Determining the feasibility of an equity centered sustainability hub on the UW Seattle campus

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03-17-2021

UW Sustainability HUB

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Introduction

The UW Seattle campus educates over 54,000 students annually and is one of the world's leading college research facilities (Discover the University of Washington, 2021). Since the inception of the UW Climate Action Plan in 2009 the institution has made strides in reducing its carbon footprint and "institutionalizing sustainability." (UW sustainability action plan, 2021) As a third-time gold-rated university, an accreditation that is recognized by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), the University of Washington is a leader in college facility sustainability, and yet the university has taken the time to reevaluate its principles and goals so that it can be a leader when it comes to all thing's sustainability. This shift towards furthering sustainability is evidenced by the Sustainability Action Plan (SAP) which is centered around 5 tenets: student learning outcomes, research impact, diversity equity and inclusion, responsible use of resources, and decarbonization of energy sources.

Regarding equity the UW states that they center equity and diversity in every decision regarding sustainability so that they can help, "strengthen the capacity of all communities to respond effectively to climate change" (UW sustainability action plan, 2021). Concerning the responsible use of resources and centering student learning the UW has also integrated several opportunities and spaces within the Seattle campus that focus the conversation of sustainability for all students, no matter their discipline. These spaces and resources can be referenced on the campus map below. Although it is evident that UW Seattle Campus has made a considerable effort towards being a sustainable campus, on their own accord university leaders have recognized that there is room to improve. An area that is of keen interest is creating spaces where all students can coalesce to conversate about sustainability, and to work together in creating solutions to center such a principle. Whether it be students, staff, or community members the UW has recognized that creating a space where these individuals can come together on equitable ground is a necessity in centering suitability.

A current proposal for such a space is to create a *Sustainability Hub* on the UW Seattle Campus. This designated space would help institutionalize sustainability into the fabric of the UW experience, as well as bolster the principles of equity and inclusion within the community. With these details in mind a research team was assembled from the ENVIR 480 A: Sustainability

Studio. The objective of this student lead research was to address the feasibility of a sustainability Hub on the UW Seattle campus from four lenses: co-curricular education and leadership opportunity, organizational structure, social justice, and environmental justice. The following report outlines the results of that research, as well as informed recommendations for how these four areas of focus can be incorporated into such a space on the UW Seattle campus.
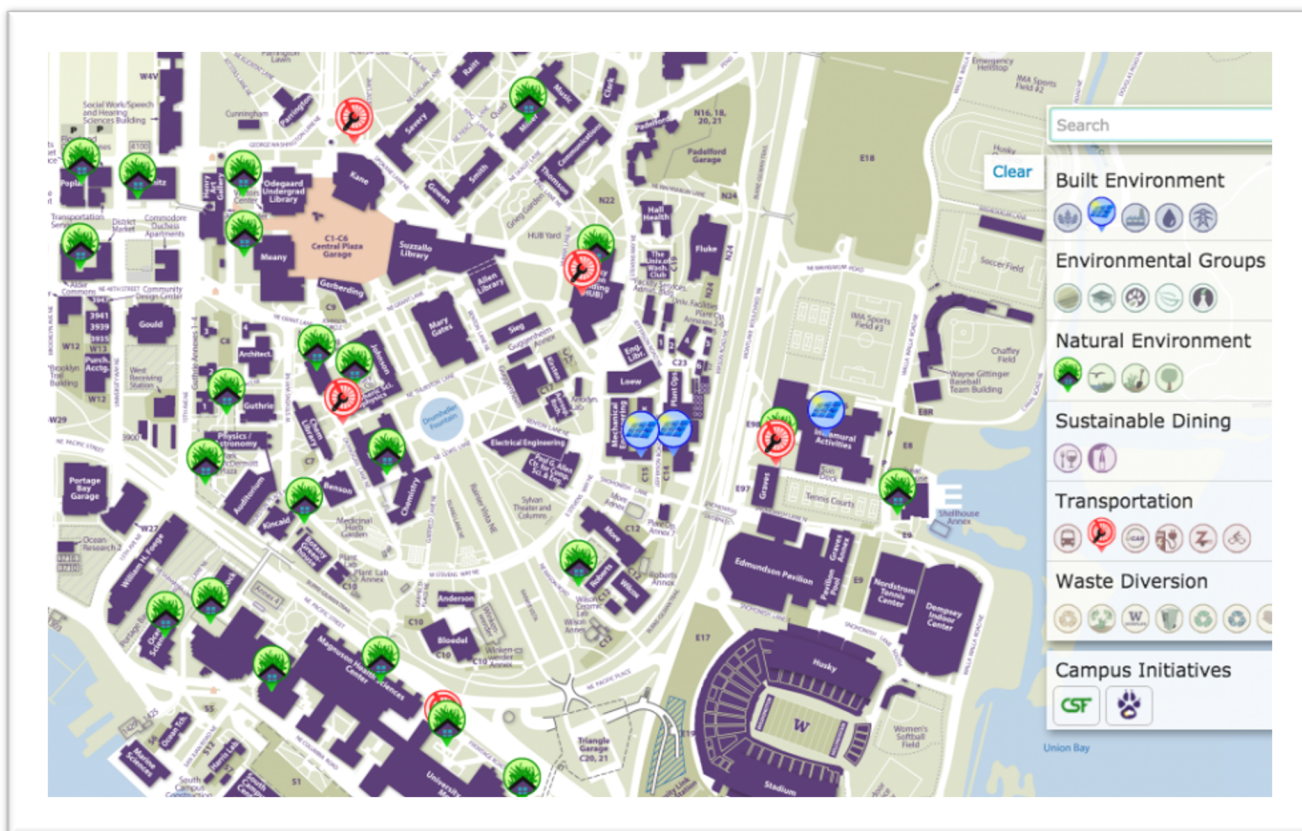
Methodology

There were many ways to approach the feasibility of the Sustainability HUB. Thanks to our clients, Kyle McDermott and Christoph Strouse, we were first provided with a feasibility outline of what needed to be done. We decided that the best way to start this project off was to create a strong foundation on why a HUB like this is needed at the University of Washington. How to do this? Well, we decided to ground our research using literature reviews. We spent the first couple weeks deciding how and what topics it would be best to split the research up. Co-curricular learning and leadership; organizational structure; and the theme of power, oppression and justice

were the three themes we felt needed to be properly explored to initiate the research for the Sustainability HUB. With three themes and four people, the group thought it be best to split up the idea of "power, oppression and justice" into how it is defined in environmental and social justice terms— since sustainability cannot be fully considered until both areas are explored. Using research databases like Google Scholar and EBSCOHost provided by the UW Library System, we found journals, articles and studies that corresponded to our areas of knowledge and reviewed them to draw conclusions and recommendations pertinent to the feasibility of a Sustainability HUB. After sharing our preliminary recommendations and findings with the clients and receiving feedback, we refined them and prepared to give our final presentation and report.

Results

Co-curricular Education

Opportunities for co-curricular education at the University of Washington are vast, however, keeping in theme with the rest of this report there are several opportunities to engage in this education around sustainability. The resources that are currently available via UW Undergraduate resources are as follows: undergraduate research, community engagement, international experience, work experience and internships, and community centered education (UW undergraduate Advising: Co-curricular engagement, 2021). Now in order to understand where there is the opportunity to incorporate sustainability into these resources it is important to reference the existing literature when it comes to co-curricular education. Justin Fincher of John Hopkins University, and Tricia R. Shalka of Drexel University state in their research concerning this matter that a critical examination of any program is worthwhile as it allows for a university to examine the effectiveness of their programs to ensure that resources and programs are being utilized in the best way (Fincher & Shalka, 2009). They state that, "no program is ever perfect," which in line with UW's mentality concerning sustainability (Fincher & Shalka, 2009, p. 228). Now in order to examine existing programs it is important to utilize operational definitions for leadership and co-curricular education that can serve as guiding standards. Currently these definitions do not exist, and there is ever-increasing pressure to define these terms so that colleges and facilities may be better suited to serve their students and patrons respectively (Stech

2007, as cited in Fincher & Shalka, 2009). This pressure identifies the necessity for the UW Sustainability Hub to define their co-curricular leadership opportunities. These definitions can provide the university with the opportunity to center sustainability in literature and learning.

Co-curricular education provides students and staff with opportunities to interact with a diverse set of disciplines. This interaction is beneficial for all students as it exposes them to the curricular intersections and helps establish that leadership education must push beyond the scope of an individual and incorporate world views and experiences that would not otherwise exist in such an individual's life (Shneider 2005, as cited in Fincher & Shalka, 2009). The UW Sustainability Hub must provide opportunities for all students to learn the tenets of leadership through the vehicle of co-curricular education, to ensure that all students are receiving an equitable education. Conclusively co-curricular education can be incorporated within the proposed UW Sustainability Hub; however, it is critical that these opportunities adhere to definitions of leadership and education that are equitable, and furthermore that the opportunities provided be equitable themselves. In order to achieve this standard organization, environmental justice, and social justice must be thoroughly understood and incorporated into the foundation of the Sustainability Hub.

Organizational Structure

Once again, by conducting a literature review of organizational structure, we came across two notable papers that served as a basis for our recommendations regarding how the sustainability hub should be structured in order to provide the greatest benefit to students and be a model of positive change in environmental education.

> *'Applying an Organizational Development Approach to Creating Diversity' (Allen)*
> This article wasn't a case study, but more an introduction to an organizational development approach to creating diversity with an organization. The author, citing examples from other companies' experiences, claims that:
>
>> ▫ **Affirmative action programs and other programs to promote diversity often fail**, as organizations fail to thoroughly implement what is learned

through training and persist in expecting employees to adhere to major-demographic norms.

- ▫ Better implementation of diversity programs is to **increase awareness of diversity and its benefits** in the workplace.
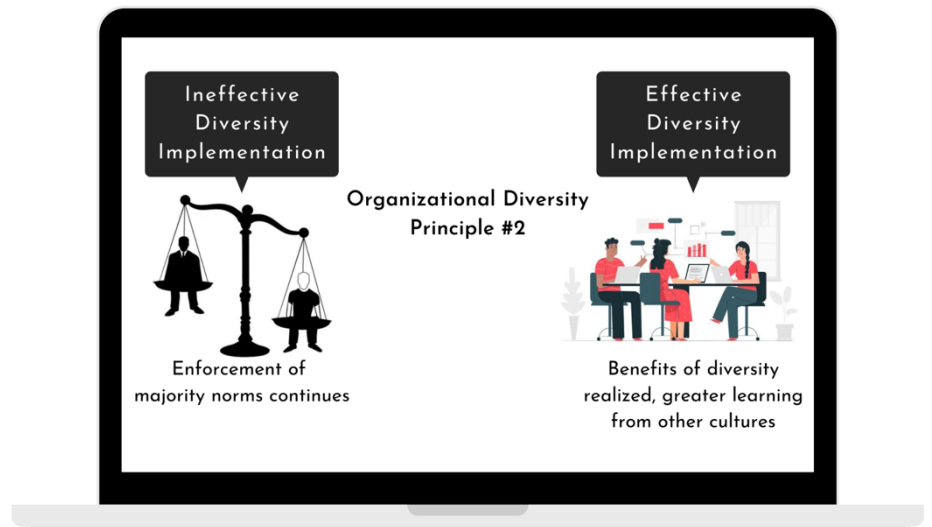
➢ *'Dimensions of Organization Structure and their Context: A Replication' (Hinings)*

In contrast to diversity, this article explored organizational structure dynamics, affirming their findings through a replication of a previous study:

A clear **negative relationship between 'structural' factors (including specialization**, standardization, and formalization) **and 'authority' factors (centralization** of authority and lack of autonomy) within an organization was found.
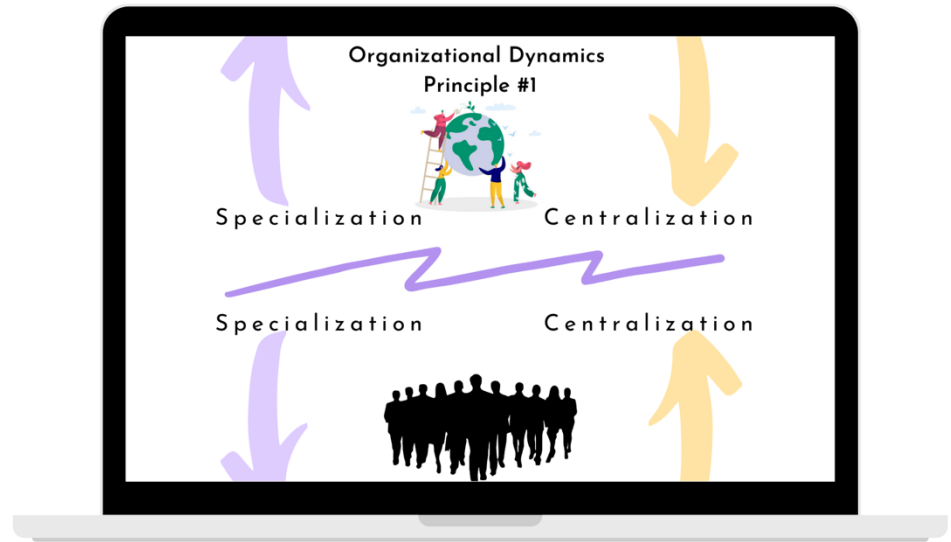
Environmental Justice

Analyzing articles concerning environmental justice, gave the team a broader understanding of how sustainability interlinks with power, identity, and oppression. The sources from this portion of the literature review give insight into concepts and structures that should be incorporated into the UW Sustainability Hub to avoid and address injustices.

➢ *"Environmental justice: Environmental adult education at the confluence of oppressions"* (Hill, 2003)

Hill focuses on examining how adult education contributes to environmental justice.
Educating adults on environmental democracy results in policies that are more likely to serve the interests of future generations, enable participation in the decision-making process, create empowerment through local-level programs/activities, and check capitalist agendas. This piece of literature supports the need for a facility that allows students to further explore topics surrounding sustainability:

o Often, the research and expert opinions used to push policies are not representative because positionality can affect both how one observes a topic and what one observes. It is important to educate adults on environmental issues, so

they can analyze the facts that often spearhead environmental policies and come to individual conclusions about them.

o   Hill describes the challenges of pursuing environmental justice on college campuses. Universities tend to avoid addressing the social inequalities within education. This provides UW Sustainability with insight as to a possible obstacle that may arise while bringing the Sustainability Hub into existence.

o   Data suggests formal education may be less effective when educating adults on environmental issues. Thus, the Sustainability Hub would be a feasible way to provide a casual learning environment.

➢   *"Rally the People: Building Local-Environmental Justice Grassroots Coalitions and Enhancing Social Capital"* (Mix, 2011)

This article discusses building local environmental justice movement (EJM) coalitions.   The author interviews a variety of working-class/community based EJM activists and records their experiences with coalition building.

o   Coalitions can both increase social capital and create momentum for addressing social concerns. A challenge that often arises is conflicting ideologies. However, through discussing with one another compromises can be made and perspectives can be better understood.

o   There are 3 forms of local EJ coalitions. The most fitting structure for the UW Sustainability Hub would be applying the multi-issue, multi-organizational coalition design. In addressing a variety of issues, it will result in more cooperation and community empowerment.

Social Justice

After reviewing a scientific study and article relating to social justice, there were a few key findings to learn from in order to ensure that the sustainability hub is a welcoming, supportive and systemic space for all.

➢   *'The Rise of the Environmental Justice Paradigm: Injustice Framing and the Social Construction of Environmental Discourses'* (Taylor)

Taylor discusses the history of the environmental justice movement over time including the history and paradigm shifts that occurred for such a movement to exist. As humans started to gain a growing consciousness of our relationship with the environment, and the understanding that this relationship varies across different cultural, social and political groups, a need to express this problem with those who could relate, and support became apparent. To resolve this, the following was introduced:

- o Framing is defined as the **"process by which individuals and groups identify, interpret and express social and political grievances"**. The four framing 'techniques' include **(1) bridging, (2) amplification, (3) extension and (4) transformation**. Through framing, a movement or idea can reach a broader audience because it applies to more people who want to support solving a specific grievance.

➤ *'Playing the game just enough: How racially minoritized faculty who advance equity conceptualize success in the neoliberal academy'* (Wright-Mair)

A study was conducted at several pre-dominantly white institutions (PWIs) where neoliberalism ideas and principles are common. Some principles defined in the neoliberal academy include **(1) consumerism, (2) competitive individualism, (3) surveillance, (4) precarity, and (5) declining morality**. After interviewing twelve racially minoritized faculty members at the PWIs, the following themes were consistent throughout each interview:

1. **The importance of meeting neoliberal metrics of merit**: Universities strive to foster an image of being supportive and valuable to their community, and this normally can be achieved when faculty are able to do work that provides a positive impact. However, through pushing these neoliberal metrics, faculty are less inclined to do this kind of work when they have to focus on generating quantifiable outputs that "enhance university prestige".

2. **The ability of having a positive impact**: These faculty members felt it necessary that they share their unique experiences, perspectives and research that pushes equity to their students and communities. No matter how big or small the difference, it motivates these interviewees to do what they do.

3. **Cultivating the agency to voice**: Being able to express a voice is critical. However, some pointed out that their voices could potentially be snuffed by the academy because of what they had to say. When it comes to politics within the academy, it is an ongoing challenge to be able to express their equity agenda while maintaining the limits.

Discussion

Overall, our findings suggested that current literature supports the need for a Sustainability Hub on the University of Washington campus. Through the analysis of co-curricular education, organizational structure, and social/environmental justice, our team composed a list of recommendations for the implementation of the hub. There were, however, a few limitations that occurred during the literature review. One of these constraints was time. The team constructed and performed our research over the course of winter quarter. This deadline limited the quantity of literature included in the final report. Another limitation was the possibility of bias due to cultural backgrounds and perspectives. We sought to mitigate the issue of implicit bias within our individual perspectives by gathering research that is representative of the larger Seattle community. Additionally, we met with our advisors to discuss and recognize our preconceived notions surrounding sustainability and interconnected topics. When reading literature, each author was researched to determine possible biases that may have influenced their writing. To gain further recommendations or ideas for the Student Sustainability Hub, members of UW Sustainability may want to create a survey. This would allow various communities and student groups to give input, while avoiding generalization.

Recommendations

As outlined above, co-curricular education will be an integral component of an equity centered sustainability Hub. In order to accomplish such a goal, we recommend the following:

➢ *Employ Leadership Development Strategies*

- o These opportunities must reflect the composition of the UW Seattle community including but not limited to the students and staff.
- o Provide avenues and opportunities for co-curricular collaboration.
- o CSF-funded projects are provided with resources and workshops where they can work with the college of engineering, law, political science, medicine, etc...
- o "As Kezar and Moriarty (2000) confirmed, leadership development practices must employ different strategies that better reflect the diversity of a student body and the unique variations that exist within it. The individuals that make up a group influence what program needs exist and what services the group desires." (229).

➢ *Reduce Centralization and Increase Specialization*
- o By operating the UW Sustainability Hub as a unit **separate from ASUW**, there may be opportunities to reduce centralization.
- o Most of the creative freedom to approve project proposals and oversee projects would belong to a **board of researchers and/or experts**.
- o Researchers would report back to a director(s) in charge of delegating finances, who would then report back to the Vice President of Student Life.
- o This essentially **reduces the constraining centralization** component that might exist if operating as a unit of ASUW and allows researchers to utilize their expertise to create meaningful projects and experiences for students and the community.

➢ *Effective Implementation of the Principles of Diversity through Monthly Keynote Speaker Sessions*
- o On a regular basis, a professor/expert/community member will present a current and/or diverse environmental issue based on their personal background, industry, area of expertise, etc., in order to expand the horizons of sustainability hub members' **knowledge of diverse issues from a variety of perspectives**.
  - ▪ Allows for **greater flourishing of ideas** and more holistic approaches to solving sustainability issues.
- o Leaders of student teams (board of researchers/experts) in the sustainability hub would be **required to attend** since they convey the direction of their team and advise students, while all other students and faculty are welcome.

➤ *Implement a strong and compelling master frame to attract students, faculty and others in the community to the Sustainability Hub.*

- o After learning about how collective action and support is gained through the social movement theory, similarly, the UW should **research and survey** how students (especially those in minority cultural clubs like the BSU, etc.) to see **how a space like this helps them better define their relationship with nature** as well as the university itself.

- o The UW should also **investigate how its own neoliberal standards** could affect faculty and how they choose to present their work to students. Through this, the university can re-envision a structure or system where equity and other moral values are prioritized over superficial quantifiable metrics. A survey can also be applied to faculty to evaluate how the Hub can further support projects related to faculty research and teaching.

Conclusion

Through working on developing a concept for a potential UW Sustainability Hub, we were able to expand our thinking through literature reviews and conversations with our clients, realizing that such a project requires bringing together aspects of many different sectors of study; from the basis of organizational structure to incorporating the framework of social justice in today's world. This value of this hub lies in the fact that it has the potential to become a center for not only student educational enrichment, but also for leading the way for Seattle and beyond to adapt to the current sustainability and climate crisis. With the application of the recommendations outlined above, we hope that we are brought a step closer to seeing the UW Sustainability Hub become a reality.

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