

Beyond the Right Thing to Do: The Value of Sustainability in Higher Education



*University of Victoria's LEED Gold Administrative Services Building.
Photo credit: University of Victoria*

How to Use This Publication

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

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Solar energy jobs are growing many times faster as the US economy as a whole.



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

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

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

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

- Energy efficiency (e.g., new lighting, HVAC technologies and retrofits), energy conservation and renewable energy can save institutions hundreds of thousands of dollars each year on utility costs, distribution system repair and maintenance.⁴
- Waste reduction, reuse, and recycling can lower hauling costs, save on purchasing costs and reduce litter. Programs that reduce consumption (e.g., print management programs and water refilling stations) can also lower costs and conserve resources.⁵ Sustainable fleet management programs lower fuel costs, improve local air quality, and can reduce vehicle procurement and maintenance costs.⁶



Stanford's new energy system is reducing GHG by 68% and saving \$420 million over 35 years. Photo credit: Stanford University

- Further, transportation demand management programs reduce traffic and can eliminate pressure to build expensive new parking facilities.⁷
- Sustainable buildings not only cost less to operate, but also improve occupant productivity, learning, health and comfort.⁸
- Including sustainability principles in campus planning helps make campuses more resilient and can reduce the risks associated with environmental changes (e.g., droughts or extreme weather events) and future regulations (e.g., on greenhouse gas emissions). Likewise, renewable energy sources can provide protection against volatile fuel costs.⁹

3. Sustainability catalyzes increased giving and new funding sources.

- Sustainability is a powerful motivator for potential donors who want to support people and projects making a positive impact.¹⁰

- Billions of dollars in government and corporate funding is invested annually in sustainability-related research at colleges and universities. ¹¹
- Industry partnerships in clean technologies can generate revenue via commercialization of intellectual property. ¹²
- Students at many institutions of higher education have voted to raise their own fees to fund sustainability initiatives on their campuses. ¹³

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

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

5. Sustainability strengthens community relations and facilitates new partnerships.

- Sustainability enhances town-gown relations by improving community wellbeing and quality of life (e.g., by reducing air pollution from traffic or maintaining natural spaces for recreational use) and contributing to municipal sustainability goals. ¹⁸



Faculty and students at Swarthmore College collaborate with community leaders on Serenity Soular, which is implementing solar and other sustainability projects in North Philadelphia. Photo credit: Swarthmore College

- Sustainability provides a focal point to engage new partners (e.g., businesses and government agencies) for high impact research collaborations and powerful experiential and applied learning opportunities. ¹⁹
- Strong sustainability commitments facilitate approval of campus expansion and development projects and are often a necessary part of agreements negotiated to gain support for new development. ²⁰

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

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

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



*Students at University of California, Irvine celebrate Bike Month.
Photo credit: University of California, Irvine*

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

