

Intersectional sustainability & student activism:

A framework for achieving social sustainability on university campuses

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Abstract

Formal definitions of ‘sustainability’ include three components: the social, environmental, and economic. Universities in North America have made recent progress in addressing environmental and economic sustainability, but have generally devoted fewer resources to social sustainability. Scholars attribute this oversight to the malleability of the term “social sustainability” and its interpretations. Narrow understandings of what makes up “the environment” contribute to this incomplete interpretation of sustainability. To clarify this issue, we define the environment as “a space in which a community lives” in this paper. We argue that universities struggle to address issues of social sustainability as a result of persisting oppressive ideologies, exclusionary policy language, and obstacles that keep students from enacting their agency prevent universities. In order to address the absence of intersectional and comprehensive sustainability initiatives on North American campuses, this paper outlines the concept of social sustainability and identifies issues of social sustainability on college campuses. With this framework in mind we argue for the formal inclusion of social sustainability into policies and initiatives on college campuses. We then provide a detailed account of our own university’s relationship with sustainability, drawing from students’ personal accounts, and compare this to those of other North American universities.

1. Introduction

In recent years, North American universities have significantly increased their commitment to sustainability, allowing universities to promote themselves as sites of scholarly engagement with sustainability while also serving as living laboratories for the advancement of such initiatives. Universities generally interpret the principles of sustainability by relying upon the broad definition rooted in the World Commission on Environment and Development’s (WCED) triple bottom line framework of overlapping social, environmental, and economic components. When achieved together, these components allow a society to meet “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” (Brundtland & World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). However, there is a great deal of flexibility in the way the term “sustainability” is interpreted and applied. This malleability is a result of three primary factors: 1) the vagueness/variations of the definition itself, 2) the context in which the term is being applied, and 3) the symbology of the triple bottom line framework (Partridge 2005; Mak & Peacock 2011). When viewed as three distinct pillars, the overlap between the social, environmental, and economic components is more easily overlooked, allowing universities to prioritize one component over

another. As scholars have recognized this shortcoming they have begun to use depictions of the three components as concentric, overlapping circles, making their synergistic relationship more apparent (Mak & Peacock 2011).

As some scholars have noted, engaging in an intersectional approach to sustainability is a fundamental step in maintaining a productive commitment to sustainability (Dunn & Hart-Steffes 2012; Kerr & Hart-Steffes 2012; Edwards 2012; Miller 2016; Brundtland & World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). As this paper suggests, this is especially true for institutions of higher education. An equally weighted focus on the three overlapping components of sustainability allows universities to improve the health and well-being of the campus community, produce more sustainable financial models, foster environmental health on campus, and ultimately serve as a pedagogical example for students who will enter the world as engaged and informed citizens. While universities have made progress towards promoting environmental and economic sustainability, fewer resources and attention have been applied to social sustainability (Dunn & Hart-Steffes 2012; Kerr & Hart-Steffes 2012; Edwards 2012).

There are various definitions of social sustainability. Generally, they emphasize equity in the structures, systems, and relationships that support healthy and safe communities and improve the quality of life for all members (McKenzie 2013; Mak & Peacock 2011). However, in the last decade scholars have documented the various ways in which campuses still fail at creating healthy and safe communities; 19% of women report being assaulted while at college, students with disabilities have a graduation rate half that of students without disabilities, and people of color remain frequently underserved and underrepresented throughout their academic careers (Krebs et al. 2007; Gregg 2009; Museus et al. 2015). Increased focus upon social sustainability would thus benefit universities through the creation of respectful campus climates, stronger commitments to standing policies on sustainability, and a more interdisciplinary educational experience for students as they are taught to be agents of change in their communities.

The presence of persisting oppressive ideologies, exclusionary policy language, and obstacles that keep students from enacting their agency prevent universities from adequately incorporating social sustainability into their sustainability initiatives. This paper begins with a discussion of the concept of social sustainability and its importance in achieving sustainability as a whole. We then examine different manifestations of social injustice present on North American college campuses, revealing the significant amount of work that remains to be done on this issue. Lastly, we include proposals for how universities can amend policies and influence campus cultures in ways that improve the overall health, well-being, and long term sustainability of campus communities.

2. Literature Review: Understanding Sustainability/Social Sustainability

Sustainability efforts that place an “emphasis on the economy and environment,” have dominated applications of sustainability and sustainable development, contributing to a broader understanding of the intersection between these two components while rendering it “harder for people to understand how the environment and social sustainability are interrelated” (Boström 2012). This is exacerbated by narrow definitions of the environment as only non-human nature which do not take into account built and social environments (Kafer 2013; Dempsey et al. 2011). Furthermore, scholars argue that “sustainability” is itself an ambiguous term, because it is a context-dependent concept: “it has to be applied to something before its meaning is clear” (Partridge 2005). This

context-dependency is reflected in the sustainability initiatives to which universities devote their resources. For example, some schools focus heavily on issues such as climate change, energy use, and waste management, while others emphasize campus and public engagement through Student Life offices or outreach campaigns (AASHE 2017).

In order to achieve a socially sustainable community, universities must prioritize and plan for universal accessibility, employment opportunities, and the availability of social support systems (MAK & Peacock 2012). In a university setting, these requirements manifest as safe social spaces for all students—specifically LGBTQ students, students with disabilities, students of color, and women—religious freedom, representation in the classroom, and accessible building designs. Thus for the purpose of this paper, when we refer to ‘social sustainability,’ we refer to all forms of campus and public engagement initiatives that address issues of social justice and promote a comprehensive understanding of community health and well-being.

2.1 North American Universities and their Relationship to Sustainability/ Social Sustainability

Institutions of higher education—especially those in the liberal arts—are prominent sites for interdisciplinary learning both in and outside of the classroom, where students can engage with their immediate and more far-reaching communities (Edwards 2012; Dunn & Hart Steffes 2012; Kerr & Hart-Steffes 2012). Promoting and utilizing the three concentric circles of sustainability is a means through which universities can further this type of education (Kerr & Hart-Steffes 2012; Edwards 2012). It is also important to note that the sustainability model intends to create a world comprised of citizens who make decisions and take actions that extend beyond individual benefits (Dunn & Hart-Steffes 2012). This too is at the foundation of teaching engaged citizenship: to help undergraduate students develop skills that they will then utilize for the benefit of society as a whole. For example, Miller (2016, 59) studied an interdisciplinary semester on sustainability for undergraduates that exemplifies this. She found that an effective approach for promoting and understanding sustainability encourages students to critique their focus on individual efforts and instead “identify opportunities for transformation” in the larger governing structures. Rather than solely pushing oneself to buy less plastic in order to achieve sustainability, people must collectively direct their energy towards transforming the overarching systems that are not themselves sustainable.

One of the primary tools used for assessing sustainability on North American campuses is AASHE’s Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, & Rating System (STARS). In line with Miller’s research, this framework outlines both the individual-based efforts and large-scale systems where sustainability work can be done. Universities can then measure their sustainability performance in a transparent manner, in areas such as energy use, financial aid, and diversity, in order to address all three components of sustainability. However there remain “significant differences in the interpretation of sustainability by higher stakeholders” (Hooey et al. 2017, 280) This can cause equally ranked universities to have varying levels of commitment because their actions vary based on localized understandings of the terms (Hooey et al. 2017). Scholars argue that “integration [of the three components] is key; their interrelationships are more important than the individual elements themselves” (Hooey et al. 2017). Although it is outlined, this integration is not directly enforced through STARS, so universities can continue to neglect social sustainability in favor of standing policies geared towards economic and environmental sustainability and are still able to achieve a high overall rating.

2.2 The Scope of Social Sustainability

Social sustainability is intended to call attention to issues of social justice such as accessibility, social space and representation, diversity and inclusion, and combatting sexism and sexual assault (Kerr & Hart-Steffes 2012; Edwards 2012; Dempsey et al. 2011). These are all factors that have an effect on the way students perceive and experience the overall campus climate and environment (Lowe et al. 2013). We expand on each of these issues in detail below, providing examples of their manifestations on North American universities.

Accessibility

Certain bodies have limited access to spaces (classrooms, dorms, libraries, dining halls) on campus due to the “compulsorily able-bodiedness/able-mindedness” that has “shaped not only the environments of our lives—both in buildings and parks—but our very understandings of the environment itself” (Kafer 2013, 130). Despite this key element of social space and the environment, disabled bodies are rarely brought into the discussion and goals of social sustainability. Alison Kafer argues that “people are disabled not by their bodies but by their inaccessible environments,” supporting the argument that issues around the environment are, in fact, issues of social inequality (Kafer 2013, 129). As some potential actions on this issue may not initially appear to university stakeholders to be related to the overall push for sustainability, the concept of social sustainability plays an important role in clarifying the connections. As discussed by Kafer, a community’s environment is the space in which they live, and fostering a safe and healthy relationship between bodies and their environment is one of the key components to sustainability as a whole.

Social space and representation

Part of ensuring a safe and sustainable campus community is making sure students are free to express their sexuality and gender identities; these are two important facets of students’ identities and perceived sense of belonging within their communities (Waldo 1998; Stolzenberg & Hughes 2017). One study on lesbian, gay, and bisexual students found them to have college experiences that “are qualitatively different from those of heterosexual students because of the processes of identity development” in climates made hostile by verbal harassment and threats of physical violence (Waldo 1998). Studies on the experiences of transgender students report similar findings; trans students are roughly “13 percentage points more likely to participate in online social networks for six or more hours per week” than their cisgender peers, a finding that is significant because “transgender students infrequently have access to supportive transgender networks on campus” (Stolzenberg & Hughes 2017). Many universities have student organizations centered around sexuality and gender identity that may offer necessary support, but these empirical studies portray the persisting presence of hostility that LGBTQ students continue to encounter.

Diversity and inclusion

The relationship between sustainability and race often conjures data on people of color being disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards (Sandler & Pezzullo 2007; Cole & Foster 2001). However, colleges face issues on the intersection of race and sustainability in a different way. While policies like Affirmative Action and others that target diversity in education have led to improvements in diversity on college campuses, studies have concluded that students’ perceptions of campus climates are still heavily influenced by their race (McClelland & Auster 1990).

Museus et al. (2015, 12), following Susan Iverson's study on 21 university plans for diversity and inclusion, noted that despite good intentions to encourage diversity, "many of them failed to recognize how their own institutional language worked to further reinscribe minoritized communities as 'outsiders' to postsecondary education."

This ostracizing language exists because universities today remain tied to the historical contexts in which they were created; the prejudices that governed a country when a university was founded are reflected in that institution's political structure. Iverson (2007) touches on this point as well, noting that "higher education is a microcosm of society" and given the current political climate "it is not surprising that racially charged events and resulting racial tensions continue to emerge on college campuses." The events and tensions Iverson refer to include on-campus parties with racist themes, microaggressions from peers and faculty, and reckoning with institutions' ties to founders with racist beliefs (Museus et al. 2015). Experiences with these manifestations of racism negatively affect students' health and wellbeing on campus, as they can be "demoralizing and may lead to higher levels of stress, feelings of self-doubt, alienation, and anger" (Sue et al. 2007). The negative influence of lingering systemic racism on students serves as evidence that issues of race on college campuses must be incorporated into universities increased investment in social sustainability.

Scholarship on the experiences of Muslim students reveals that the issue of racial discrimination overlaps with religious discrimination. For example, in 2010 an episode of South Park was taken off the air following controversy over its depiction of Muhammad; in response, students at universities across the United States, including Northwestern University and University of Wisconsin at Madison, took part in campus-chalking of images of Muhammad as a way to "protest censorship" (IFYC). As "actual depictions of Muhammad are generally forbidden within Islam," this imagery was very harmful towards Muslim students (IFYC). However, when Muslim students and student organizations at Northwestern University came forward asking their fellow students not to participate in the chalking, their requests were ignored. Afterwards, Muslim students reported feeling "targeted" by these actions (IFYC). These kinds of discriminatory and disrespectful actions against Muslim students and their religion is a reflection of the broader social climate in the United States, making them all the more important to address in our smaller communities.

Combatting sexism and sexual assault

Another key aspect of a safe campus community is taking necessary measures to protect students from sexual assault. However, scholars continue to document high trends of sexual assault on campuses, showing that university communities remain unsafe in this manner as well (Krebs et al. 2007). To prevent assault, it is common for women and administrators to come up with defense strategies instead of strategies that address the systemic culture of sexual assault that compromises women's free and independent use of campus spaces (Day 1995). Drawing from the model of social sustainability, strategies would be more effective if they targeted specific shortcomings of sexual assault policies and worked to alter the existing campus climate that allows assaulters to face very few repercussions (Day 1995). In order to maintain donor relationships and sustain enrollment, some universities have chosen to prioritize an image of safety rather than publicly address the harsh realities of campus violence (Day 1995). Thus, universities can often appear to be safe spaces, but can actually be danger zones (Lewis et al. 2016).

2.3 Obstacles to Implementing Social Sustainability on College Campuses

The primary obstacles that North American universities face in confronting issues of social sustainability on campus are 1) oppressive ideologies (i.e. racism, sexism, ableism...), 2) policy language, and 3) limited agency of students in enacting change. These challenges are often exacerbated by the fact that the term sustainability is itself a fluid concept. It is easily appropriated by university administrators and public relations experts who redefine "sustainability" in order to promote a carefully-crafted public image that sanitizes and obfuscates the very problems social sustainability initiatives seek to confront. Many North American universities have taken positive steps towards improving environmental sustainability on their campuses, but this limited scope can have "unintended consequences", which we outline below (Edwards 2012, 20).

Oppressive Ideologies

Some universities promote an approach to education that aids students in "understanding privilege and oppression, and equip[s] students with the kinds of skills to foster more justice and equity," yet there exists a disconnect between these lessons and university administrators' own relationships to these ideas (Edwards 2012, 25). Outside of the classroom, policies and attitudes do not reflect the same efforts to address oppression and inequity. As a result, marginalized communities throughout campus become further discouraged as they witness the disconnect between the lessons they hear in the classroom and how these lessons materialize in their everyday lives. There is ample evidence from scholars and activists who write about this topic, as is outlined below through examples of discrimination against LGBTQ students, students of color, students with disabilities, and women.

LGBTQ students are often underrepresented on college campuses, which leads to feelings of exclusion and diminishes students' sense of belonging (Marine & Nicolazzo 2014). Although universities attempt to promote safe places and resources for LGBTQ students, these students often remain marginalized by non-inclusive language; but when programs, policies, and practices actively promote the inclusivity of LGBTQ groups on campus, there is a higher level of commitment from students (Marine & Nicolazzo 2014). Outside of those spaces that are intentionally inclusive of LGBTQ students, hetero- and gender-normative perspectives still largely dominate the campus climate. College fraternity parties are particularly exclusionary to students who don't adhere to these social standards, and on many campuses this problem is exacerbated by the lack of alternative options for parties (Byron et al. 2017). In some cases, "Gay men... are outright ejected from these spaces by some fraternity members" for displaying their sexuality (Byron et al. 2017, 689). For transgender students, even non-sexualized spaces are dangerous; in locker rooms and restrooms that are separated for "men" and "women," transgender students "often face verbal and physical assault" (Beemyn et al. 2005, 55). Not only are LGBTQ students marginalized, they are further endangered when they are LGBTQ students of color and their exclusion becomes even more prevalent (Marine & Nicolazzo 2014).

As Lowe et al (2013, 574) stated, students of color lack confidence in their universities' "capacity to adequately address racist incidents" because of the rate at which they experience acts of racism. Students of color have even reported feeling like "guests in someone else's house" because of their universities' negligence in addressing their concerns and make necessary changes (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, 20). As Milem et al. (2005) and Lowe et al. (2013) suggest, these sentiments are largely the result of tokenism, microaggressions, white privilege, and white dominated spaces on campuses across North America. Experiences of "higher levels of perceived hostility and discrimination" towards students of color are more common at universities with "lower levels of perceived institutional commitment to diversity" (Milem et al. 2005, 11). These environments

frequently result in “low grades” among African American students, “feelings of isolation” among Native American students, and Latino/a students report struggling to feel “a sense of belonging” in college and to adjust to college life (Milem et al. 2005).

Further evidence of this issue is provided by Museus et al. (2015, 13) who concluded from studies on racism within universities that “racism operates at a systemic level to privilege the racial majority’s perspectives in the formation and interpretation of policy” and remains deeply ingrained in higher education. Just as the institutions themselves are not removed from the racist structures that North America was built upon, neither are university administrative systems. To exacerbate this disconnect, many university administrators fail to recognize that this system of privilege is at play in their own institutions, and are thus unable to adequately address it. When universities do not address these historically embedded systems of oppression, students are left to adapt to damaging campus climates on their own, forced to navigate the structural issues that exist in their environments without sufficient support. This handing off of responsibility to students is prominent in addressing issues of oppression on campuses.

Scholars stress that in order for universities to foster a culture of sustainability, students must see their institution “role-modeling sustainable behavior through its policy and practice” (Kerr & Hart-Steffes 2012, 11). However, when looking at the widespread issue of sexual assault on university campuses, there is a lack of “university-based resistance to everyday sexism and laddism” (Lewis et al. 2016). Universities often engage in “practical strategies... intended to prevent assault” that put the responsibility on students to avoid becoming victims of sexual assault, as opposed to “strategic actions aim to change the underlying conditions conducive to assault or crime” (Day 1995, 264). When students endure “oppressive cultures and practices” on campus, but do not feel supported by their universities—i.e. experience “institutional betrayal”—this contributes to mental and physical health problems (Lewis et al. 2016, 2). In failing to assist their students in addressing this issue, universities perpetuate and normalize sexist environments in which women and other marginalized groups feel unsafe and unsupported.

The “political institution of able-bodiedness” as discussed by Kafer (2003, 77) is also an ideology found on campuses that is based on the oppression of certain groups. One manner through which ableism manifests within universities is the narrow scope of the term “environment.” The environment is widely perceived solely as nature and wilderness, but social spaces and the environment do not exist without one another. As Kafer (2013, 129) elaborates, “the natural environment is also ‘built:’ literally so in the case of trails and dams, metaphorically so in the sense of cultural constructions of deployments of ‘nature’, ‘natural’, and ‘the environment.’” The university environment, through sidewalks, building access, and parking lots, has the potential to be constructed in a physically accessible or inaccessible way. Ableism affects more than physical accessibility of the built environment—assumptions about normative learning styles contribute to the alienation of students with learning disorders. Though universities are required to provide support systems and accommodations for students, they are often inadequate. For this reason, “many students with disabilities or learning disorders enroll in online classes or at online institutions to avoid the stigma (real or perceived) found in traditional classrooms” (Sutton 2016, 9). Students with disabilities reported that traditional classroom settings were “‘draining,’ ‘awkward,’ and made participants ‘self-conscious’” (Sutton 2016, 9). Despite “the opportunity to be viewed as a student without limitations” and the refuge from harmful classroom experiences, students reported feelings

of isolation when participating in online classes, rendering neither situation ideal for learning (Sutton 2016, 9).

Policy language

To promote sustainability, Miller (2016) emphasizes that it is important to understand the obstacles of integrating social sustainability into campus policies. The implementation of sustainable practices at institutions of higher learning require efforts that involve administrators, staff, faculty, and students, and span facility operations, finance, research, student activities, and community outreach efforts. Without an approach that incorporates all of these facets, the active power of sustainability as an integrative concept is compartmentalized and controlled by those who interpret and implement the policies. Yet this collaboration is not necessarily easy to facilitate. Students often face obstacles that limit their agency to amend campus policies, including a governance-related inability to write/amend policies (i.e. students are restricted from authoring or editing policies), disagreements among community members about the best paths forward, or even lack of access to the administrators themselves. Sometimes this inaccessibility is present because of disproportionate levels of education in certain fields, but at other times, policy language and structuring are themselves exclusionary.

The creation of “Green Funds” is one way universities are attempting to further their commitments to sustainability at a policy level. “Green Funds” and “Sustainability Funds” are pools of grant money—often generated from student fees or earmarked as part of their tuition—that campus members can apply for to fund their sustainability-related projects and initiatives. Usually, a committee comprised of various campus stakeholders will approve or deny funds based on a project’s perceived relevance to sustainability and potential to improve the university in some way. However, the narrow interpretation of sustainability that strongly favors cost savings and carbon-footprint-reduction is present in the language of many universities’ “Green Fund” guidelines; the use of the word “green” in naming these funds can itself be exclusionary to projects focused on social sustainability (Edwards 2012). Stanford’s outline for appropriate Student Green Fund projects specified that projects must aim to reduce Stanford’s “ecological footprint” and “directly address environmental sustainability” (Sustainable Stanford). Similarly, Mount Holyoke College intends to allocate their Green Revolving Fund to projects that “reduce resource use and generate cost savings” for the university (*Green Revolving Fund Established*). While the existence of a specific fund for these types of initiatives is no doubt critical to achieving sustainability on campuses, the focus on environmental and economic sustainability is reinforcing the notion that social issues and personal experiences are a less prioritized component of the sustainability narrative.

Student Agency & Authority

Universities provide a unique environment in which students have varying levels of agency. On one hand, students make up the majority of the campus population, thus rendering their presence the largest and their voices potentially the loudest. Despite this strength in numbers, institutional structures often prevent students from realizing their power. Scholarship on teaching and implementing sustainability emphasizes the need for universities to incorporate lessons on “relationships, leadership, making change, social justice, group dynamics, power, and economics” into student learning (Kerr & Hart Steffes 2012). This learning should not be exclusive to the classroom experience; academia-based lessons must be paired with opportunities “to put classroom knowledge into action in [students’] daily lives” (Kerr & Hart Steffes 2012, 11). As students generally live on or near their college campuses and are deeply tied to university operations while in

attendance, the university is the most appropriate setting for students to enact this applied learning. But, as Miller (2016, 53) emphasizes, in order for these practices to be integrated effectively into all aspects of students' university experiences, they must consider the "institutional policies, cultural norms, social norms, gender norms, and even physical infrastructures" that govern the way their respective communities function. Students must also account for the ways these structures create dissonance between the agency they hold and their ability to claim it.

Though students are often expected to contribute to change on campuses, their perspectives are not always taken into account when university's policies and initiatives are altered; requests made by students are frequently overlooked or diminished by more powerful structures (Day 1995). Because of these experiences of disenfranchisement, students can grow to distrust university administrators and their ability to take their concerns seriously. This distrust that activists feel is not one-sided—administrators themselves often have concerns about campus activism and how activism will impact the reputation of their university. Universities are heavily influenced by their wealthy donors and alumni, as well as prospective students and their families, which causes them to formulate a positive image that suppresses the voices of frustrated students (Day 1995). Histories of societal judgement and institutional betrayal often contribute to a tense relationship between activists and their institution administrators. This skepticism from administrators not only gets in the way of activism, it often directly conflicts with curriculum and university goals and mission statements (Southwestern University Mission, Purpose, and Values). Although in this conflict both student activists and university administrators argue that they want a safe and comfortable campus climate, the issue lies in defining what this means and the strategies that are deemed appropriate.

3. Taking Action at Our University: A Case Study

"If we are not fostering a safe space for all, what the fuck are we doing here? If this school is exactly as dangerous for women as any other school in this country, with the same rate of rape and sexual assault, how does it offer anything unique or individual at all? Is 'being southwestern' just being exactly like everybody else?"

-Anonymous student survey response

Our research was motivated by our experiences in which social sustainability is left out of the conversation, the policies, and the structure of our own university. The current legislation of our campus Green S.A.F.E. (Sustainable Advancements Funding Endeavor) Initiative, a fund made up of a \$15-per-semester fee in students' tuition, exemplifies this problem. The language of the "Green Fund" policy is ambiguous about the term 'sustainability' but does specifically name two other documents adopted by the university as the basis for appropriate delegation of the funds.¹ These two documents—the Talloires Declaration and the President's Climate Commitment—specifically articulate environmental endeavors in terms of carbon-footprints, resources use, and improvements to the purportedly "natural" environment.

The absence of social sustainability from our Green Fund's policy was specifically brought to our attention during the fall semester in 2016, when two project proposals were submitted that fell under this category. One project, submitted by leaders of a student organization, would fund a workshop for establishing a peer network to combat sexual assault on our campus. Students felt that this was

¹ Appendix A

important because our university is under two separate investigations for mishandling Title IX procedures regarding sexual assault cases. The other proposal was submitted by a faculty and staff member to have an automatic door installed in one of the academic buildings to increase accessibility. The Sustainability Committee—comprised of four students, three faculty, and three staff—voted to award money to both of these projects. The following semester, as the projects were being carried out, senior staff informed the Sustainability Committee that alternative sources of money would be found for these projects because they did not fit within the definition of sustainability as outlined in the Green Fund’s legislation. In response to shock and frustration from the campus community, we decided to rewrite the policy and navigate the bureaucratic channels to have it adopted. We crafted a clarifying amendment that expands the scope of the Green Fund, allowing funds to be awarded to projects that address any kind of environmental, economic, or social sustainability issue on campus.²

Unsure of how to begin the policy amendment process, we reached out to the Student Government Association (SGA) in early September. We let them know about our plans, and asked for more information on the step-by-step process. We also reached out to faculty in order to ensure that we had all of the necessary information about the university governance structure and official policy stream. In early October we met with SGA’s Legislative Committee, and then returned later in the month to present our amendment to the SGA General Assembly. This gave SGA leaders and representatives three weeks to discuss our proposal with other students and receive feedback. In early November, an anonymous survey was sent to students with information about our amendment so they could vote in favor or against the policy change. Ninety percent of the 178 students who voted were in favor of the amendment.³ When the vote was taken on November 7th, the SGA General Assembly unanimously voted to pass our clarifying amendment. The next step in the process required us to present our case to the chief university committee which is comprised of elected faculty and staff with voting powers, but also attended by ex officio administrators. We addressed the concerns presented to us, and the policy was unanimously approved by voting members of the committee, who recommended that our amendment move forward to the university faculty for discussion and approval at the following faculty meeting. We left the committee meeting under the impression that our amendment was approved and began planning to address the faculty. Shortly thereafter, we were surprised by an email stating that the process had been delayed. We were later told that, upon our departure from the meeting, senior staff informed the voting members of the committee that the amendment could not go forward at that time. Further consultation with the administration, namely the president of the university, would be needed before taking our amendment to the faculty. At the time of writing, this setback in the policy process has prevented us from continuing to move forward this semester.

In the early stages of the policy process, as we were drafting our clarifying amendment, we also talked to students about their understandings of and experiences with social sustainability on our campus. We hosted an open forum in order to provide a space where students could share their own stories and find commonalities in their experiences. We called this event “A Space to Dream”, and students from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds came together to foster an empowering environment. The stories that students shared were deeply personal recounts of hardships they had endured while at our university, and it was validating to find how many of us had gone through

² Appendix B

³ Appendix C

similar trials on our campus. Recounted below are some of our own personal accounts interwoven with the experiences students shared at our forum, together forming a picture of social sustainability and student activism at our university.

During our first year at Southwestern a student discovered through social media that our school was under investigation for mishandling procedures for a sexual assault case as outlined in Title IX. Immediately, this student shared the information with the campus community, and students gathered to strategize a response to the administration's lack of transparency. Copies of the letter were posted all over the President's office door. In response to this investigation, and a drugging that occurred shortly after at a fraternity house, students held a Take Back the Night march on campus grounds. They hoped that this march would make the urgency of this issue visible to the campus police and administrators. Additionally, students began the push for a Zero Tolerance Policy which would result in the automatic expulsion of any student found guilty of sexual misconduct. Students met with senior staff and crafted a petition that gathered over 600 signatures from faculty, staff, students, and alumni in favor of adopting this policy. However, when the petition was delivered to the President and other senior staff, students were met with no response.

After facing obstacles for several years, students slowly began to direct their energy to other issues that arose on campus. Activism on campus intensified again during the 2016 election as Donald Trump's racist and sexist language permeated all communities, including our own. The campus climate deteriorated immediately, as a group of students chalked over 40 threatening, pro-Trump messages across campus grounds. The following morning, after spending the night scrubbing these messages away, students gathered with signs of solidarity in the President's classroom. The President took the opportunity to turn this into a photo-op, posting an image on his social media account—but did not respond to student concerns with institutional adjustments. Students had also researched and crafted policy proposals for addressing our needs at an institutional level. In a meeting with the President and Vice President we presented a proposal to declare our school a sanctuary space, a call for the creation of a task force to specifically handle hate crimes, and the expansion of our honor code to include social integrity in our relationships. The two administrators said very little during this meeting, and on the occasions we attempted to follow-up on these efforts, we received vague responses.

Because neither of these concerns were properly addressed by the administration, these issues persist in student lives today. This was made explicit at the forum we held, as students voiced instances of oppression that they experience on campus. One of the students who spoke out, a Latina active student leader and member of the Coalition for Diversity and Social Justice (CDSJ), reflected on the challenges of student activism. She discussed the draining nature of trying to tackle multiple social sustainability issues at once, and her ongoing struggle to facilitate collaboration among student organizations. As each of the organizations that is a part of CDSJ centers around a set of specific issues that they are passionate about, it can be difficult to unify all members looking to make the campus a safer, more sustainable space. This same student also faces ongoing challenges as a woman of color within a STEM department. Almost all of the faculty within her major are white, predominantly male, and do not have an understanding of how to teach students of color. Women of color are severely underrepresented in STEM fields, so they are already entering these classes with the weight of difference on their shoulders. This burden is worsened when professors don't incorporate students' identities into their methods of teaching or their interactions with students, instead approaching these dynamics through their own positionalities.

These issues are not limited to one academic department, but transcend into others. A Fine Arts Latina student expressed her desire to broaden the availability of composers played during her music classes. These classes heavily focus on white male composers which results in a lack of representation within the department and further alienates minority students. To combat this problem, this student proposed an idea for events that allowed music students and faculty to meet and talk about diversity within the music world. However, she was met with resistance from Fine Arts staff and had to restructure her plans to meet their demands, resulting in a watered-down version of her intended idea. The hurdles this student faced generated additional work that she was expected to handle on her own rather than in partnership with the Fine Arts administrators and faculty.

When trying to make institutional changes, student activists find that official statements from the university differ at times from the actions and words of individual staff members. One senior staff member recently expressed concerns about the connotation of the word ‘activism’, and in a speech given to an audience of student leaders, stressed that students should be involved in taking action, not activism. This statement is alarming considering that “Encouraging activism in the pursuit of justice and the common good” is in the university’s official core values statement (Southwestern University Mission, Purpose, and Values 2017). The statement also ignores that activism revolves around taking action. Incidents such as this make students feel as though they cannot rely on the university faculty and staff to consistently embody and uphold the core values that the university claims to strive for.

4. Discussion: A Comprehensive Sustainability Framework

The issues discussed above and others that surfaced at the forum aligned with the literature we read on the prevalence of social sustainability issues on North American universities. We also found that our school is not unique in its struggle to address these injustices. Reflecting on the activism that students—at our university and at universities across North America—have spent their college years engaging in, it is clear that the work to improve the campus climate has fallen largely on their shoulders. These efforts require a heavy devotion of personal time and resources, and are usually done on a volunteer-basis in conjunction with coursework and jobs. If students are going to take on this work, then institutional support must be formally available through university policies and administrators’ assistance.

While all campus community members—namely students themselves—need to be involved in campus decision making and enforcement, a larger portion of this responsibility should fall onto administrators who not only hold titles and power, but are also paid for this labor. In order for the efforts of students to be worthwhile and make change, administrators must listen to the needs that are put forward by students and act on these concerns. This action cannot be limited to reiterating a pre-existing policy; administrators must respond in a way that does not deflect the true source of the problem, the histories that have created the issue, or their responsibility to actively ensure that their campus provides a safe and inclusive environment.

Fostering a healthy relationship between students and the administration is crucial to the successful implementation of socially sustainable policies and the creation of a safe campus climate. In order to maintain a favorable outward image for donors and prospective students, the systemic issues at

universities tend to be glossed over rather than addressed in an effective manner that would ultimately improve student experiences and confidence in the university. A piece of this conflict is centered around the lack of transparency of university issues. Rather than openly discussing “controversial” issues on campus, many of these discussions take place behind the scenes. This lack of transparency contributes to feelings of disconnect between university students and their administrators, with students having to take it upon themselves to continually push for transparency from the administration.

This is why social sustainability needs to be incorporated into universities’ sustainability initiatives. The Green S.A.F.E Fund policy amendment is a prime example of how this can be executed, because this grant money is applied for by students themselves. The money allotted for these projects is supplied through student tuition, the funds allow students to request things that they need on campus, and students are involved in the process following the approval of their projects. Outlining the intersectionality of sustainability in this policy additionally allows student activism to be viewed in a more comprehensive manner. If the “environment” is understood as the space in which a community lives, it is clear that anything that makes that space dangerous also makes it unsustainable. Through this framework, issues ranging from the sexual assault epidemic to growing white supremacy across college campuses—including on our own—become sustainability problems, as they damage the university environment. By implementing socially sustainable policies on universities, the systematic problems that students face can be addressed across all facets of the institution. Below we will outline additional strategies to better the overall sustainability of the campus climate.

Adapting and Adjusting: Activism never stops

The lessons that we drew from our own experiences and the experiences that students shared with us pushed us to think about activism strategies and how to avoid being burnt out by repeated disappointment and institutional betrayal. In reflecting on all of these accounts, we were not only re-motivated in our work—we also came back to the idea of social sustainability, and the failure of institutions to create and uphold sustainable communities. As the systems currently exist and operate, students are not able to live in sustainable environments, but our work has highlighted several strategies for working towards healthy and safe living spaces through a comprehensive approach to sustainability.

The dynamic of a classroom is important so that all students, regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability feel included in class discussions and activities. When a university is mostly populated by white students and faculty, the power structure of the classroom is always evident to a minority student. Because the opinions of white people are systemically valued over the opinions of people of color, the present power structure causes these individuals to feel invalidated. While the lack of diversity itself is an issue that must be addressed, proper faculty training is needed in order to help minority students already enrolled in North American universities. In this training, professors will learn how to teach to students of color, disabled students, and students with identities that differ from their own. Without this training, faculty lack sensitivity towards the obstacles that students face because of their marginalized identities. In order for such training to be effective, a person who has experienced the weight of these kinds of oppressive structures should be the one to set the agenda for and direct faculty diversity training.

Outside of the classroom, student-led initiatives are a key part of campus change. Though as discussed previously, students often feel that their voices are not heard by university administrators who wield the power in shaping university policy. However, strategies exist to strengthen the voices of students and thus increase their agency; these include forming alliances, collaborating, and providing spaces on campus for open dialogue. These spaces and alliances also provide support for marginalized students who do not feel that their voices are heard otherwise. However, because of the busy schedules of students and student workers, it can be difficult for students to physically gather together on a regular basis. Social media communities are thus also necessary for maintaining the collaborative efforts of students and continuously fostering open dialogue.

Technology-based networks emerge most significantly after events that create rifts in the campus climate, such as the presidential election in the fall of 2016. Because of the immediate accessibility of these platforms, students can come together at the spur of the moment, responding to issues as soon as they are brought to light. For example, when a few students chalked threatening messages on campus sidewalks on election night, other students shared photos with their friends, sparking an immediate late-night effort to scrub the messages away before the rest of the campus awoke in the morning. This collaborative effort allowed students involved in various organizations to form alliances with one another in order to achieve overlapping goals—to work against racism, sexism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia on campus.

As we worked to amend our university Green Fund, it became increasingly evident that working to improve this aspect of sustainability on campuses must be approached through the multitude of strategies stated above. That being said, changing policy language in order to broaden the use of funds helps to achieve these strategies. As a result, we encourage universities across North America to consider modifying their sustainability initiatives to incorporate the concentric circle model of sustainability.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Sub-Section B. Funding will be approved for projects based upon the principles of sustainable improvement set forth by the Talloires Declaration and the President’s Climate Commitment, to both of which Southwestern University is a signatory.

Appendix B

Sub-Section B. Funding will be approved for projects based upon the principles of economic, social, and environmental sustainability, drawn from the concept of sustainable development as put forth by the 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. As these principles apply to the Southwestern campus community, they can be interpreted as follows:

The Green S.A.F.E. (aka Green Fund) will support projects that:

1. Promote various dimensions of ecological sustainability, energy efficiency, and environmental knowledge/awareness;
2. Promote social sustainability including environmental and social justice, diversity, and/or the public health and well-being of the campus community;
3. Promote economic sustainability, fiscal responsibility, and/or the long term financial health of Southwestern University.

Appendix C

Survey Question:

One of the Environmental Studies Capstone groups is proposing a clarifying amendment to the Green Fund legislation in order to expand the scope of the projects that can be funded by this money. Currently, the Green Fund is a pool of grant money that Southwestern community members can apply for to fund projects that promote environmental and economic sustainability; with the clarifying amendment, social sustainability projects will be able to receive Green Fund money. There will be no change to the the fee from student tuition that makes up the Green Fund.

Survey Results:

Do you support the amendment to include social sustainability?

178 responses

