

COMMUNICATING AND ENGAGING WITH STUDENTS

Introduction

Post-secondary students represent a force of human potential that could strongly influence Ontario's sustainable development efforts. Engaging students in your climate change efforts is an optimal way to gather perspectives, gauge knowledge, collect ideas, and garner support. Engaged students will bolster a culture of sustainability, support improved awareness and integration of sustainability practices.

Not all sustainability champions and staff work directly with students, and many do not have any experience developing and implementing student engagement strategies. Engaging students can be one of the most difficult aspects of this type of work and is a factor most post-secondary institutions strive to improve. The information presented in this document has been collected by a series of discussions with Ontario college sustainability professionals, as well as digital research. We hope it helps to bridge the gap with students, so your institution can drive transformative change.

Student Engagement Strategies

There is no single strategy or plan of action to engage students. They need to be approached in various ways to cover all relevant lines of communication that meets them where they are, including: social media channels such as Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, as well as in person, by email, announcements and more.

How students engage with the world is constantly evolving. Effective engagement will occur when you understand how students are communicating now. Have conversations with Marketing, the Student Association, academics and faculty, as well as any other departments that are actively engaged with the student population. In addition, you should do your own research on popular social media marketing tools.

The correct channel to use will depend on the kind of content being shared. For example, if you are launching a carpool program that requires an in-depth explanation, it would be suited to short videos and in-person communication to highlight the key benefits of ride-sharing communities that serve educational institutions. Whereas, if students are confused as to which waste stream to toss coffee cups, a static message on posters and the occasional Instagram photo may suffice.

Give students opportunities to provide their opinion and feedback. Understanding their perspective on what they believe the sustainability office is and should be (the office's responsibility) can be used to inform and build a case for future programs and support from decision makers. Create and participate in hands-on events students are interested in. Programs and projects should be a learning experience for the students, not just an end goal to be met. Institutions that do this well not only show internal leadership, but also enable students to participate fully. Keep in mind that students are progressing through a very stressful time in their lives so do not ask them to come to you, go to where they are, including both physical and online spaces.

Anonymous engagement and communication paired with incentives can be very successful as it makes people feel more comfortable with sharing their opinions and thoughts without judgement or fear of repercussions.

Using Incentives

Incentives are a huge driver for student engagement, especially during orientation week when your institution is setting the tone for newcomers. Align your large-scale giveaway with one of the sustainability office's goals. Consider equipping students with tools aimed at changing behaviour by making their lives more convenient. For example, typical sustainability giveaways such as reusable water bottles or reusable cutlery will provide tools students may not be able to afford or have not considered.

The University of Western Ontario's Ivey Sustainability Club [launched an initiative](#) to reduce the purchase of single-use plastic water bottles on campus and create awareness of the negative environmental impact of plastic water bottles. They also brought attention to the financial savings from refilling bottles at water fountains, compared to buying 500 mL of bottled water for \$2.00. Canadian Springs, a Mississauga based water services provider, donated 600 refillable aluminum bottles and water-refilling stations were installed in student classrooms.

"Over the period of 3 months, students saved approximately 2,200 MJ of energy, 500 kg of CO₂ emissions, and over \$4,000. For each single-use plastic bottle equivalent (500 mL) that students consumed using their refillable aluminum bottles, Ivey's Centre for Building Sustainable Value donated funds towards the purchase of a permanent water refilling station in the new Ivey building."

For Orientation Week 2017, the University of Guelph's Sustainability Office and the Central Student Association gave students the opportunity to enjoy a BBQ and a chance to win a large prize—a new bike!—as an incentive to stimulate engagement. The Bike Centre, the campus do-it-yourself bike repair shop, [hosted the event](#) and presented new students with the opportunity to have their bikes tuned up and learn valuable repair skills before the start of the fall semester. Encouraging students to pedal to campus with an event such as this makes a lot of sense, if a reduction in pollution and greenhouse gases features in your Sustainability Plan.

Creative and usable incentives give students the resources to start making their own sustainable decisions, instead of simply asking them to make their own choices. Make the default choice the more sustainable one and provide students with an item they feel they should use. Food, institutional-branded merchandise, and technology (buy refurbished to be sustainable and save money) work well as incentives.

Collaborating with Students

Strive to build beneficial relationships with the student association and other departments that are student facing, such as student services. Establishing these relationships and collaborating on engagement activities will reduce organizational efforts while capturing the strengths of both partners.

Employing students within the Sustainability Office not only brings fresh enthusiasm and ideas, but also provides invaluable insight into effective engagement tactics. These students will act as sustainability advocates to their peers. Student-to-student interactions are more effective than staff-to-student interactions. Informed students can support the institution further by educating and engaging staff/faculty to disseminate information about any and all sustainability initiatives the institution is taking on.

Team up with student organizations to execute lectures, workshops and seminars on subjects related to sustainability. Students in varying programs tend to organize activities with different perspectives. Those studying business and economics could arrange lectures about sustainable cities and companies, while culinary students could focus on food waste and the benefits of Meatless Monday options at campus food services.

Timing Your Efforts

It's important to map out student semesters and the school year lifecycle to understand periods of down time, when reduced stress makes engagement more effective. Orientation is a key time for engagement, as it provides the opportunity for new students to see sustainability as one of the first messages associated with the institution. Communicating and engaging students through social media and surveys should be framed around times like exams and mid-terms when students look for a distraction and are on their computers for longer lengths of time. Any student engagement planned for exam week should remain online.

Engagement Metrics

Establish communication and engagement metrics to help assess the techniques and strategies that are working for each project, initiative, or program. Rework or re-evaluate engagement strategies to make sure communications remain relevant and important to students. For example:

- Monitor social media analytics to understand the days and hours that students are most likely to see social media posts. You might notice an uptick in the morning hours, for instance.
- Track the number of individuals interacted with at orientation and other face-to-face events.

Values such as honesty, integrity, loyalty, and compassion are important to students; to be credible¹, make sure you demonstrate those same values.

Communicating Accomplishments

Take the time to celebrate and communicate accomplishments with students, as it demonstrates positive, community-focused progress and boosts morale. The majority of the time students do not know the results of or the reasons for engagement, so this is an opportunity to show good work is being done based on their opinions and feedback.

What Does Successful Engagement with Students Look Like?

- Sustainability-related innovation should be built into everyone's job description and duties to ensure institution wide success and integration.
- Students know about the sustainability and climate change related programs and courses.
- All areas of the institution work together to support sustainability. Advocates are everywhere.
- Improve engagement and awareness within academics, so students know what sustainability is and what it includes on campus (what we do). The Sustainability Office cannot be the only ones engaging and communicating on sustainability.
- Students ask to see more movement on sustainability and feel they have the audience and influence to shape and actualize agendas.

Potential Challenges

- Sustainability and climate change are complex global issues with constant, and at times difficult to understand, concepts and a constant stream of new information. It helps to make these topics relevant and relatable to students and their experiences.
- Engaging students in a post-secondary setting is notably difficult because of the period students are enrolled, new and ongoing stresses, and diversity of student demographics. Some may be fresh out of high school and others may be adults with family responsibilities.
- Staff burnout as engagement continues with each new semester and it may feel like you're always starting from scratch. Use feedback metrics to evaluate engagement and see the progress made from year to year.
- Many people with a sustainability and/or climate change role do not have a communication or engagement background and may feel intimidated by engagement and the potential for failure. Do not be afraid to ask for support, work with communications students, collaborate with other areas of the college for events, and work to build new relationships.

Ongoing, incoming funds for projects is critical; some institutions build a revolving fund into tuition costs, generally no more than \$10 per semester to implement student-led initiatives.

Conclusion

A sustainability ethos is a community vision. One that emphasises ethical opportunities that make a campus a more enjoyable place to attend. Unfortunately, the term 'sustainability' may be synonymous with negativity for those who perceive a massive uphill battle towards any true change. It is important to foster a feeling of community through your sustainability causes, as it improves the quality of campus life. It's a forward looking approach to community well-being, energy and economics. By balancing effort and value when creating and implementing engagement techniques, your campus will grow into a more caring, innovative and resilient place to work and study.

¹ McCollum, DL. (2009). What Are the Social Values of College Students?: A Social Goals Approach. *Journal of College and Character*. Accessed from <https://naspa.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.2202/1940-1639.1469>