

Strategic Vision for the Sustainability Office (2019-2022)

January 11, 2019

Current State and Strengths:

The Sustainability Office was created in 2007 and in 2008 the University of Utah joined the President's Climate Commitment with a charge to develop "an institutional plan to achieve net zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and expand the University's research and educational efforts related to sustainability" (2010 Climate Action Plan). This charge outlines the current structure of the Sustainability Office: a) serving as the facilitator for action plans related to sustainability (e.g. the 2010 Climate Action Plan, and updates generated on a rolling basis by subject matter since 2016); the creation of the Global Change and Sustainability Center (GCSC) in 2009; and educational efforts such as the SUSL/SUSCcourse designations and the Interdisciplinary Graduate Certificate in Sustainability.

Assessed current strengths of the Sustainability Office include:

- *Place-based Approach.* While climate change is a global phenomenon, the local manifestations of climate change are what have driven place-based approaches to the three charges articulated above.
- *Student Engagement.* Linked together with a place-based approach, the University of Utah experiences a high degree of student engagement in the action efforts of the Sustainability Office. Truly, many of the leading initiatives of the past decade have emerged through student body leadership.
- *Sustainability-oriented Faculty.* The University of Utah is fortunate to possess a wide range of faculty expertise dedicated to research, teaching and service addressing sustainability issues on campus.
- *New U Leadership.* The Sustainability Office is extremely well-positioned to assist the University move in the direction of "One U" as sustainability concerns transcend disciplines and campuses. Current leadership espouses concerns for the impact of climate change on the long-term viability of the campus and our environs and are poised to renew the U's commitment to the President's Climate Commitment.¹
- *Partnerships.* The Sustainability Office furthers its mission by leveraging community partnerships.

¹ In April 2019, President Ruth Watkins signed the [Presidents' Climate Leadership Commitments](#) which includes Climate, Carbon and Resilience Commitments. These commitments expanded the University's original carbon neutrality commitment (ACUPCC) signed in 2008 to include components focused on mitigating and adapting to climate change. Signing these commitments was part of the process to obtain membership in [UC3](#) which is a national University Climate Change Coalition.

2022 Aspirations:

Through a SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results) analysis conducted on January 11, 2019, core stakeholders of the Sustainability Office identified the following aspirations to be achieved by June 30, 2022:

- 1) *That our campus (design, facilities, operations) is a leading-edge sustainable campus that inspires others to treat their campuses as living labs.* This aspiration challenges all aspects of campus operations to adopt best sustainable practices as sustainability is one of the espoused core values of the university.
- 2) *That both wellness and social/environmental justice are deeply embedded in all sustainability efforts.* This challenges the Sustainability Office to broaden its operationalization of sustainability from addressing climate change to understanding how those actions impact both wellness and social justice in our community.
- 3) *That all students are global citizens of sustainability.* This aspiration suggests a central part of all education at the U is focused on helping students understand that climate change is a global challenge and that even local responses must be situated within the global context.
- 4) *That the organizational structure and resources allocated to this effort reflect the core value position and urgency of the issue to university leadership.* The current organizational structure significantly limits the voice of sustainability at the Presidential level and therefore across campuses. We believe it is essential that the Chief Sustainability Officer position transition to a Presidential level report akin to the Chief Financial Officer.² Additionally, the university should be an unquestioned leader in the community on sustainability issues and at the forefront of best sustainable practices.
- 5) *That the university is viewed as a national leader in sustainability research and education.* We believe that current and aspirational efforts align closely with the University Climate Change Coalition (UC3) and that the U ought to be recognized in that group of 18 peer institutions. Additionally, research and instruction related to sustainability ought to be recognized and rewarded.³

Plan to Get There:

The following are action items that will assist the Sustainability Office to achieve these aspirations:

1. **Place the Chief Sustainability Officer as a Presidential level report aside the Chief Financial Officer.**

The Sustainability Office needs to have reach and responsibility across campuses to achieve the 2022 aspirations. Currently, the CSO has no necessary relationship with

² In spring of 2019, the university launched a search for a Chief Sustainability Officer who will be reporting directly to the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs. This individual will be responsible for strategic planning and implementation of mission-driven institutional sustainability efforts at the University of Utah. It is anticipated that this position will be filled by the end of the calendar year.

³ The University of Utah joined [UC3](#) in spring of 2019.

financial, facility or operation decisions and therefore has difficulty in implementing recommendations of any plan of action generated. The search for this individual should commence immediately. Any Presidential “Blue Ribbon” Sustainability Task Force would report directly to the CSO and meet with the President each semester.

- 2. The Chief Sustainability Officer shall work with the Chief Financial Officer, the Chief Facilities Officer and the two SVPs to enact best sustainability and resilience practices across their units by 2022.**

The Sustainability Office will be responsible to work with these units to develop a climate resilience assessment by the end of FY20 and then a Climate Action and Resilience Plan by the end of FY2022. Working together with these leaders, best practices shall be enacted entering FY2023. This scope should initially focus on the areas of: air quality, carbon, water, and their impact on both health outcomes and social justice/equity in order to further the integration of wellness into sustainability work. It is conceivable that the Chief Wellness Officer could be situated within the Sustainability Office.

- 3. The University shall place investments as appropriate in facilities and operations so as to place the university’s carbon emissions on a glide path toward carbon neutrality by 2050.**

The Sustainability and Energy Program in Facilities Management estimates a \$12 million investment is required to allow them to move in this direction. While the Sustainability Office is not responsible for this investment, it directly impacts any likely achievement of the Climate Action Plan for which the office is responsible. To improve decision-making and accountability toward carbon-neutrality goals, the Sustainability Office needs immediate investment in a data manager.

- 4. Whenever the University reviews RPT standards and practices, we encourage those discussions to place appropriate emphasis on the issues of interdisciplinary work, communityengaged scholarship and the rewards and recognitions associated with both as they are integral to sustainability inquiry.**

Our aspirations are that sustainability research and instruction be both place-based and interdisciplinary as is required to address the wicked problems of the domain. Without explicit valuing of these modes of scholarship, work in sustainability may not achieve optimization.

- 5. In any reconsideration of General Education, the global citizenship of sustainability shall be considered essential to the education provided at the University of Utah.**

We propose challenging the Office of Global Engagement and the Sustainability Office to work collaboratively with the Office of Undergraduate Studies to shape this dimension of general education.

- 6. That the University immediately seek inclusion in the University Climate Change Coalition (UC3).⁴**

This would challenge the entire university and leadership of the Sustainability Office to develop a leading-edge climate resilience plan by the end of FY2022.

⁴ The University joined [UC3](#) in spring of 2019.

- 7. The university should invest in a “One U” cluster hire addressing Health, Justice and the Environment.** Climate change has a differential impact on various communities across the globe and will exacerbate health and justice disparities over the coming decades. We believe the U is well-positioned to explore both local and global manifestations of inequity. Locally, we know there is differential impact in regard to both water and air and regionally, these issues will become greater hot button issues (e.g. water rights). Such a cluster can build upon the strengths in Global Health, Public Health, The College of Law, the College of Architecture and Planning, the College of Mines and Earth Sciences and be catalyzed by the intellectual frameworks associated with TRANSFORM.

Results:

We believe these actions will result in the following results by the end of FY2022:

1. That we will have anecdotal evidence of other peer institutions visiting us to learn best practices.
2. That we will have a climate resilience plan in place and actions starting to take effect by the end of FY2022.
3. That students will achieve sustainability learning objectives at an 80 percent level.
4. That all decision-making frameworks on campus will reflect ecological responsibility.
5. That the University of Utah will no longer be one of the top 30 emitters of carbon in the EPA area by 2022.
6. That the university will set cumulative carbon reduction targets (in reference to 2018 carbon data) and target to be at 50% reduction by FY2028 with the ultimate target that of carbon neutrality by 2050.

FY20 Planning:

Two immediate actions are asserted by this vision. First, is to commence an immediate search for a Chief Sustainability Officer to begin FY20.⁵ This position shall become a full-time administrative position with expertise in goal setting and plan development and execution; implementing appropriate policies and procedures to achieve those goals and expertise in accountability feedback loops. Public speaking and the ability to work with faculty and staff equitably is imperative. Second is the need to invest in and then search for a data manager/analyst. Decision-making in regard to sustainability ought to be data-driven, while understanding the ecosystem of those decisions will inherently prove themselves to be wicked. Sustainability decisions also are likely to prove highly political and at times countervailing to

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some current practices; they involve culture change. As such, the better and more informative data that may be collected and analyzed, the better-informed decisions may be and accountability is enhanced.
