

Beyond the Right Thing to Do

The Value of Sustainability in Higher Education



*Master of Science in Sustainability Management graduates at
University of Toronto Mississauga*

How to Use This Publication

This document aims to help higher education sustainability practitioners more powerfully articulate the value of sustainability to higher education leaders as well as the general public. As different points will be more or less relevant at individual institutions or with specific audiences, practitioners are welcome to create more targeted versions of this publication. After each point is a reference link that will take the reader to a list of supporting resources in the [Campus Sustainability Hub](#), AASHE's online resource center. AASHE will be adding new resources over time so the list of supporting resources will expand. As the reference links will not be accessible in printed copies, this publication is best used in electronic form.

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University of Connecticut accepts two GreenerGov awards from the state government in 2025.



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Forward

Around the world, we are witnessing both inspiring progress and profound challenges in the pursuit of a sustainable future. As humanity faces unprecedented environmental, social, economic and political disruptions, the role of higher education has never been more vital. Colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to educate changemakers, foster cross-sector innovation, and model transformative action. Yet in some regions, sustainability efforts are increasingly politicized, putting pressure on institutions to retreat from this important work. Now more than ever, it is essential to communicate that sustainability in higher education is not only morally imperative, but strategically essential. The economic, pedagogical, organizational and societal benefits are too significant to ignore.



The energy intensity of Université de Sherbrooke's buildings in 2023-2024 was reduced by 46% since 2002, when the first energy efficiency measures were implemented. This substantial decrease played a strategic role in the institution's achievement of carbon neutrality.

The Value of Sustainability in Higher Education

Humanity faces a series of complex, interrelated, and, in some cases, existential sustainability challenges. These include climate destabilization and its attendant consequences, resource depletion and degradation, widening inequalities, a growing population, and loss of biodiversity. As the educators of future leaders and as laboratories for experimentation, institutions of higher education have an opportunity and a responsibility to help overcome these pressing challenges. This updated briefing demonstrates that sustainability isn't just the right thing to do, it's also smart business. By prioritizing sustainability, institutions can contribute to key institutional goals such as boosting revenue and enrollment, while also preparing students for solving society's greatest challenges. A strong sustainability culture can alleviate administrative burdens and promote institutional success.

1. Sustainability education prepares students for career success and responsible citizenship.

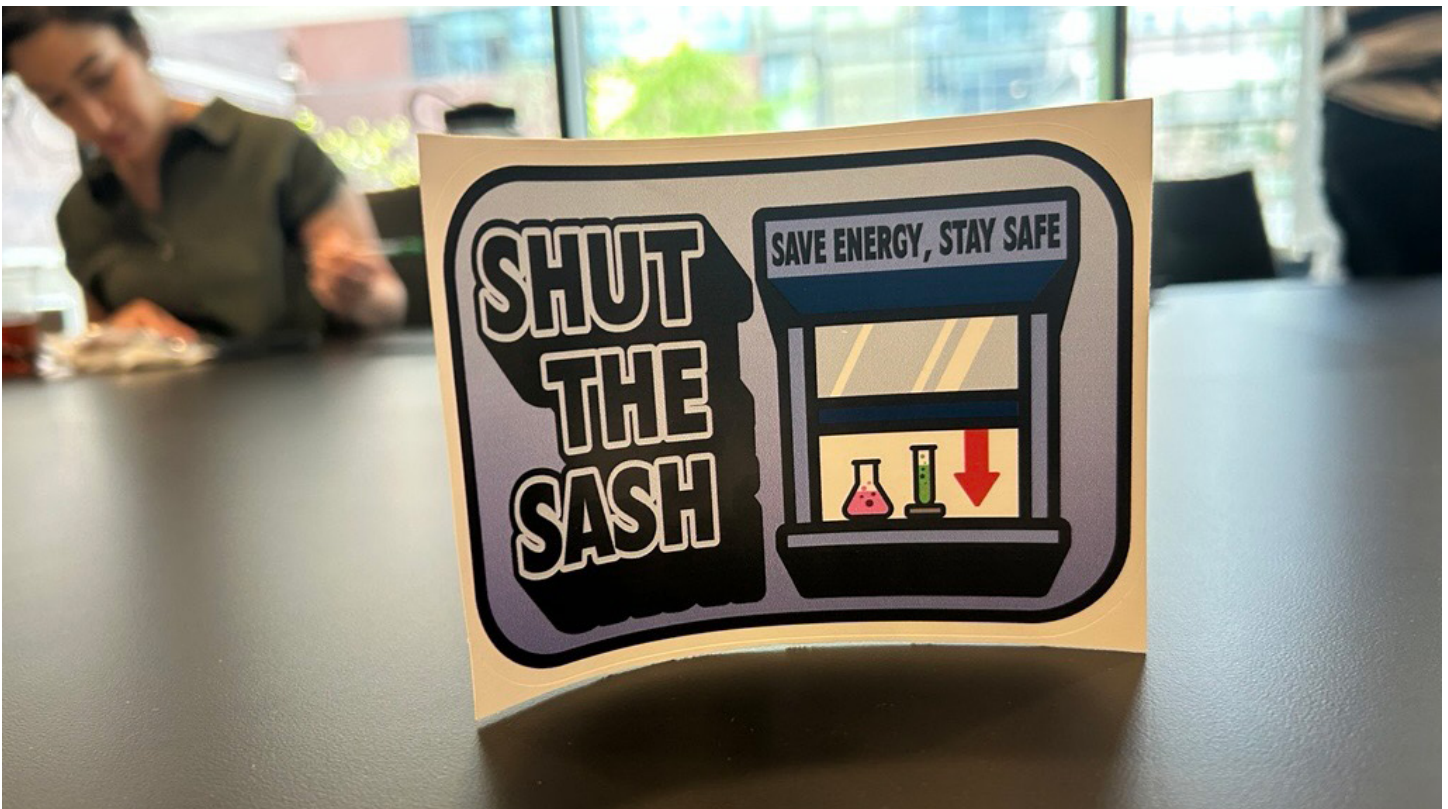
- Employers increasingly emphasize sustainability competencies as sustainability becomes more central to business strategy, even for jobs that aren't explicitly focused on sustainability. This means that sustainability education is an essential part of workforce development. ¹
- The jobs of the future are sustainability jobs. Indeed, the fastest growing segments of many industries are sustainability-oriented (e.g., renewable energy, organic agriculture, green buildings and electric vehicles). ²
- Sustainability literacy helps empower students to participate effectively in civic dialogue, which is likely to increasingly focus on the management of urgent sustainability challenges. ³



Students attended a Sustainability Career Fair at Seneca Polytechnic, where they discovered career opportunities across diverse sectors, including banking, landscape, community work, and green energy.

2. Sustainability improves organizational efficiency, decreases operational costs and reduces risk.

- Energy efficiency (e.g., new lighting, HVAC technologies and retrofits), energy conservation and renewable energy can save institutions hundreds of thousands of dollars each year on utility costs and distribution system repair and maintenance. ⁴
- Waste reduction, reuse, and recycling lowers hauling costs, saves on purchasing costs and reduces litter. Programs that reduce consumption (e.g., print management programs and water refilling stations) also lower costs and conserve resources. ⁵
- Sustainable fleet management programs lower fuel costs, improve local air quality, and reduce vehicle procurement and maintenance costs. ⁶
- Transportation demand management programs decrease traffic and reduce pressure to build expensive new parking facilities. ⁷
- Sustainable buildings cost less to operate and improve occupant productivity, learning, health and comfort. ⁸
- Prioritizing sustainability principles in campus planning helps make campuses more resilient to the growing risks associated with environmental changes (e.g., droughts, wildfires and other extreme weather events, as well as future regulations (e.g., on greenhouse gas emissions). Likewise, renewable energy sources can provide protection against volatile fuel costs. ⁹



Shut the sash sticker at University of Pennsylvania. Photo credit: Bianca Swift

3. Sustainability catalyzes increased giving and new funding sources.

- Sustainability is a powerful motivator for potential donors who want to support people and projects making a positive impact. ¹⁰
- Billions of dollars in government and corporate funding is invested annually in sustainability-related research and implementation at colleges and universities. ¹¹
- Industry partnerships in clean technologies can generate revenue via commercialization of intellectual property. ¹²
- Students at more and more higher education institutions are voting to raise their own fees to fund sustainability initiatives on their campuses. ¹³

4. Sustainability helps attract, retain and motivate top students and employees.

- Students are seeking schools that actively demonstrate sustainability leadership and provide them with the tools for complex decision-making and problem-solving. ¹⁴ Sustainability, and the sense of purpose it provides, also helps to enhance student retention. ¹⁵
- Strong sustainability performance facilitates the recruitment of high-quality faculty and staff, who increasingly seek to work for organizations that are making a positive impact on the world. ¹⁶ Sustainability also helps to foster organizational commitment and improve employee retention. ¹⁷



The 2024-2025 cohort of Sustainability Project Fund student ambassadors at McGill University.

5. Sustainability strengthens community relations and facilitates new partnerships.

- Sustainability enhances town-gown relations by improving community wellbeing and quality of life (e.g., by reducing air pollution from traffic or maintaining natural spaces for recreational use) and contributing to municipal sustainability goals. ¹⁸
- Sustainability provides a focal point to engage new partners (e.g., businesses and government agencies) for high impact research collaborations and powerful experiential and applied learning opportunities. ¹⁹
- Strong sustainability commitments facilitate approval of campus expansion and development projects and are often a necessary part of agreements negotiated to gain support for new development. ²⁰



Texas A&M University students paint repurposed tires as part of The Big Event, one of the largest one-day, student-run service projects in the United States.

6. Sustainability research and education demonstrates relevance in addressing urgent grand challenges and help unify the campus around a shared sense of purpose.

- Making tangible contributions to solving ever-growing real world sustainability problems can improve an institution's reputation and enhance public support for higher education. ²¹
- In a sign of its importance to solving pressing sustainability challenges, sustainability research is growing quickly and receives more citations than research generally. ²²
- As an inherently interdisciplinary field that necessitates increased levels of campus coordination, sustainability can stimulate innovation and catalyze improvements in organizational performance. ²³

Closing

Prioritizing sustainability in higher education is a win for everyone: students, employees, communities, and society overall. Today's graduates are putting their educations to work in professions that bridge geographical and disciplinary boundaries. Higher education has the opportunity, the responsibility, and the great honor of leading global efforts to create a sustainable future. This is not a future for which we can afford to wait, but one we must actively forge by teaching our students, and ourselves, how to achieve health and happiness, environmental quality, and economic well-being for current and future generations.



The University of Maryland Global STEWARDS program trains doctoral students to work and communicate across food, energy, and water disciplines, enabling transformative discoveries through interdisciplinary approaches.



Students walking with a bike at Toronto Metropolitan University.

Images throughout this publication provided courtesy of the following AASHE member institutions: McGill University, Seneca Polytechnic; Texas A&M University; Toronto Metropolitan University; Université de Sherbrooke; University of Connecticut; University of Maryland, College Park; University of Pennsylvania; University of Toronto Mississauga.

About AASHE

AASHE empowers higher education administrators, faculty, staff and students to be effective change agents and drivers of sustainability innovation. AASHE enables members to translate information into action by offering essential resources and professional development to a diverse, engaged community of sustainability leaders. We work with and for higher education to ensure that our world's future leaders are motivated and equipped to solve sustainability challenges. For more information, visit www.aashe.org.

