



Introduction to No Sustainability Without Justice



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.



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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