

A Call for Solidarity: Integrating Equity and Sustainability Through a Joint Office

By Victoria Ho, Lacey Raak and Nizhoni Chow-Garcia



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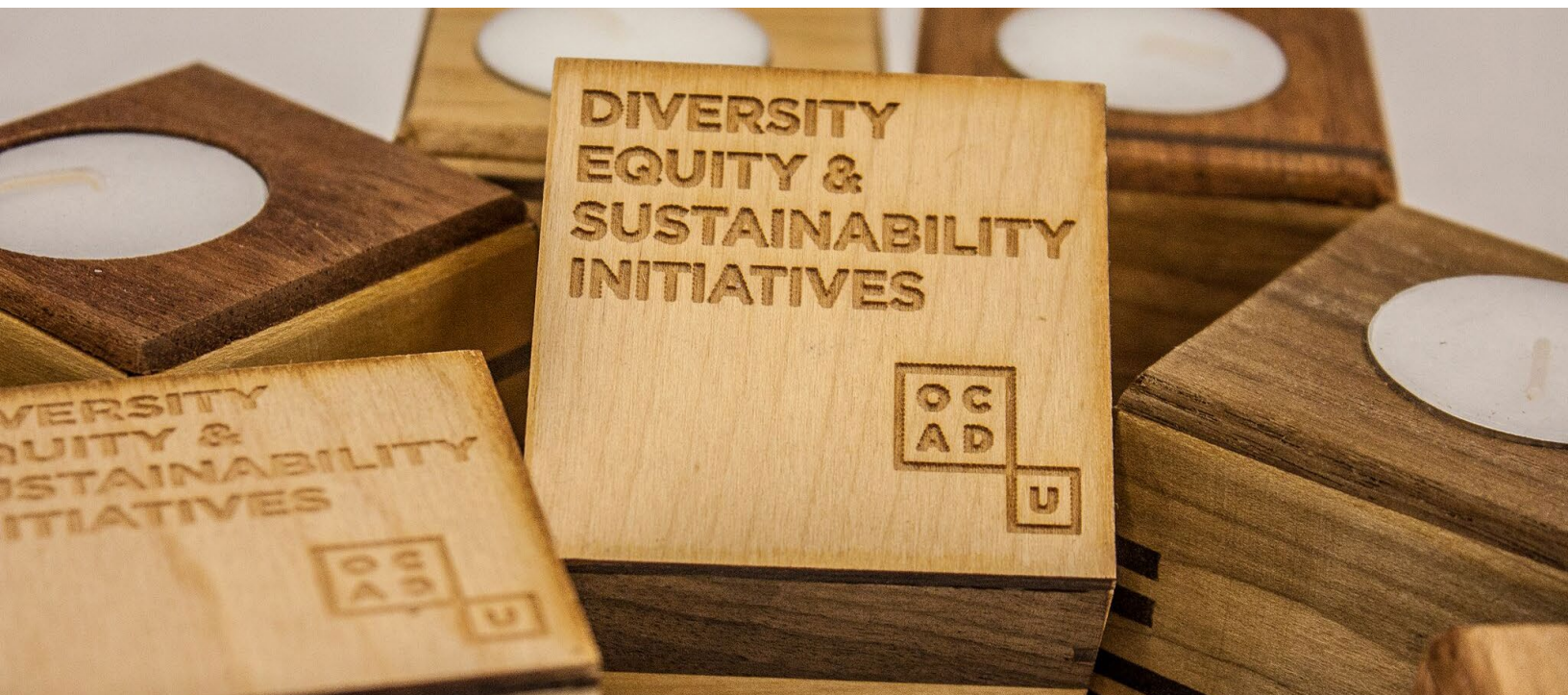
Nizhoni Chow-Garcia (she/her), Ph.D., is Diné, born to the Tódich'í'ni (Bitter Water People) and To'tsohni (Big Water People) clans. She earned her undergraduate degree from UCLA and her Ph.D. from the University of Rochester and now serves as the Director of Inclusive Excellence at CSU Monterey Bay. Her academic and professional areas of interest are broadly in the field of diversity and inclusion and more specifically in working to increase the success of Native Americans in higher education, supporting women and students of color in STEM, and engaging in critical Indigenous frameworks and methodologies. Her work has been recognized as the 2017 NASPA Melvane D. Hardee Dissertation of the Year Award and the 2017 ACPA Marylu McEwen Dissertation of the Year Award. Nizhoni can usually be found running and swimming with her two boys, beading, and learning the ukulele.

Introduction

A climate justice-approach to sustainability recognizes that the climate crisis is a social justice issue rooted in the systemic exploitation of low-income individuals, communities of color and Indigenous Peoples. Colonial-capitalist expansion in pursuit of resource accumulation displaces Indigenous communities from their ancestral lands, topples ecological balances, and creates a global power imbalance in access to clean air and water, food, and decent livelihoods (Agyeman et al., 2003; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Goodyear-Kaopua, 2009).

Recognizing and addressing these past and present harms are necessary to build broad-based participation and trust in contemporary sustainability efforts. Choosing to separate sustainability discourses from conversations about Indigenous sovereignty, racial injustice, and climate change may risk perpetuating a broader cultural amnesia about the roots of climate crisis. However, the possible reward of acting upon this recognition is a richer, more culturally expansive and interconnected movement informed by a multiplicity of perspectives and approaches to addressing our shared climate crisis.

Inspired by the need for solidarity between sustainability and social justice efforts, this essay describes the rationale for, and implications of, merging equity offices with sustainability through the experiences of two North American universities. While a merged office may not be the right decision for every organization, our experiences illustrate that equity and sustainability are interrelated and enriched when approached side by side. In addition to guidance around merging offices, this essay also offers insights on expanding engagement between sustainability offices and those focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. We will discuss the processes and key considerations involved in integrating sustainability and equity offices and offer some closing reflections and questions for the reader to consider.



Tea light holders made of wood offcuts. Designed by OCAD U students commissioned by ODESI to reimagine swag.

History and Context

California State University, Monterey Bay

The [founding vision](#) of California State University Monterey Bay is grounded in equity and social justice. Prior to becoming a University, the land was used as a military base and for ranching. The Ohlone-Costanoan and Rumsen peoples, who served as stewards of the land, were forcibly removed in the 1800s. Today, CSUMB serves about 7,500 students and has 25 undergraduate majors and nine graduate majors.



California State University
MONTEREY BAY



- About 7,500 students
- Sustainability office merged with Inclusive Excellence in 2020

A three-person Office of Inclusive Excellence was established in 2013. The Office was led by an Associate Vice President (AVP) who reported directly to the President. The Sustainability Office was founded in 2015, within campus planning and development/facilities with reporting to the Director of Campus Planning and Development. The Sustainability Director reached out to the AVP of Equity and Inclusion in the first weeks of starting her position in 2015. Over the next 4 years, they met twice a month and collaborated on change management trainings and found connections in their work. When the AVP left and a new person moved into the role, the regular meetings and connections continued. The process of merging into one office began around 2020 as a proposed reporting line change for the Sustainability Director. This change in reporting structure was appealing for two reasons. First, although many sustainability concerns are directly connected to facilities systems (water, energy, transportation, etc.), having the position within facilities did not inherently support a systemic culture of sustainability. Second, the management style found in facilities typically (though not always) focuses on project-oriented work flows, while the management style often found in diversity and equity offices tends to focus more on navigating the challenges of organizational culture transformation.

“As fields of operation and action, Sustainability and Inclusive Excellence function similarly at CSUMB and within Higher Education in general. Both areas work broadly across campus to integrate and support a campus culture that emulates its values. ”

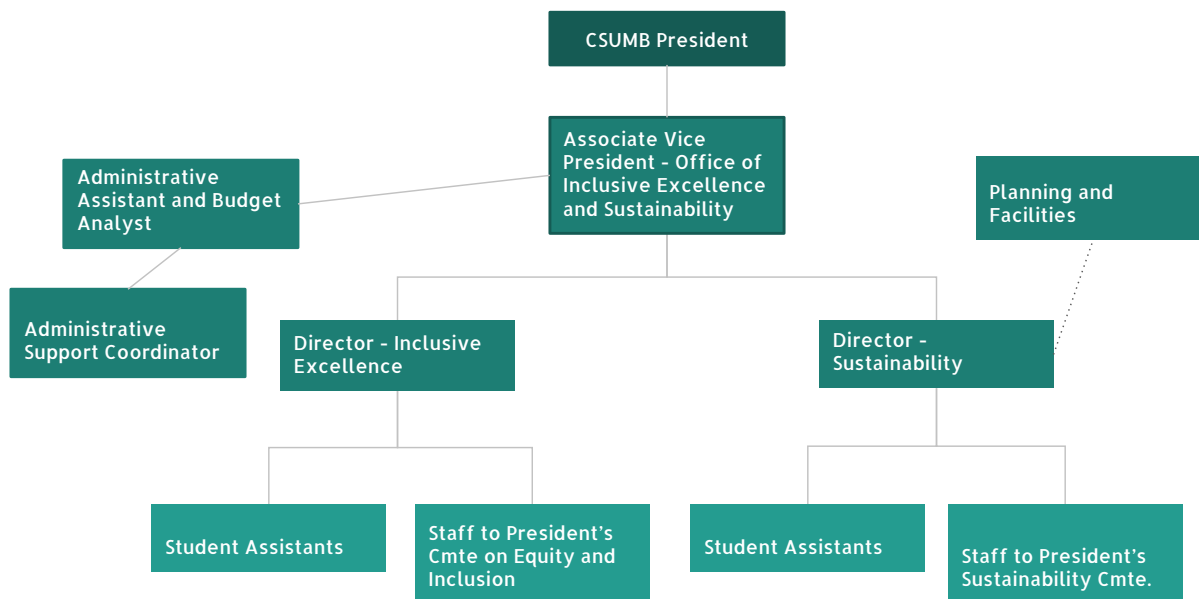
- Brian Corpening, Associate Vice President for Inclusive Excellence (2020)

When the reporting line changed in summer 2020, the Office of Inclusive Excellence and Sustainability (OIES) was formed. It was not all smooth. Although there was support for this at the Executive level, staff within the Office of Inclusive Excellence (a Director and Analyst) were surprised by the integration of sustainability, and they should have been brought into the conversations earlier in the process. Budgets and all other administrative aspects of the office remained somewhat separate for the first two years, which resulted in some ambiguity related to working relationships and day-to-day functions. These challenges were exacerbated by the reduced in-person interaction due to increased reliance on remote work during the COVID 19 pandemic, which overlapped with the first two years of the merger.



CSUMB students attend a sustainability retreat.

Organization Chart of ODESI and Direct Reporting to OCAD University Office of the President



OCAD University

OCAD University is located in Toronto, Ontario, Canada and exists on the ancestral and traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe and the Huron-Wendat, who are the original custodians of the land on which the University operates. Today, OCAD U engages with sustainability and decolonization as priority areas within its Academic and Strategic Plans. Previously called Ontario College of Art & Design, OCAD U is a comparatively small university with about 4,500 undergraduate students and about 300 graduate students.

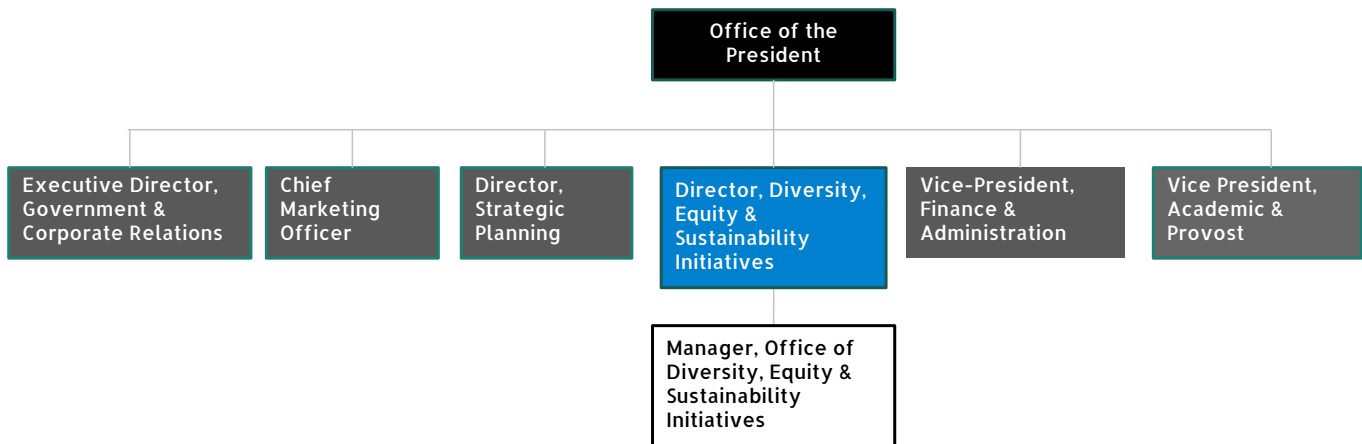


- About 4,500 students
- The Office of Diversity, Equity & Sustainability (ODESI) was formed in 2015

The Office of Diversity, Equity & Sustainability Initiatives (ODESI) is an independent office reporting to the President with a mandate to support organizational change strategies that promote a culture of inclusion and acknowledge and redress systemic, structural and historical disadvantage in employment and educational policy and practice. This organizational change mandate also encompasses a sustainability framework centred on justice and a better quality of life for all. ODESI aims to foster whole university re-imagining.

The development of a home for sustainability evolved over the course of a decade. Different administrative departments and faculties had piloted sustainability-focused staff roles within their areas, but a permanent position and home did not exist until 2015. At that time, the three-staff Diversity & Equity Initiatives Office began the process of restructuring and reimagining itself as a community-driven and independent human rights office (referred to as Title IX in the US) that provides a leadership and advisory role while building capacity across units to recognize that responsibility for sustainability and equity is vital within every staff, student, and faculty member's roles.

Organization Chart of Direct Reporting to OCAD University Office of the President



As a result of this collaborative reimagining process, an understanding emerged that sustainability employs the same kind of whole institution approach as is necessary to advance diversity¹ and equity, the Office officially became the Office of Diversity, Equity & Sustainability Initiatives in 2015. As well, the creation of ODESI coincided with the formalizing of the OCAD U Sustainability Committee that evolved from a Working Group to a Committee with Terms of Reference and reporting lines to the President.

ODESI is now a four-person team composed of a Director, a Manager, a Programs, Outreach & Human Rights Advisor, and a Sustainability Coordinator. In the spirit of collaboration and a whole university approach, the Sustainability Coordinator may undertake secondments by directing staff hours to other departments, for example working with the Faculty Curriculum Development Centre two days a week to support the development of curriculum and sustainability curriculum strategies.

Deep consultation was foundational to creating ODESI, as was an openness to adapting to community feedback as necessary. Advocacy by faculty members underpinned how the Office was structured in relation to the rest of the university. In particular, Black, Indigenous, and Racialized faculty provided input as community members who are the most adversely affected by inequitable systems and therefore have the most at stake in organizational design. An independent and arms-length office was necessary to be able to promote accountability and transparency to the OCAD U community.

Integrating the equity and sustainability offices helped to highlight that sustainability and climate justice issues are bound up in or closely connected to equity issues. As the joint office was being developed, the term 'just sustainability' (Agyeman et al., 2003) described this framework at OCAD U with the purpose of creating new ways of understanding and acting that build social capacity and promote positive transformation and change.

"Sustainability thought leaders recognized the deep value of incorporating sustainability into an Office with well-established constituent-driven and participatory approaches to all aspects of its work. Since equity is a process and approach (as well as an outcome), equity offices are a natural home for sustainability as they have the expertise, mandate and structures in place to centre community-driven and participatory approaches to strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation."

- Amanda Hotrum, Director, ODESI (2014)

¹ The term 'diversity' can be problematic in service of equity. Tina Lopes and Barb Thomas (2006, p.266) describe its meaning: "This word gained popularity in the 1990s as a way to refer to, but not quite mean, 'equality'. It suggests the range of human characteristics found in any workplace or community. It also implies 'cross-cultural communication,' 'dealing with difference,' and 'creating harmonious workplaces.' Diversity, as a concept, does not provide a framework to examine power and racism or to identify the elements of racial equity."

Planning, Accountability and Reporting

California State University, Monterey Bay

The equity and sustainability leaders each currently rely on different external standards and frameworks from within their own separate fields of professional expertise. For example, the Sustainability Director uses the [Living Community Challenge](#) and the [Living Building Challenge](#) (both of which incorporate elements of equity and justice), as well as [STARS](#) and Second Nature's [Climate Leadership Commitments](#) (which are also working to improve and enhance the integration of social justice and equity). On the other hand, the diversity, equity and inclusion staff use the Inclusive Excellence Framework (Williams et al., 2005). The campus is examining the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) as a potential tool to better integrate the intersections of justice, equity and sustainability. Finding frameworks to support this intersectional field of work is an area for ongoing exploration and growth.

Internally, there are separate presidential-level, inter-departmental committees on Sustainability and Equity and Inclusion. The two committees are continuing to identify opportunities for mutual support. For example, the Sustainability Committee has established an "intersections working group", which we hope to expand to be a joint sub-committee consisting of representatives from both presidential-level committees. Likewise, the Equity and Inclusion Committee has been leading the process of developing unit-level Inclusive Excellence Plans and it encourages units to include sustainability within those plans. Managing these complex committees is challenging and having both directors (sustainability and equity and inclusion) in the same department helps provide mutual support and personal camaraderie.

Prior to the move, when housed within facilities, the sustainability department was 3 steps below executive level leadership (president and provost). Now, the sustainability department is one step below executive level leadership. With a new supervisor, the sustainability officer is also more supported in communicating with leadership. This has helped open conversations that had previously not moved beyond the facilities department.

In addition, CSUMB's 2020 [Inclusive Sustainability Plan](#) integrates environmental and social elements through specific goals and strategies. When the Campus Sustainability Plan was developed to be an "Inclusive Sustainability Plan", changing the term and language used helped shift the overall thinking of sustainability as a "technical, expert-oriented activity focused on aspects such as built environment, climate, energy, food and water, to more of a concern with inclusive sustainability, which centers on issues of power dynamics, difference, and ethical considerations" (Lu et. al, 2017).



Inclusive Sustainability

To support the natural environment and all people living within it

Plan
2020



OCAD University

Externally, OCAD U publicly reports to the [Council of Ontario Universities](#) on sustainability-related research, scholarship, and capital projects. The institution responds to provincial government reporting requirements such as providing data on annual greenhouse gas emissions, energy conservation and demand management planning. OCAD U also references the [AASHE STARS](#) framework to benchmark and map out future opportunities. To support a broad definition of sustainability and the myriad ways in which faculties and departments can participate, multiple trainings throughout the year are provided on the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) (UNSDGs). The UNSDGs further reinforce ODESI's approach to sustainability and equity by taking an intersectional approach to sustainability that links environmental action to socioeconomic outcomes such as addressing poverty, access to decent work, and affordable energy.

Internally, ODESI reports directly to the President. OCAD U's equity work is guided by the [Educational & Employment Equity Committee \(EEEC\)](#), which is an advisory committee to the President, with representation from the academic Senate and the Board of Governors. Its mandate is to create an equitable and accessible educational and employment environment, diversify curriculum and teaching methods, and ensure recruitment and retention of underrepresented student groups as well as faculty and staff. Members include the President, faculty, staff, students and senior administrators.

The [OCAD U Sustainability Committee](#) is nestled as a sub-committee within the EEEEC. It is co-chaired by faculty members and supported by a membership of faculty, staff, and students. The Sustainability Committee develops strategic organizational planning and provides recommendations such as for the Academic & Strategic Plan, technical criteria for major capital projects, and for curricular transformation.

Unlike CSUMB's Office of Inclusive Excellence and Sustainability, ODESI participates in the administration of human rights policies and related obligations in the daily resolution of complaints. Though this short essay will not go into detail about the implications of including a sustainability portfolio within an office that includes the human rights complaint mechanism, it is an important variable to be aware of in terms of the department's strategic focus, perceptions about the role of the office, and campus relationships. Human Rights responsibilities (referred to as Title IX in the US) are included in OCAD U's ODESI, but are managed separately (by University personnel) at CSUMB.



Parts of a whole. Unassembled wood scraps prior to being re-formed into usable candle holders. Courtesy of OCAD University.

Comparing CSUMB and OCAD U

Similarities

- Both offices report to the President
- Both sustainability officers still have involvement in facilities-related work
- Neither sustainability officer has professional staff that report to them
- All staff in both offices work highly collaboratively throughout the organization

Differences

- OCAD U created a combined office where previously there was no sustainability office; whereas CSUMB had Sustainability move into the Office of Inclusive Excellence
- A portion of OCAD U sustainability officer's hours are devoted to other areas via secondments, vs. CSUMB has a static placement within one office (OIES) and dotted line reporting with Facilities
- Human Rights responsibilities (referred to as Title IX in the US) are included in OCAD U's ODESI, but are managed separately (by University Personnel) at CSUMB



OCAD U students, staff, and faculty pose in front of Roberto Chiotti's off-grid straw bale house during a Sustainability Committee annual retreat.

Interaction with Facilities

Most campuses have their sustainability staff housed within a facilities unit, as noted in AASHE's staffing survey reports (Urbanski, 2020). There is good reason for this, as many sustainability improvements rely on shifts in operations and relate to the physical environment (buildings, cars, water, waste and energy systems). When CSUMB merged, this was an important consideration. To help mitigate the risk of losing access to the facilities "world", a memo signed by the heads of Administration and Finance as well as the Office of Inclusive Excellence allowed for dotted line reporting between the Sustainability Director and Facilities.

At OCAD U, the sustainability officer works with facilities and administrative units on projects and overarching strategy development such as for waste management, procurement strategies and RfX criteria, materials reuse, and sustainable landscaping. This relationship between sustainability and the various facilities and administrative portfolios is maintained in part through an active Sustainability Committee and in part through regular outreach and participation in working groups. With the creation of ODESI, a newly written Sustainability Coordinator position was posted with the expectation of cross-departmental collaboration defined in the job description.

When sustainability resides outside of facilities, seamless information flow is not guaranteed. On the next page are some suggested actions for sustainability staff located outside of facilities that will ensure continued collaboration between sustainability staff and facilities.

Tips for collaboration between sustainability and facilities staff

Ask to be invited to facilities staff meetings - This is a great opportunity to hear updates on projects and learn about what is being planned for the future.

Build sustainability review into procedures, processes and projects - Design review for small and large capital projects, facilities-managed contracts, etc. This was in place at CSUMB before the merge and sustainability staff continue to be included.

Maintain (or build) relationships with facilities staff - Check in with facilities colleagues regularly to stay updated on what might be happening "below the surface".

Share resources where possible - For example, if your office has the budget to hire students, ask facilities about their needs and prepare a proposal for a student position that addresses that need through a sustainability lens.

Take advantage of other opportunities - Ask to be on hiring committees for new facilities staff and engage regularly with facilities staff that serve on a campus sustainability committee.

Shared Reflections on Managing Change

Collectively Identify What is Best for Your Institution - Practitioners at both institutions have found that creating an integrated office is just one method of raising the profile of the intertwining nature of equity and sustainability. It can generate conversation, build trust in your process, and open up research opportunities. Nevertheless, an office reorganization is not a cure-all; it is the responsibility of all sustainability practitioners to reflect and examine how their day-to-day work as well as long term strategies can more meaningfully integrate the work of inclusion, equity and justice. As the figure to the right illustrates, sustainability officers across the sector “rarely engage” with their campus Diversity Offices (not even reaching the top 10), however, engagement was slightly higher in 2020 than in 2017. It is essential that sustainability officers continue to increase engagement with their diversity offices, but what that looks like can vary.

Meet People Where They Are At - Campus stakeholders in our experiences have responded in a variety of ways to the integration of sustainability and equity in a single office. Some are deeply aware and appreciative of the effort to collaborate and align the work of sustainability and DEI, while others are skeptical and reluctant. Reluctance from people of color is understandable especially given the historic (and ever-present) racism within the environmental field. For this reason, it is important to meet people where they are, try to understand any concerns, and highlight the benefits of centering the shared values of a new joined department or even a joint work event, project or program. Principled disagreement is normal and can open up heartfelt and important conversations.

Level of Engagement: Sustainability Staff across Campus



■ 2020 Weighted Average ■ 2017 Weighted Average

Very Engaged - Almost daily interaction, 3.6 and higher
 Frequently Engaged - Several interactions per month, 2.6 - 3.5
 Occasionally Engaged- Several interactions per quarter, 1.6 - 2.5
 Rarely Engaged - A few interactions per year, 1.5 and below

Data from recent higher education staffing surveys shows that engagement between sustainability offices and diversity, equity and inclusion or similar offices is low compared to other offices and units.

Value Relationships and Manage Expectations - Making a continual commitment to both operationalize sustainability solutions while addressing broad socioeconomic systems can be challenging for both internal staff and external campus partners. The issues can raise feelings that overwhelm. Especially during the pandemic years, cognitive overload and burnout are real factors that can limit people's ability to embrace different approaches to thinking, planning, collaborating, designing, and more. Also, Indigenous and racialized staff may already be stretched by too many institutional requests to 'diversify' various university portfolios. It is unrealistic to expect all campus and community partners to embrace the "other" (i.e., sustainability partners to fully embrace DEI work and vice versa). To address issues of overwhelm and burden, place emphasis on building reciprocal relationships and identifying areas of mutual gain with both internal team members as well as with the core-stakeholders that are vested and very involved in the work.

Consider Benefits/Challenges Collectively - Work together with all staff in the department that would be impacted by the merger. Changes that are initiated at an executive level often don't fully account for impacts to staff who become responsible for implementing the policies.

The topical benefits and challenges presented on the next two pages illustrate topical questions and considerations that came up during our experiences. These questions may be helpful for institutions that may be considering this type of approach.



CSUMB student art that expresses elements of equity through the depiction of endangered species.

Topical Considerations: Merging Equity and Sustainability Offices

Organizational context and top-level support

What is the impetus for this merger? Is there a strategic mandate? Does a potential merger align with your organization's values?

Gain support from top-level administrators AND staff within impacted offices, as well as sustainability/DEI champions.

Make links to your institution's strategic plan. Readiness for a merged office may be indicated in the goals, values, and principles. If the language doesn't already exist in the institution's stated commitments, you may face barriers when developing a rationale for a merged office.

Generating support from the campus community

Would this merger be supported by the campus broadly and by top administration as well as staff in the DEI/sustainability office and campus DEI/sustainability champions? How will these changes be communicated to the campus community? Will people of color be provided opportunities to weigh in?

Share top level support if already achieved.

Engage student, faculty, staff student groups, particularly those with a DEI focus.

Organizational structure

Where should the office be in your organization's reporting structure in order to have a campus-wide impact on students, staff, and faculty? Where might the office gain traction toward organizational change? Will a move provide more access to key decision makers?

Consider the departments with whom the sustainability office has existing trust, visibility, and/or influence. A merger can be unnecessarily arduous if it is not a good organizational fit.

A merge may be more feasible with a smaller sustainability office (such as just one person).

Shared mission & vision

Is the mission and vision for each division in alignment? Can disparate mission/vision statements be consolidated with ease?

Connect the work of both equity and sustainability to the campus's guiding strategic framework.

Ensure that representatives of both divisions are represented in early visioning exercises (and have early visioning exercises).

Topical Considerations: Merging Equity and Sustainability Offices

continued

Financial considerations

What are the financial implications of the merger and how can these reinforce the office? What additional resources may be needed?

A merger can deepen the work but may stretch your existing staff capacity. Be aware of how an expanded departmental mandate may require additional staff and resources to implement your goals.

If one existing budget is significantly larger than the other, consider if/how that may change when merging.

Marketing & communication

How would the office's collective mission and vision be articulated in the website, university publications, programming, etc.? How and in what ways would this include broad-based participation and thereby cultural transformation?

Identify the reporting structure that will support you to spread your message effectively.

Make note of where messaging needs to change if a merger is approved.

Scope of work

How will work change through an integrated office? Would integration result in delegating operationally-focused (or other) tasks to Facilities or elsewhere, while adopting more social-justice and culture-focused projects internally? Will you focus on integrating social justice into operations, such as through social and sustainable procurement criteria?

Lack of clearly defined roles can cause resentment or confusion about when to reach out or how to budget for collaborative projects. Be prepared for regular negotiation within your role of when to lead and when to support.

Individual reflexivity

How do your personal experiences and identities influence the work? Can you be comfortable with the ambiguity or complexity of working on these issues as interconnected, complex systems? Are you willing to contend with the personal work needed to approach these issues?

Identify skills of individual staff members that can be amplified.

Identify gaps within the division to determine if new training is needed.

Closing

As sustainability requires a whole institution approach, it made sense for our institutions to align sustainability and equity more closely within the higher education context. While this approach may not be appropriate for every campus, the reinforcement of this coupling or thoughtful integration of these two subjects can allow for greater and deeper transformation – personal, interpersonal, and institutional. Regardless of whether full integration is right for your campus right now, we encourage all sustainability practitioners to engage more closely with DEI practitioners and begin to identify ways to build relationships that speak to the value and need for this intersectional work, in solidarity.

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