

# Sustainable Justice in Wisconsin: A Transdisciplinary Approach for Incubating the Movement

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University of Wisconsin - River Falls  
UMACS Conference 2019, Sept. 28  
Carleton College Rm 236, 2:00-2:50 pm

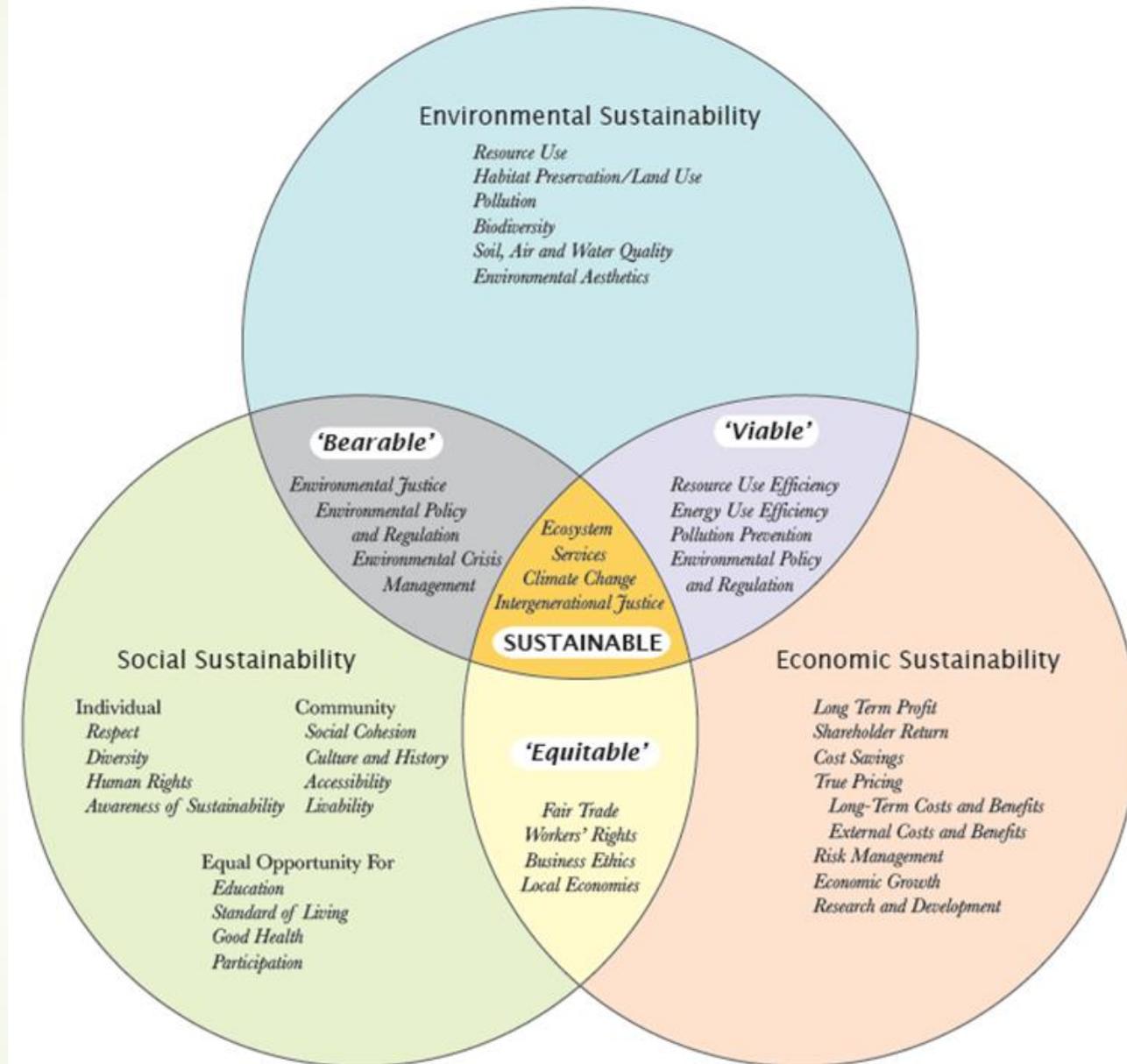
# Outline



- UWRF story (2008-2019)
  - From Sustainability Studies to Sustainable Justice
  - Barriers to SUSJ implementation
- Program Achievements vs. Institutional Change
- Incubating the Movement
- Discussion & Questions

# Origins: Sustainability @ UWRF

- Environmental Science professor, Kelly Cain & Sustainability Studies Minor @ UWRF (2008)
- AASHE years 2010-2018
- Sustainability-Across-The-Curriculum Trainings
- Sustainability-infused syllabi awarded stipends without review
- Growth of Sustainability Office, Director, Interns, Facilities Staff -- & Cuts (2012-13)



## Julian Agyeman, Tufts AASHE Keynote 2010

*“AASHE Digest  
2009, 380 pages,  
over 1250 stories  
and initiatives from  
nearly 600  
institutions, 24  
chapters and the  
word ‘justice’  
appears 13  
times...”*



Urban & Environmental Policy Planning, Tufts University  
*Introducing Just Sustainabilities* (2013)  
*Sustainable Communities & the Challenge of  
Environmental Justice* (2005)

# Agyeman's argument for Just Sustainability as the "middle way"\*

## Sustainability

- ▶ "Equity-deficit" environmentalism gave rise to environmental justice movement
- ▶ Sustainability movement largely white, educated, middle class
- ▶ "Green" agenda of environmental protection, biodiversity, ozone layer –updated as technoscience fixes for climate change
- ▶ Environmental sustainability
  - ▶ Good on *inter*-generational equity
  - ▶ Silent on *intra*-generational equity

## Environmental Justice

- ▶ Environmental justice organization
  - ▶ Rooted in grassroots Civil Rights
  - ▶ Bottom-up organizing
  - ▶ Redefines environment as places where we live, work, play, pray
  - ▶ Largely low-income, people of color-driven
- ▶ "Brown" agenda of poverty alleviation, health and education, infrastructure development
- ▶ Just sustainability
  - ▶ Environmental quality & human equality are inseparable

\*Julian Agyeman, "Toward a 'just' sustainability?" *Continuum* 22:6(2008), 751-756.

# Toward Sustainable Justice (2015-18)

- 2014-15 – Budget cuts to environmental programs across UW system begins
- 2015 - new ¼-time EH Sustainability Faculty Coordinator launches 5-year assessment:
  - Gaard, G., Blades, J. and Wright, M. (2017), "Assessing sustainability curriculum: from transmissive to transformative approaches", *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, Vol. 18 No. 7, pp. 1263-1278.
  - Research -> **Sustainable Justice Minor**
    - **5 criteria for inclusion:** Sustainability definition, sustainability-infused assignments, rubrics, resources,
    - **Learning Outcomes:** sustainability ethics, praxis, global citizenship
    - **Foundations and Capstone courses + SJ-infused electives.**
    - **HOUSING the MINOR—WHERE??**



# Assessing Campus Climate for Sustainability: Two Cultures

- ▶ Environmental Science (CAFES)
- ▶ Business & Economics (CBE)
- ▶ Predominantly white, male, with disciplinary graduate studies only
- ▶ View of education as knowledge transmission.
- ▶ Positivist – based in empiricism.
  - ▶ Auguste Comte: much as the physical world operates according to gravity and other absolute laws, so does society
  - ▶ Rejects introspective & intuitive knowledge, theology & metaphysics as these cannot be quantified.
  - ▶ Scientific method: circular process of theory & observation.
- ▶ With a **transmissive** methodology, 'education for change' is instructive—associated with the transfer of information—and 'education in change' is imposed.
- ▶ Environmental Humanities (CAS)
- ▶ Education, Social Work, Health (CEPS)
- ▶ Diversity education – PhD minors/studies, race/gender/sexuality integral to curriculum
- ▶ Critical Theory - view of education as fostering critical thinking skills.
  - ▶ Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*
- ▶ Critical Pedagogy affirms
  - ▶ teaching as an inherently political act,
  - ▶ rejects the neutrality of knowledge, and
  - ▶ insists that issues of social justice and democracy itself are not distinct from acts of teaching & learning
- ▶ With a **transformative** methodology, 'education for change' is constructive—it engages the learner in constructing and owning meaning—and 'education in change' is participatory.

# Student Groups: ECOS, SALSA





# Sustainable Justice Minor

*Sierra Club Ranks UWRF 66 out of 268 cool schools in 2018*



## UWRF in 2018



poet, writer, photographer, performance and multimedia artist



# Program Achievements vs. Institutional Change

- **NEH Grant** – written for \$100,000 to support team-teaching & interdisciplinary program gave faculty an opportunity to dream big
- **Strategic Initiative** – awarded for \$10,380 to support SUSJ Capstone students for interdisciplinary research-based civic engagement
- **AASHE Gold Star Status Awarded in 2018**
- **Sierra Club ranks UWRF 66 out of 268 Cool Schools in 2018**

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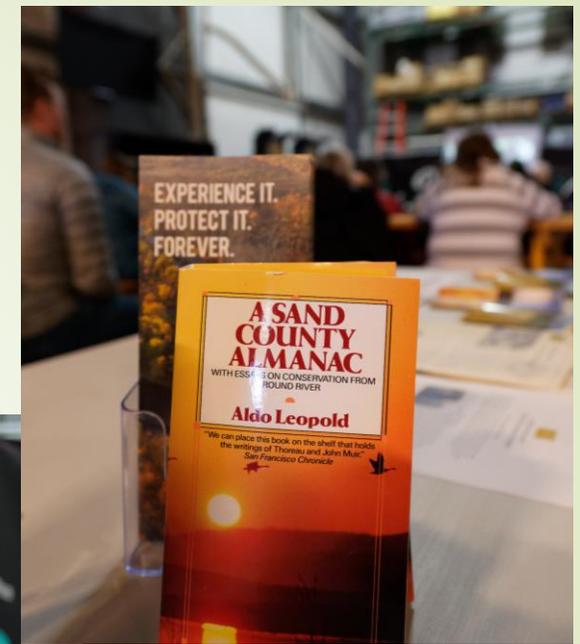
- **Known Threats** – internal and external opponents
  - **Internal:** disciplinary silos, environmental science disciplinary dominance and corporate funding prioritized over transdisciplinary approaches in the liberal arts and environmental humanities
  - **Internal/External Campus climate:** anonymous call to AASHE criticizing UWRF's STARS report data.
  - **State/National culture & political climate:** removal of environmental protections, increases in hate speech and discrediting non-dominant groups' experiences of oppression (women, youth, indigenous people, people of color, immigrants)

## Institutional Changes in 2019 --

- **ECOS Student Group folds**
- **UW-System budget cuts to Sustainability create faculty exodus (2017-present)**
- **New Chief Administrators**
- **Sustainability Faculty Fellows Program and Coordinator Cuts** effective December 2019
  - **New admin. plan:**
    - **2 rotating faculty fellows in Diversity or Sustainability,**
    - **housed in a newly-created Center for Teaching & learning**

# Incubating the Movement for the next wave

- **Sustainable Justice Minor** updated and institutionalized
- **SUSJ Foundations Course** **remains** as a Gen. Ed attracts enrollment
- **SUSJ Capstone course** revised into variable credit, with any SFF eligible to direct a student's capstone research
- **Strategic Initiative Repurposed:**
  - J-term all-college faculty workshop, **“Re-Igniting a Culture of Civic Engagement at UWRf”**





# Questions?

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