

Sustainability Development Task Force

Public Statement on the Value of Sustainability in Higher Education

January 20, 2021

The PASSHE Sustainability Development Task Force recommends a continued and long-term commitment to placing sustainability - the understanding that human and planetary health are directly connected to social justice and economic security - at the foundation of PASSHE's strategic plans. In return, efforts to achieve PASSHE's goals of economic fitness, increased social mobility and equity will be enhanced by sustainability initiatives. System-wide sustainability can:

- Prepare our communities of students, faculty, and staff for the environmental, social, and economic challenges of the climate crisis and call for social justice and racial equity.
- Meet the needs of adults to reskill and upskill to remain relevant in rapidly changing labor markets.
- Reduce costs and ensure more students have an opportunity to access affordable higher education.
- Leverage our economy of scale in order to drive operational efficiencies and reduce costs.

Sustainability benefits PASSHE in six important ways (*AASHE, 2020*):

Sustainability research and education demonstrates relevance in addressing grand challenges and helps unify the campus around a shared sense of purpose. We are currently faced with environmental, social and economic challenges that are global and imposing. Therefore, a PASSHE education must prepare students for the future, which will require a workforce that is creative, technical, innovative, and prepared and will require citizens that can monitor, assess, diagnose, manage, and solve diverse problems. There is a clear need to develop, grow, and, most importantly, SUPPORT interdisciplinary academic programs in environmental and sustainability fields and integrate climate education through comprehensive, system-wide policies to ensure students and Pennsylvania residents are informed, environmentally conscious citizens (*Tobin & Radhakrishna, 2017*).

Sustainability improves organizational efficiency, decreases operational costs and reduces risk. There is a strong relationship between fiscal fitness, environmental sustainability, and social equity. In addition, smart investments in renewable energy, sustainability and climate related research, environmental, engineering and health related majors, and cross-disciplinary minors are vital to supporting future economic development. Impending legislation, such as cap-and-trade or carbon taxes, will further improve the cost benefits of reducing the use of fossil fuels, warranting serious consideration of carbon reductions. PASSHE should be strategic in investing in an economy that aligns with its social mobility and equity goals and supports the Commonwealth as it faces climate change.

Sustainability catalyzes increased giving and new funding sources. Innovating sustainable solutions to solve the large number of current problems takes research and development in many areas, as well as coordinated efforts among public and private entities dedicated to creating such solutions. There are many local, state, and federal government agencies, private foundations and donors, and public/private corporations supporting these efforts through grants, low interest loans, tax credits and other subsidy programs. Sustainability-related research grants, in particular, provide an opportunity to better prepare our students for the future while increasing revenues and reducing overhead costs to make education more affordable.

Sustainability education prepares students for career success and responsible citizenship. Students who graduate with a background in sustainability now enjoy an advantage in competing for jobs in

the new green economy. Currently, in the United States, the fastest growing jobs are in renewable energy (U.S. Department of Energy, 2017), and in Pennsylvania, the clean energy sector now employs twice as many people as the fossil fuel industry (Breath Project, 2020). Companies are hiring workers with sustainability experience to help comply with environmental laws, anticipate and get ahead of new regulations, save money through resource conservation and energy efficiency, reduce climate-related business risks, help with employee and consumer morale, and add value to marketing and branding programs. As companies worldwide and across all sectors make sustainability advancements, student training will have to meet these job market requirements.

Sustainability helps attract, retain and motivate top students and employees. Protecting the environment is now central to the agendas of young adults (millennial or younger) (Ballew et al., 2020, Harvard Kennedy School, 2019) and the opinions of these young individuals are shaping the future of Pennsylvania. The higher education system can benefit by listening and responding to their needs. Students are looking for programs that teach them to not only think, plan, solve, and manage their future world, but to do so while enjoying nature and living in harmony with the natural world. Prioritizing PASSHE resources that can develop, grow and support interdisciplinary Sustainability programs will attract these students. Evidence also shows students are looking for climate leadership and consider it the obligation of the university, as the entity that is preparing them for the future (ASSHE, 2009), to provide this education. For this reason, promoting a culture of sustainability has great marketability potential.

Sustainability strengthens community relations and facilitates new partnerships. Partnerships between universities and communities increase available social capital and help to sustainably grow our communities across disciplines, jurisdictions, and geographic boundaries (Robinson & Tinker, 1997; Dale, 2001). Furthermore, sustainability programs focus on reducing environmental health risks, expanding access to goods and services, and increasing community resilience; they also help the most environmentally impacted and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities (Zabin et al, 2016). Whether it be investing in solar panels, reducing food waste, building a robust climate education program, or partnering with sustainable industry, business, and community leaders, incorporating these changes throughout PASSHE will address climate change AND socio-economic inequalities, driving economic development and ultimately benefiting local communities and the entire Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and serving as an example of what a public system of higher education should look like in the United States.

Based on the above trends, we believe it is of utmost importance that PASSHE adopt sustainability as a strong theme included in and guiding a strategic plan for the future.

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