and universities (and others) in the US to think beyond environmental concerns alone when working for sustainability. It can remind those who are narrowly focused on the environment to consider who should benefit from our efforts to conserve and protect our natural resources.
The time is ripe for strong collaboration and movement building between both environmental and social justice perspectives. To name only two examples, activism by Indigenous Peoples opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline and Black residents of Flint, MI, both defending the human right to safe drinking water and cultural autonomy, have risen to national prominence and garnered support from civil rights organizations and traditional environmental organizations alike. Many of the leaders within the global youth climate movement innately center diversity and social justice in their work. Students at higher education institutions are looking for the same holistic, system-wide perspective, and action from sustainability offices and staff.

While these overlapping ideas, needs, and perspectives remain complex, there is an increasing awareness that a healthy planet must be one that is equitable for all people and environmentally sound. In “Racism is Killing the Planet,” Hop Hopkins argues that “we’ll never stop climate change without ending white supremacy” (2020). He describes the interconnections between a racist, economic logic that treats certain people and places as disposable. Hopkins writes, “All I know is that if climate change and environmental injustice are the results of a society that values some lives and not others, then none of us are safe from pollution until all of us are safe from pollution. Dirty air doesn’t stop at the county line, and carbon pollution doesn’t respect national borders. As long as we keep letting the polluters sacrifice Black and brown communities, we can’t protect our shared global Climate.”

While simultaneously working to solve both social injustice and environmental crises may sound overwhelming, both higher education and sustainability professionals have a unique opportunity to lead in the balancing of these two crucial areas. Our research as scholars and professionals within higher-education goes deep into the data and thinking that can drive sustainable changes. We teach people young and old about the realities of injustice and environmental degradation and should challenge ourselves to challenge them to envision radical solutions that build upon that knowledge. And last, sustainability professionals are used to thinking in terms of systems, interconnections, overlapping causes and impacts, which make us uniquely situated to focus on holistic solutions. Will higher education rise to the challenge?

### Key Points

- Equity and social justice are components of sustainability.
- The importance of equity and social justice has historically been under-appreciated by the environmental movement and efforts to improve sustainability.
- There is much overlap between those working primarily for social and racial justice, and those focused on specific environmental issues. The concept of sustainability, with its focus on thriving social, environmental, and institutional systems, can provide a bridge.
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Collaboration Strategies for Sustainability Officers

Authors: David Havelick and Stephania Fregosi

About the Authors

David Havelick
In Harvard’s Office for Sustainability, David helps to develop and advance the University-wide goals, standards, and commitments that are contained in the Harvard University Sustainability Plan. He works with faculty, students, staff, senior leaders, and alumni to translate cutting edge research into practice and to ensure that research informs the priorities of the Sustainability Office. He is helping to manage the process under the auspices of the Presidential Committee on Sustainability to create Harvard’s second-generation Sustainability Plan, which will include more explicit connections between the sustainable development definition of intergenerational well-being and broader justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion issues.

Stephania Fregosi
As the Portland Community College Sustainability Analyst, Stephania Fregosi maintains the utility database, completes the greenhouse gas inventories, and the STARS report. Stephania conducts policy and program research and provide other program support. This year, other program support included co-creating an ecosocial justice training for student leaders and co-leading our Climate Action Plan Update. The update focuses on integrating equity into climate action planning, rooting climate equity efforts in the understanding that power, place, purpose, people, and process each have a role in ensuring equitable outcomes in our community and across our locations.
This essay is intended to help sustainability practitioners think about how to partner around social justice and DEI with others on their campuses and in their local communities. Those people include, but are not limited to, multicultural groups, affinity groups, DEI staff, and community organizations. This essay sets out principles for establishing relationships and working in collaboration. Many of these principles can be extended to working with community partners more generally. Beneath each principle is a list of possible approaches to collaboration. We can use our collective influence to make social change, as many are already doing through mechanisms such as Second Nature’s Climate Commitment and We Are Still In. These collaborative relationships should not be limited to external partnerships, and can begin within our organizations in the form of partnerships across departments and divisions.

As outlined in the preceding essay, “Equity is Great, but What Does it Have to Do with Sustainability?”, it is crucial for sustainability practitioners to make the case that diversity, equity, and inclusion are bound up with the goals and priorities of a sustainable future. They are not separate. And yet, they are almost always split into separate offices and divisions in the higher education context. On average, engagement of sustainability offices with offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion are relatively low in comparison with other campus entities (AASHE, 2020). Some organizations, such as California State University, San Marcos, are beginning to more formally connect the work of sustainability and DEI offices.

The magnifying impact of climate change and other environmental challenges to existing social inequities makes it more important than ever to convey the links between racism, poverty, and environmental harm. This was effectively conveyed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include “reduced inequalities” as a major priority. Cities are also increasingly addressing equity issues within their climate plans, like Boston’s Social Equity Report. Second Nature’s work on climate resilience also includes social equity and governance as a core component.
Responsibility

Before entering into new relationships, be sure that you have done the groundwork to build those relationships. It is everyone’s individual responsibility to identify what they do not already know and seek answers to fill in those gaps. We recommend starting with AASHE’s community resources on Racial Equity and Social Justice and/or resources at your own institution. It is not the responsibility of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to be educators on race, particularly as many people have a long experience with personal trauma or experience trauma through those conversations.

Examine Your Privilege

• The trust you have in the system working for you may not be shared by others who have a history of the system not working for them.

• Enter into new relationships without an agenda or expectation other than getting to know a colleague and see if you can support their work later on. In order for relationships to be meaningful, they cannot be transactional. At the same time, it is important to compensate people fairly for their contributions.

Educate Yourself

• Develop an understanding of the historical and current challenges that face the demographics of your student body, your faculty, staff and the community your institution inhabits. This will help you serve it better and move your programs toward justice.

• Research and familiarize yourself with existing DEI efforts at your institution. This could look like identifying dedicated offices, identity centers, affinity groups, student organizations, or administrative committees.

• Take DEI and racial equity trainings, ideally ones that address personal and professional contexts and provide the opportunity for reflection on both levels. Look to AASHE’s RESJ Resources for the Higher Education Community if training is not available.

• Learn more about how a history of racist social practices and environmental racism has affected communities of color near your school. Use resilience tools to find maps to identify unequal harms and distribution of benefits. Who has benefitted from community improvements and who hasn’t?

Repairing Trust

Sustainability practitioners should approach new relationships with humility and humbleness; this is not something dominant business culture does well. In the United States, we are immersed in a culture that centers the importance of self, and too often, we fail to recognize the importance of ourselves as members of larger groups and circles. Communities of color have historically been given empty promises that have been broken, or no action has been taken by those in power. Examples include broken promises of the federal government with regards to tribal sovereignty (Wang, 2015) and the one-sided relationship of anthropology (Bishop, 2005), ministries (Cole, 2012), and scientists (Skloot, 2010) to minority populations where one group is studying and “serving” the other according to their own agenda.
Even if you were not the person to break that trust, your membership in the group that broke that trust matters (e.g., whites, or other high-level members of pigmentocracies, the wealthy, administrators, or other members of groups that make up the majority in power). It is better to start with the idea that trust has been broken in the past, and move forward from there.

- Show up authentically and communicate from the heart.
- Rather than making an immediate offer of assistance, provide opportunities to participate in planning and decision-making; those groups are often experts in determining for themselves what best serves their needs.
- Think about what you are actually able to offer directly, versus what you think the project could accomplish. Be honest and direct about how change will happen to avoid miscommunication.
- Implement what suggestions you can.

**Establishing Trust**

Increasing trust and understanding with the diversity, equity, and inclusion staff and/or multicultural resource center staff will strengthen your problem-solving ability and increase the quality of collaborative work at your institution.

- Incorporating a variety of perspectives tends to strengthen your work, rather than diluting it.
- If you are positioned differently within your institution than the office(s) you are seeking to work with, you may be able to share your own resources and networks in order to build more support for social equity projects.
- Try a casual face-to-face introduction in which you can establish a working style preference. Some people prefer working face-to-face or phone calls over email and other digital communications. This could take the form of supporting that person’s event or taking advantage of an all-college event to do some networking.
- Supporting the work of others allows them to see your genuine interest, without asking for anything (i.e., reciprocity), which creates space for collaborations to take place organically.
- Face-to-face meetings also allow you to read non-verbal cues and understand more about how your colleagues work and what they value.
- When you establish trust, there are things your colleagues may say one-on-one that they would not put into writing or say to someone they have not met in person.
- See if you have an opportunity to bring historically underrepresented voices to any decision-making table you are at. This could also look like giving up your seat.
Find Comonalities

Sustainability, multicultural, diversity, equity and inclusion staff implicitly share the role of defining your institution’s position on social responsibility, along with faculty and senior administration. Both also face the challenge of working on complex topics where dissenting views loudly express that the problem is overblown or does not exist, or the work is politicized by groups with a different agenda. The techniques and means to overcome these challenges share a lot in common:

• Roles can include administrator, supporter, counselor, role-model, activist, and teacher.

• Shared tools can include education, engagement, empowerment, communication, negotiation, mediation and collaboration.

• Institutions are facing changing demographics. Projections indicate fewer students entering higher ed overall but higher percentages of students of color, first-generation, and poorer students. This necessitates colleges and universities to stay relevant to prospective students by creating inclusive spaces for all students to participate and offering appropriate role models.

• Both fields have experience in creating behavioral change in the face of dissent.

• The need for self-care is shared, given the contentious, challenging and overwhelming nature of these roles.

• Some solutions and initiatives are positioned to solve challenges being faced by both types of offices, such as programs aimed at reducing food insecurity.

Collaborate

Modeling partnerships will increase collaboration at the institution as a whole and needs to be both from the bottom-up and the top-down.

• Documenting your partnership and sharing stories will make your qualitative outcomes tangible and relatable and serve to inspire others.

• With real budget and time constraints, collaboration can sometimes seem like more people trying to access the same small resource pool, but it is better thought of as a smarter leveraging of resources.
Elevating Voices

One way to integrate racial equity into your work is to elevate the voices of members of underrepresented communities and non-governmental organizations whose focus is on social justice, racial equity, civil rights and ending poverty. Be mindful of the potential to increase someone’s burden or trigger trauma when approaching people with conversations around racial equity and social justice. Remind yourself to check your biases before starting a conversation with someone you do not know well; everyone has a unique lived experience. Everyone has boundaries that should be respected even when the reasons for them aren’t shared with you. Start by listening and showing your readiness to listen.

Creating and realizing a vision of a socially and environmentally sustainable future requires the work of many people and organizations working together on behalf of current and future generations. Many national civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), have long understood the negative impact that systemic ecological racism and environmental inequities have on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. There are multiple local and national coalitions that focus on grappling with these issues; yet within higher education our internal efforts to address issues of racism, multiculturalism, environmental impacts, and social barriers to student success remain fragmented and artificially divided between operational efforts and instructional ones. (Many of these organizations are listed in AASHE’s community resource on Racial Equity & Social Justice.)

- Partnering with non-government organizations allows things to be said that you may not be able to say yourself.
- Providing other resources allows your message to come from a larger community
- Partnering outside your institution can reduce the tendency to think of social-environmental problems as abstract.
- Sharing campus resources in your community benefits everyone: students gain hands-on learning opportunities and communities may gain increased access to academic and financial resources.
- This work could help Town-Gown relationships, if done well.

Center Programs around Social Justice

Many institutions of higher education include diversity, equity, and inclusion in their missions. Some approach this by working to uplift the voices of historically underrepresented and underinvested communities, whether through curriculum, service learning, programming, multicultural centers, or civic engagement. As practitioners, we understand that climate change, immigration, and the rise of fascism and right-wing nationalism are connected; as ethical practitioners, our responsibility is to protect disenfranchised and historically underrepresented groups. Quality of life issues that impact student retention and quality of student performance are highly likely to be both environmental and equity issues and involve social justice solutions. Examples include housing insecurity, poverty, access to public transportation, and health conditions such as diabetes and asthma.
• Help your students register to vote and inform them about how voter suppression has primarily impacted BIPOC communities. Communicate the importance of civic engagement beyond the national election cycle.

• Learn more about systemic racist practices that have contributed directly to the dominant social paradigm in sustainability and about people who have propagated those beliefs, even while acting for the benefit of the environment.

• Attend, support and help promote diversity, social justice, and multicultural trainings, events and other opportunities on campus.

• Create projects and programming that highlight environmental justice concerns. A place to start is The People’s Ecochallenge, which can help generate ideas for pledges and student engagement.

• Recognize the ethnic and racial diversity of sustainability leaders and the often unsung or even erased (CNN, 2019) contributions that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color have made to the sustainability movement.

• Recognize how critical social justice leaders, principles and strategies have been to the environmental movement. This could look like acknowledging those traditionally recognized for their civil rights work along with others who are mentioned less frequently.

Sustainability practitioners can review their office’s work to ensure and strengthen these efforts. Building Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Into Your Sustainability Program explores this concept further, offering some starting points and longer-term strategies. In taking all of these steps, remember that those facing challenges from institutional racism may be unused to having responsiveness from those in power, which underscores the importance of being authentic and sincere.

Key Points
- Offers advice for forming true meaningful partnerships.
- Identifies potential ways to approach establishing collaborative synergistic relationships.
- Offers some ways for the reader to approach personal and professional growth.
- Gives examples of ways that these offices’ missions may intersect and overlap.
References:


Burton, N. (2019, October 11). *Meet the young activists of color who are leading the charge against climate disaster*. Vox.


Building Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Into Your Sustainability Program

Authors: Nina Morris and Caylin McCamp

About the Authors

Nina Morris
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.

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“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.
Attracting and Developing Diverse and Socially-Minded Sustainability Officers

Authors: Caylin McCamp and Nina Morris

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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“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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic Area</th>
<th>Competency</th>
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| Inclusive  | • 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 | • 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 | • 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 | • 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 | • 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 | • 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:


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.
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