10 Tips to Foster Sustainability in Higher Education

How to influence a cultural shift to promote sustainability in your institution.

A sustainable cultural shift calls for substantial time, effort, and persistence, and requires various strategies. While some of these strategies are small and individual, others are large and require collective commitment. This list provides strategies that sustainability officers, staff, and faculty can use to implement sustainable practices in their higher education institution.

From Fostering Sustainability in Higher Education: Leveraging Human Behavior in Organizations by Elise Amel, Christie Manning, Catherine Daus, and Makayla Quinn

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1. *Green Defaults: Make sustainable actions the "easy option"*

   More often than not, choosing the sustainable option takes more time and energy than other options. Implement "Green Defaults," where sustainable actions are the easiest route. Offering recycling and compost bins with fun descriptions, prioritizing natural light, and setting the printer to automatically print double sided are small but effective ways to make it easier to act sustainably. This will help move the needle towards a sustainable culture. (Page 105)

2. *Make your organization's commitment to sustainability known*

   Hiring individuals with existing commitments to sustainability is incredibly effective when creating a cultural shift towards sustainability. When searching for jobs, people with sustainability-oriented values are more likely to choose an organization that shows consistent commitment to sustainability. As a sustainability officer, you can highlight sustainability achievements and goals in lots of different places such as websites, advertisements, and organization descriptions to attract sustainability-oriented applicants. (Page 57)

   Additionally, an institution known for its sustainable values and accomplishments is more likely to have employees that hold aligned values and feel more fulfilled with their jobs, which can positively influence workplace motivation and success. (Page 58)

3. *Take into account the varying values and perspectives of individuals across your institution*

   Individuals do not care equally about sustainability. Broaden your sustainability office's reasoning for implementing sustainability to resonate with different perspectives and values. Someone who is passively opposed to sustainability might need a more personal reason to actively participate in the organization's sustainability goals. (Page 17)

4. *Involve everybody in the planning and goal setting process*

   Autonomy and significance is key when encouraging others to commit to sustainability. Be open to suggestions and provide opportunities and resources for other faculty and students to act. Encourage departments or individuals within your institution to recognize what can be improved regarding sustainability, and act on it themselves (Page 100). Remember to avoid micromanaging and judgement. (Page 139)

5. *Build sustainability competency within your organization*

   Many employees, especially those in higher education, are nervous to implement sustainability because they simply don't feel that they know enough about it. Encourage training that is worthwhile by asking faculty and staff what they think is important to learn. Make sure training raises awareness on the importance of sustainability, targets a variety of weaknesses, and emphasizes institutional values (Page 79). Involve staff that already have sustainability competencies in implementing basic training to further foster a sustainable culture. (Page 84)

   These trainings can be small such as providing short online training courses and hosting optional book clubs or larger such as offering professional development opportunities at conferences or summer workshops.

6. *Involve Human Resources*

   Remember that every job is a sustainability job. Involve human resources by working with them to revise job descriptions to include sustainability responsibilities in existing roles throughout your institution, and incorporate sustainability questions into interviews to pick out individuals with sustainable values (Page 61). Additionally, work with human resources employees to implement sustainability during the employee onboarding process to set a sustainable tone. The first few months of a job impact a new

employee's beliefs about and perceptions of the organization and therefore their motivation and success. (Page 78)

7. *Discuss Sustainability in a positive and hopeful light*

   A positive future vision is much more influential than focusing on the distressing consequences of unsustainability, which can lead to feelings of helplessness, diminished resilience, and eventually burnout (Page 181). Develop a sustainable vision statement that focuses on the benefits of acting sustainably and motivates staff both inside and out of the sustainability department to continue to work towards the organization's sustainability goals. (Page 25)

8. *Encourage Resilience and Wellbeing within the workplace*

   It is common to feel overwhelmed, depressed, and anxious when discussing climate issues. Many people feel that their lifestyle changes are small or insignificant which can cause work-place stress or burnout. Job satisfaction and work engagement are two large factors that can counteract burnout. Encourage these by fostering supportive relationships, conversations, and communities that work together towards sustainability, and continuing to reiterate successes and accomplishments. (Page 188)

9. *Foster shared competency that influences future staff and faculty to retain sustainable policies*

   There are many ways to spark a sustainable culture that persists through future "generations" of employees. Create a vision statement that is future-oriented, unambiguous, and encourages people to think about positive possibilities. Embed long-term policies that will influence future staff to renew or improve upon existing sustainable policies. (Page 24)

   When sustainability actions originate from the grassroots of an institution, successful initiatives and projects can serve as rationale for doing more. Remember, people are more likely to adopt sustainable practices in the workplace if they perceive the company as already successfully implementing change. Consider advertising successful student or faculty-led projects that led to campus-wide change to highlight previous accomplishments. (Page 22)

10. *Lead by Example*

> It takes one individual to get the ball rolling when working towards a cultural shift. This might start with one individual or a group of individuals demonstrating specific practices that influence others. Individuals take note of and adopt the actions of others, creating a "norm" of acting sustainably and transforming the organizational culture. (Page 19)

This tips list is based on the industrial/organizational psychology that underlies sustainable human behavior in higher education, drawn from the book "Fostering Sustainability in Higher Education," written by Elise L. Amel, Christie M. Manning, Catherine S. Daus, and Makayla Quinn. For more information, check out the pages associated with each tip to learn more about the supporting principles and implementation strategies. This list was created by Selah Slag, an undergraduate student at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities pursuing a B.A. in Biology, Society, and Environment. She started this list as a UMN Sustainability Corps Intern in the Summer of 2025 and completed as a UMACS Sustainability Fellow. She also acknowledges Elise Amel and Megan Voorhees for their guidance throughout the writing process.

References:

Amel, E. L., Manning, C. M., Daus, C. S., & Quinn, M. (2023). Fostering Sustainability in Higher Education. Springer International Publishing.