

Title: Barriers to Success in Sustainability at the Land Grant University: student demands for transparency and accountability in a climate changed world

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Abstract: Institutions of higher education should be at the forefront of climate change research, teaching, and outreach. One of the ways that universities are addressing environmental issues potentially related to climate change is through sustainability initiatives on campus. In this paper we center the voices of undergraduate environmental organizations at a land grant university to better understand how sustainability initiatives are (or are not) attempting to address environmental issues and climate change impacts. We highlight the specific example of the establishment of an Office of Sustainability, which was launched and shuttered at the University of Delaware. We situate our study at the site of the settler colonial, neoliberal, land grant university, which showcases the messy foundations of creating inclusive and justice-oriented sustainability practices. Our data suggest that students are not being included in meaningful ways and that more should be done to inspire climate and sustainability dialogues across campuses in the United States.

Keywords: land grant university; campus; settler colonialism; sustainability; climate change; students

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Introduction

In the summer of 2013, two undergraduate students participating in a summer research program studied sustainability efforts at the University of Delaware; the end result of this work was a 27-page proposal for an Office of Sustainability. It was presented to the upper administration of the University who declined to establish an office, citing no need (Rider 2014). After sustained efforts by coalitions of undergraduate and graduate students and faculty over the following decade, an Office of Sustainability was established in 2023 (Gianinio 2023; Washington 2024). Within less than a year of its creation, the Office is disbanded and absorbed by Facilities, Real Estate, and Auxiliary Services, where it is now part of the Sustainability, Energy, and Engineering Department and staffed by Facilities Engineers. We find that this very quietly executed removal of the Office by the upper administration at the university breaks trust with students in a moment of climate crisis.

Moreover, this breaking of trust comes at a time in higher education where students are increasingly taking on debt while tuition and fees are being raised incrementally and the neoliberal character of the university ever more treats students as consumers (Naylor and Veron 2021; Slaughter and Rhoades 2000). The increasing financialization of higher education, decline in government funding, and erosion of shared governance have led to an explosion of student debt and decline in student well-being (Eaton, 2022; Harris, 2023; Missé and Martel 2024).

Simultaneously, it presents a baffling move to back away from sustainability while we are witnessing firsthand the impacts of climate change in our on- and off-campus environment, dismissing the concerns raised by students. Such dismissals suggest that the upper administration does not value students as educated individuals who are aware of climate change and the sustainability challenges faced by the university. Furthermore, the lack of attention to environmental concerns and the cutting of sustainability efforts sends a strong signal regarding what the university prioritizes under real (or imagined) times of austerity.

There is an established body of literature that shows that students are aware of climate change problems and possibilities (Ortiz 2024) and that they are working together to make changes on their campuses, in their communities, and at the state and federal level—even in some instances taking the government to court (cf. Ortiz 2017). However, we find that the goals and concerns of college students who are already involved in the fight against climate change are not given attention towards institutional change. Undergraduate students are not just emerging adults/workers who may or may not be aware of the role of sustainability initiatives in addressing impacts of climate change—their input on this issue is valuable and essential to these conversations, as they will be addressing the problems and solutions of the future. In this paper, we focus on understanding the actions and reactions of environmentally-focused undergraduate student organizations at the University of Delaware, how they participate in environmentally focused activities, how they understand the university and its actions on sustainability in a climate changed world, and their reaction to the establishment of an Office of Sustainability.

We are situated at a land grant institution and so we lead the paper with a brief history of the University of Delaware and of the land grant system established by the Morrill Act (1862). We also give some context for the undergraduate organizations who participated in our study and on some of the environmentally focused bodies at the University. We then situate our study in the context of needed institutional action on climate change in settler colonial contexts. Turning our attention to the organizations themselves, we share how the student-run organizations characterize themselves, what environmental issues they prioritized and why, their relationship to the university, and their reactions to the establishment of the now short-lived Office of Sustainability. We make some general suggestions about how institutions of higher education might prioritize student concerns; ultimately, we suggest that the upper administration at universities work to build and/or retain trust with their students and to be transparent and accountable to their demands for progress on the environment.

Context and Background

The University of Delaware is one of the oldest universities in the U.S., established in 1743 in Pennsylvania and relocated to Newark, Delaware in 1765 as NewArk College; renamed Delaware College in 1843; and designated as a land grant institution in 1867. A women's college was established in 1914 and in 1921 the colleges merged to become the University of Delaware (University of Delaware, n.d. b). In 2021 the University established a living land acknowledgement, it begins:

The University of Delaware occupies lands vital to the web of life for Lenni Lenape and Nanticoke, who share their ancestry, history, and future in this region. This interactive map shows that the Lewes, Georgetown, Dover, Newark and Wilmington campuses are located in these Indigenous homelands. UD has financially benefited from this regional occupation as well as from Indigenous territories that were expropriated through the United States land grant system since the institution was established in 1743. We acknowledge that the centuries of harm to Indigenous people and their homelands are beyond repair. Yet, we pledge a sustained commitment to accountability.¹

It is against this backdrop that our institution, a land grant, sea grant, and space grant university, which houses ~24,000 students and ~5,000 faculty, and proclaims to be tackling the “biggest challenges facing our state, nation and the world” (University of Delaware, n.d. a) has a very small contingent of environmentally focused research centers, student and faculty organizations, and environmentally focused planning documents. The strongest sites of institution-wide efforts are led by faculty and are funded in large part through external grants, philanthropy, and small sums of institutional support. These include: the Delaware Environmental Institute, which supports faculty and graduate fellows with research stipends; the Gerard J. Mangone Climate Change Science & Policy Hub, which is home to the undergraduate Climate Scholars; and the newly established Center for Environmental Humanities. We include these to show the new and well-established efforts of faculty to create lasting institutions from within, however our focus is narrowed here to the efforts of staff, faculty, and students with regard to sustainability on campus.

In 2015, UD hired its first Sustainability Manager. Housed in the then, Office of Facilities this role was created with the intent of evaluating and updating the 2008-2009 UD Climate Action Plan—the funding of which was *the Class of 2008's senior class gift* (Chajes 2015).² In cooperation with faculty, the Sustainability Manager established the UD Sustainability Council in 2019.³ The Sustainability Council was officially launched in April of 2020 in order to improve UD's standing in sustainability as compared with peer institutions.

In the council's sustainability plan, which was released in 2022, the council stated its immediate goals: “creating a Sustainability Office, assisting administrative leadership with creating tangible sustainability goals, and expanding and renewing the University's 2009 Climate Action Plan” (2022: 2). Made up of twenty-six members representing each academic unit on campus as well as other related offices (e.g. Student Life; Facilities; Sea Grant), six members were undergraduate and graduate students, and the Council had one seat for an alum. Major activities of the Council while active included supporting interdisciplinary research, teaching, university infrastructure projects, advocating for sustainability programming in academics, including sponsoring conferences, making grant awards (the Green Grants), and the creation of the Graduate Certificate in Sustainability. Additionally, the Council served as a hub for learning about sustainability innovations in the region and supported the efforts of the Sustainability Manager (who co-convened the Council) towards data collection and analysis for the Association for the Advancement for Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) scorecard; a national sustainability ranking for institutions of higher education (in 2020 UD received the lowest possible “bronze” ranking) (ibid: 4).

With the establishment of the Office of Sustainability, the Council was disbanded and some members moved on to become part of its newly created internal advisory committee. The Council website is still active, but as an archive and online resource for ways to become more sustainable and where sustainability plans and surveys from 2017 onwards can be accessed. In 2023 one of the faculty leaders of the sustainability council, as part of a larger expansion of the

Office of the Provost, was named Associate Provost and Academic Director of the newly created Office of Sustainability. In addition, it was announced that UD had hired a Director of Sustainable Operations (Gianinio 2023; Washington 2024).

With campus-wide attention, both the student and university news outlets reported on UD's "new priority to be a leader in sustainability" and highlighted recent sustainability developments made by the university (Washington 2024), while also suggesting more student engagement is desired (Gianinio 2023). Among the action-items highlighted, examples included: the approval of a separate designation for sustainability-focused classes in order to make the topic easier to find by interested students, the purchasing of alternative-fuel and battery-operated landscaping equipment in 2022, and the beginning of food-waste composting in UD dining halls in October 2023, demonstrating that much of the early focus was on academics and facilities/infrastructure (Washington 2024). However, student leaders in environmental organizations demanded more "student engagement," as they argued, students have budding ideas and vastly different perspectives than professors (Gianinio 2023).

Indeed, the Graduate Student Government, which is a legislative body made up of representatives from each graduate program at the university, created a Sustainability Committee, which compiled and released their own Sustainability Report in 2024. Intended as an effort to "accelerate action" with the establishment of the Office of Sustainability, the purpose of the report was to allow for "immediate action" based on "recent policy recommendations made by the Committee, and which were supported by majority votes of the Graduate Student Government and were endorsed by graduate and undergraduate student leaders in student organizations" (Sustainability Committee 2024: 7). Among the recommendations from this document are an official plan for fossil fuel divestment, the use of sustainable lighting practices, campus building retrofitting to improve energy efficiency, the installation of heat pumps, electrification of stoves, grounds maintenance equipment, and vehicle fleet, proper accounting of emissions, increasing the green energy share of the university's energy consumption, the

phasing out of red and processed meat from campus dining services, labels for local and organic food options, creation of a bikeshare program and improvements on bike infrastructure, expansion of electric vehicle power stations, elimination of single use plastics, installation of solar compacting trash bins, controlling and monitoring of dining hall food waste, adoption of more sustainable vendors for merchandise, phasing out of pesticides, and the planting of native species (ibid).

Student groups, both graduate and undergraduate remain important spaces for generating thinking about campus sustainability, however it should be noted that these groups have rotating membership. The Graduate Student Government is a legislative body which makes and remakes itself annually through elections and graduate students pass through it as they complete their 2-5 year degree programs. There is also an undergraduate student government, which in 2022-23 became involved in discussions on sustainability curriculum and also university recycling. However, for undergraduate students, environmental groups within the university usually come in the form of a registered student organization (RSO), or can be a fraternity or sorority– in either case, the group is officially recognized by the university and gains access to university resources (such as a budget and/or office space in the student center), so long as they adhere to certain policies, including having a faculty advisor, and fill out the required application.

There are several environmentally focused RSOs on the University of Delaware campus, five of which were interviewed as a part of this research. Each group shares the overarching goal of tackling environmental issues – however, the issues chosen to be prioritized and the methods for engagement vary greatly among these groups. Some of the more activism-based groups persistently appeal to University leadership to address issues on campus that they care about, some of the more widely discussed ones being recycling, fossil fuel divestment, and landscaping practices. In 2023, the University partially (and impermanently) addressed these demands by creating the Office of Sustainability. While active, the purpose of this office (the website is now

removed) was to “ensure that sustainability is both a priority and consistent focus throughout UD’s domain.” The interviewed student groups saw the establishment of this office as a win—however, even with its establishment, there were concerns as to whether the office would follow through on its promise and take the requests of student groups seriously. Although students move through these groups in the course of 4-year degrees, these groups remain active and are passed on by graduating seniors to their junior colleagues. Many students who are involved with these groups are passionate about how to make change in the institution, particularly in light of the impacts of climate change. However, the inner-workings of these institutions are not transparent to the students and the legacy of the land grant and introduction of neoliberal tendencies make effecting change difficult for this group of thinkers who are increasingly treated as customers.

Neoliberal, Settler Colonial Universities in a Climate Changing World

Education is often viewed as the ‘great equalizer,’ a pathway to a better life, especially for minoritized populations in the United States, despite its roots in structures of enslavement and settler colonialism. The neoliberalization of higher education and the attendant reductions in federal and state funding, however, gave rise to “students as consumers” - a source of revenue (Mintz 2021). Education shifted from being a public good to a private one (Mintz, 2021). Financial deregulation in the 1970s gave rise to the increasing financialization of society and everyday life (Eaton, 2022; Karaagac, 2020). As Eaton explains, the financialization of education included expansion of federal student loan programs, leveraging endowments of Ivy League and other wealthy institutions by investment banker alumni for private equity and hedge funds, and acquisition of for-profit colleges exploited student loans by private equity managers. With declining government support, public and for-profit universities raised tuition for revenue, something that was increasingly addressed through student loans and subsequent debt (Eaton, 2022).

Decision-making on budgets and investments in higher education institutions rests at the upper administration level which includes University Presidents/Chancellors and Boards of Trustees. While the first settler universities in the U.S. were overseen by a Board, they were still largely faculty-run with some semblance of shared governance (Missé and Martel 2024). Under shared governance, the responsibility for governing higher education institutions is “shared by faculty, administrators, and trustees” (AAUP, n.d. (a)). The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) recognized the role of students in shared governance in 1966 while also acknowledging that students do not “have a significant voice in the government of colleges and universities” (AAUP, n.d. (b)). While this remains by-and-large consistent with operations today, simultaneously external oversight of faculty in higher education institutions is increasing, from the introduction of Taylorism in the early 20th century which advocated ‘scientific management’ to increase efficiency (Missé and Martel 2024) to today’s neoliberal and fascist-leaning turn at multiple scales. Oversight today is largely by Boards that consist of financiers or have close ties to financial investors (Eaton, 2022) and pressure from state legislatures, and the federal government is worryingly on the rise. At the same time, shared governance is being dismantled (AAUP, 2025). With financial administrators leading universities, rising tuition costs, and the societal narrative of education as a necessity for success, crises for students worsen.

The most glaring of these crises remains overwhelming student debt. Student debt exacerbates income inequality, and it overlaps with the climate crisis (Harris 2023). Finance emissions, generated by (endowment) investments and loan money, are over 700 times larger than direct bank emissions (Alexander et al 2023). Student-led activism on the climate crisis is leading to fossil fuel divestment in higher education institutions in the U.S., and investments in sustainability initiatives (Barron et al., 2023). More recently however, a roll back of environmental protections at the federal level and cuts in university budgets appear to justify dismantling of sustainability initiatives. Neoliberalization and the defunding of higher education

are imposing unsustainable debt and financial precarity on students, and also contributing to environmental deterioration (Baker and Harris 2024; Harris 2023). Further, with the erosion of shared governance and university administrations in the hands of financiers, we find that student voices are not valued, and student championed sustainability initiatives are being eliminated. And while this is happening across the landscape of higher education, here we focus specifically on the land grant institution with an emphasis on how they came to be and why they are an ideal space to generate repair.

The Morrill Act passed in 1862 after much debate over whether an ‘agricultural college’ was needed in society (Simon 1963) and made possible the establishment of fifty-two land grant institutions in the U.S (Brayboy and Tachine 2021). Almost eleven million acres of land were stolen from roughly two-hundred and fifty Tribal entities (McCoy et al. 2021).⁴ In chronicling the congressional debates over the Morrill Act, the land in question is referred to simply as ‘public lands’ throughout (Simon 1963). This violent mythology (see: Brayboy and Tachine 2021) of the establishment of land grant institutions led some scholars to rebrand them ‘Land Grab Universities (LGUs)’ (see: Lee and Ahtone 2020; McCoy et al. 2021; Palmer 2023). The living land acknowledgement from the University of Delaware was among the few that not only recognized the displacement of indigenous peoples from the lands on which the campus(es) sit, but also that they were built using indigenous land. Lee and Ahtone note that “the grants were as big or bigger than major cities, and were often located hundreds or even thousands of miles away from their beneficiaries” (2020: np). Higher education, as it is now known contemporarily could not exist without the ongoing colonization of indigenous peoples and lands (ibid). Very little literature comments on the ongoing problem of settler colonial institutions of higher education in relation to climate change and how it is or is not being addressed (as an exception see: Stein and Hare 2023). This omission is crucial to consider as adaptation measures will need to be inclusive to be effective (see: author citation, 2024). Further arguments that climate

change is an extension of coloniality and colonialism (see: author citation 2024; Sultana 2022; Whyte 2017) makes the settler colonial institution a key site for addressing the climate crisis through a number of measures notwithstanding sustainability initiatives.

Thus, we are situated in a settler colonial institution that benefitted from stolen land and stolen people. Patel writes that “settler colonialism is a structure that arranges people relative to land, recast as property, and relative to each other, in the quest for empire. Settlers must always be settling land and turning it into property, Indigenous peoples must always be disappearing, Black peoples’ humanity must always be in question, and forced migrants must always be denied their legitimacy as humans” (2021: 41-42). It is important to note that we are discussing settler colonialism, which is distinct from colonialism as an imperial project. Colonialism is largely outsiders controlling space, where settler colonialism involves colonizers inhabiting, with permanency a colonized space (Veracini 2010). The settler colonial university erases (Palmer 2023), homogenizes and universalizes. How then do we consider environmental harms, environmental justice, and confronting climate change from such a violent and exclusionary space? An office of sustainability cannot undo the violence of the land grant theft or the settler colonial institution, but it is one place where we might (particularly as social-justice work is undermined in many neoliberal settings) pursue initiatives that confront inequities through holistic and inclusive environmental measures and acknowledge and begin the work of addressing it through repair (cf. Bruno et al. 2024), and place-based learning, such as land-as-pedagogy and storytelling (cf. Bryan et al. 2024).

However, all these possibilities are presented under a backdrop of literal and figurative fires being fought in academic institutions. Alexander (2023), with a specific focus on what a climate changed university might look like, considers environmental disasters, hostile policies or policymakers, or otherwise hostile campuses to ask what can the academy do to both withstand and confront the climate crisis? In this broader work, there is a suggestion that universities may become passive actors, lacking agency to confront environmental crises at their doorsteps.

However, there is also the question of what agency academic “actors” can mobilize to confront the climate crisis (ibid: 2-3).

A focus on sustainability initiatives is one potential avenue for universities to try and create sites of inclusive knowledge production (e.g. valuing student voices) towards mitigating environmental harm and exclusions as a neoliberal, settler colonial institution faced with the hazards of the Anthropocene. Indeed, Whyte argues that climate change is an intensified form of colonialism that needs to be addressed at/by the university (2017: 154). Writing from a U.K. context, Dyke and Monbiot (2024) ask: “What is the role of universities in a time of climate and ecological crisis?” They suggest that universities’ potential for contributing to societal benefit could be better harnessed, especially when it comes to climate change solutions. Moreover, universities have a critical role in the current climate crisis including supporting scientific and humanistic research on potential causes and solutions in order to inform decisions and policymaking. Simultaneously, we recognize that “sustainability” is becoming one of those words increasingly tucked into the neoliberal fold. Kolinjivadi and Vansintjan (2024) in writing about the co-opting of environmental sustainability by the upper-class, argue that sustainability activities are minor adjustments at best and lip-service at worst. That said, the authors nod to research that suggests that when we work collectively, particularly when *students* take collective action towards environmental (or sustainability) concerns, people are finding actionable solutions, even within neoliberal constraints (ibid). In many cases these solutions are justice-oriented. Thus, there is an opportunity to distance from the student-as-a-consumer model towards students as citizens (Bednarz 2019; Naylor 2025; Naylor and Veron 2021).

Moreover, recent research suggests that it is not a lack of knowledge about climate change which hinders action, so simply increasing research and education is not enough to change human behavior; the authors note: “if universities are to fully realize their role as key institutions of societal change for sustainability transformations, then they must consider the full spectrum of human knowledge, including a deep understanding of human value systems and

how cultural and societal norms can be shifted” (Dyke and Monbiot 2024: 4). For, what makes the position of the university unique is the ability to engage various stakeholders—such as students, faculty, government, and outside institutions and universities—in meaningful conversations and to foster a much-needed interdisciplinary and inclusive ways of thinking. Indeed, Alexander argues that universities have the potential to become “climate sanctuaries” toward climate justice and reparations (2023: 221).

It is clear that across the U.S. students are by and large concerned about climate change (Healy and Debski 2017; Walchholz et al. 2014). One of the ways they enact their climate change politics is by participating in and requesting sustainability programs at their universities. Some form of sustainability practice has been present at institutions of higher education since the environmental movement in the 1970s and over time these practices have changed from being purely focused on environmental issues, to having an emphasis on social change (Washington-Ottombre et al. 2018; see also: Eby and Rangarajan 2023). However, in many cases while students may find sustainability to be important, many of them are not aware of university practices or initiatives (Emanuel and Adams 2011; Msengi et al. 2019; Urbaniak 2024). Studies also show that integrating sustainability into the curriculum leads to better outcomes for students and universities (Jarchow et al. 2018; on building sustainability education see: Conroy et al. 2024; Hill and Wang 2018). Importantly, most scholarship cited here notes that institutions of higher education are a crucible for sustainability education, research, and practice.

Sustaining Campus?

For our purposes, we relied on the UN definition of sustainability to approach the Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) in our conversations about sustainability on campus during a climate crisis: “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Bruntland Commission 1987). The first author completed

the interviews with the RSOs. The presidents, sometimes accompanied by vice presidents, of five environmentally-focused registered student organizations (RSOs) at the University of Delaware were interviewed. Online interviews were recorded through Zoom, and in-person interviews were recorded with an audio recorder. The interviews were transcribed with the names of the RSOs and student leaders kept anonymous. Interviews were conducted in 2022 and 2023.

The first part of the interview focused on characterizing the organization and its role on campus based on its overall purpose, activities, and engagement. Participants were asked to describe their RSO, what its purpose and goals were, whether they engaged primarily with the university community or outside the university and where they have had successes. The below table (Table 1) encapsulates how each RSO self-defined in the interview.

RSO 1	We're here to be a cohesive body who takes different information and ideas from all of the other environmental RSOs on campus and other ones that have shown interest. Making sure that we're all communicating and getting an idea about what everyone's doing and what we all want to get done instead of working very individually.
RSO 2	The main goals of the RSO are not only to spread awareness on environmental justice issues that are going on locally, nationally, or even internationally, but to get hands on with--environmental justice--vulnerable communities...we can go into communities that want our assistance...so that they can be more resilient to climate change and gentrification and things like that.
RSO 3	I'd say the main goal is just general environmental education but also pushing forward different sustainable initiatives on campus.
RSO 4	Our mission statement is to promote environmental education, volunteerism, and stewardship, basically to enhance people's appreciation for the natural world.
RSO 5	I see our purpose as advocating for policies that combat climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But I think in reality it's just fighting for anything that's good for the environment really, by advocating for the enacting of laws and policies that further good things for the environment.

Environmental organizations at UD focus on varying topics including environmental education and communication, political activism, volunteerism and outdoor activities, environmental justice, and social networking.

The interviewed RSOs fulfill these purposes through various forms of engagement on- or off- campus. All the interviewed organizations have scheduled weekly meetings with members which are advertised on platforms such as GroupMe, Instagram, or through school email. One RSO brings together the leaders of various environmental groups on campus, where shared goals and action items are discussed. Another organization provides training for grant writing at their meetings. Other groups focus on environmental education at their meetings to inform curious members about various issues such as climate change, deforestation, or fast fashion. A more activism-focused group informs members about current bills to be passed in the Delaware legislature.

Two of the student groups discussed their role in hosting on-campus events such as teach-ins or faculty panels which are meant to bring information to a wider audience. The main on-campus event which was frequently mentioned by the interviewees was Earth Day, which all interviewed groups participated in and/or helped to organize. The students generally looked back positively on the event, and as one group member stated: “the Earth Day event was a big success, and it had a lot of different clubs and a big turnout... I’d just say that people really engaged at the tables... We did see more faces that we didn’t usually see.” Earth Day on campus brings together many of the environmentally focused groups on campus that are discussed in this paper—research centers, student government, and others participate annually.

Four out of the five organizations mentioned student-led initiatives to engage with the community outside of campus. One organization participated in a program to restore a small plot of repatriated ancestral land of the Lenni-Lenape Indian Tribe of Delaware (Aldridge 2021); another group expressed interest in working with the Tribe in the interviews. Other activities include going out into the Delaware legislature to make connections and advocate for certain

bills. Some events involve physical labor: one group does “a lot of volunteer events like trash cleanups or oyster bagging for natural shoreline restoration, invasive species removals, and tree plantings.” More environmental justice-oriented events included an online grant writing workshop with a native Tribe in Alaska, and efforts to work with communities in Southbridge, Wilmington. These activities we view as possible threads that could be productively taken up by an office of sustainability towards recognizing the settler colonial university.

Barriers to Success

In the second part of the interview, group leaders were asked about the environmental issues of the most concern to their organization, including what major issues they focused on for campus and what barriers they faced to reaching their goals. An overarching response from the students was climate change. Many groups were also concerned about local issues and talked about beach erosion and plastics and one group even discussed environmental legislation.

Communication was viewed as a main obstacle to both getting things done and raising awareness. Students felt like they weren't being heard, one remarked: “I just feel like we always have to take one extra step just to even get the President's office or the Office of the Provost to kind of listen to what we're trying to push forward...” even after sustained efforts student felt weary of trying to enact their agendas: “it feels like we're just trudging through all these different people just to make our voices heard.” In many cases they felt invisible, one student discussed the strategy of collaboration, where after individual attempts were met with silence, the RSOs banded together on a larger email campaign:

Us and a bunch of other RSOs and we literally emailed him [the President of the university] every day and we were like “you really need to move with us about sustainability on campus, we don't have a sustainability board on campus, like what the heck is going on.” And we emailed him and said “listen if you're not going to respond to us, that's fine, we're just gonna protest outside of your office for all of finals week and contact the media.” And the next day he sent out a mass email to the entire school being like “hey, great news guys, we're creating a

sustainability board.” And we were like, “oh, now you won’t respond to us, but you’ll do what we’re asking, and we appreciate that.”

Students also felt that decision-making and information about any sustainability initiatives was lacking:

Communication and lack of transparency was shocking. Students didn’t even know that we had a sustainability council. They were only meeting on Zoom, their website was pretty lackluster in my opinion. There’s really no social media presence. There was little outreach going on their part. And look, they’re also all full time faculty and they’re all super busy and have a million classes to teach so it completely makes sense why outreach and communication weren’t at the forefront because these people were just all so busy. But yeah, definitely not a strong sense of communication or transparency, absolutely.

Being under-informed and not being able to gain access to information was an important point conveyed by interviewees, along with concern that fellow students outside of RSOs might not be able to gain access to information because of lack of communication and transparency from the university: “...there’s a lack of communication here and it sucks. We’re sick of it. We’re sick of A and B, having to tell each other about it because nobody else tells it to people. It’s very annoying.” However, if frustrating, participants overall showed a strong sense of trust with other environmental RSOs for exchanging information.

Another common theme around barriers to success was the speed at which things get done. Students who were seniors were most vocal in that regard as many lamented that they had been working so hard for years and either saw nothing get done or would not be around to see changes—such as with the Office of Sustainability. However, even first-year student respondents were frustrated at how little they’d seen change since starting at UD.

A sense of urgency

With respect to the Office of Sustainability specifically, students echoed the quote shared earlier about protesting. They had been planning some ‘days of action’ after no movement was

made following a Student Government ballot that allowed students to affirm that they wanted an Office of Sustainability:

So, it took them almost a year to establish it [Office] and every time we were planning a big action to do it they would do one little step, and then we'd say, "oh, we don't need this action we're doing", and then maybe again one little thing... So, I think they were almost doing it in a way that they were trying to stall and drag it along as long as possible without inciting some kind of big protest.

Students also understood the university to be slow at making change generally: "I think it's also just the bureaucratic process. It takes so long to get anything approved because it has to go through a million and one different levels." And so, there was a reluctance to accept the slow movement, as well as a healthy skepticism with regard to how long things take, but also a resigned recognition that things do take time.

One comment that stood out was from the RSO that interacts most closely with the state legislature. This student noted that even though things were slow at UD, it was also difficult to scale up:

...honestly it's a slow process to get stuff introduced to the house or senate. It's a really slow process. I know with the climate change solutions act, it took a hot minute for them just to introduce it. And also collaborating with people to form an agreement is also really hard. When we were sitting on the climate change solutions act, people were like "oh, what about this? Oh, what about that?" So it forms a really long discussion that's really drawn out, and people repeat things. So I think the biggest challenge is the effectiveness of getting action done is what I see. But I definitely think a balance needs to be struck between taking a long time to make legislation and between making legislation that works for the community and knowing that it works for the community by consulting with the community.

There is a real sense of urgency on the part of these students and their organizations to get things done and quickly. In part because they are largely 4-year students who will graduate and have to hand things off to their junior counterparts. However, for these students, there is a

deep need to act on climate and now. Sustainability on campus is just one way the students see to act towards a more environmentally just future.

Transparency and accountability

In the third part of the interview, student leaders discussed their perspectives on university leadership including decisions on sustainability, communication, and information transparency. They were asked about communication between the university and RSOs and how much they felt they understood the process of the university making decisions about sustainability. Students had varying levels of interaction with the university administration, but overall expressed a lack of awareness about how decisions were made. In one interview students expressed confusion: “I think it’s maybe funds-related. Like whatever they want to spend their money on. But I don’t know what that is.” Another member of the same group followed this statement up by noting: “Yeah it’s kind of been like recently that we’ve discovered that it’s not just the president of the University of Delaware making decisions. There’s also the entire Board of Trustees making decisions and all their other motivations that tell them what to do and what not to do.” In a different interview with another organization the Board came up again:

I was looking at the [sustainability] plan, which I think might have been endorsed by some of the Trustee members. I did a deep dive into their own backgrounds and all of them work for or all of them are retired financial sector workers, so they work for big banks which of course are major funders of fossil fuel companies. And also, a lot of them are aligned pretty closely with the DuPonts, which is another iffy topic when it comes to environmental issues. But yeah, I really don’t know how these processes work, I don’t know who goes through who to get stuff done around here.

Interviewees continued to express a general unknowingness of how things worked at the university. One student frustrated, remarked: “I honestly don’t think so. I personally don’t think I have a good understanding of who has to talk to who to get something done. I genuinely have no idea.” In a different interview, a student suggested that the lack of awareness around how

decisions are made at the university was problematic. Not understanding the role of the various offices and bodies. One student suggested: “they should teach about how the university’s decision-making structure works and how students can be involved. And there should be consistent reporting on all of the decision-making bodies or most of them.” Another student went even further:

I think that actually should be something that’s taught in first-year seminars. Because I feel like basically the university is a government and they make a lot of decisions that affect my day-to-day life. And I feel like I have no say in them and if they make a decision I don’t like then I have no way of knowing how I can get involved and what kind of change I can make. I have no idea who makes what decisions, what role the student government plays in any of it. Because I don’t know how any decisions are made and I don’t know how I can advocate for me as a student to have an influence on those decisions that are really going to impact my day-to-day life. It’s sad that they don’t tell us who those institutions are that make those decisions and there’s no reporting on it either.

Students expressed a general dissatisfaction with the lack of transparency and accountability from the university. One student had a very different level of interaction with the upper administration, but still expressed frustration about how things function:

I’m on the President’s Student Advisory Council. From that, yes, I have a greater idea and understanding of why things take so long, and I kind of understand that kind of stuff. But I don’t think that everybody knows how that kind of stuff happens nor do I know how that kind of stuff happens. I know that eventually you’ve got a committee here who talks to their advisor who talks to this person, so yeah, I’m not very clear on that either. I think there’s a lot that goes on behind the scenes that students are unaware of for good and bad reasons. Because I get that it can’t all just be out in the open as well. But there could be more transparency.

Ultimately, students were unsure of how decisions were made generally, but they expressed concerns specifically about how decisions were made about sustainability. One participant noted:

I mean, no, I don’t think I really understand their thought process when it comes to the decisions they’re making regarding sustainability here on campus. I’m obviously not an expert so I shouldn’t be the one to tell them like “you should do this you should do that.” But I see a lot of easy opportunities for sustainability that the university isn’t taking that I do think students could have a say in

regarding how our recyclables are dealt with, our landscaping here on campus, our energy sources.

All interviewees expressed uncertainty when asked about UD's decision-making process and most of them stated that they did not understand the process. Two students mentioned the Board of Trustees as a body behind this process and speculated on finances as a major driver of decision-making – one student even researched the backgrounds of the board members. The students expressed an understanding that it is not just the president making decisions, but recognized it as a collaborative effort influenced by various (mostly unknown) stakeholders working behind the scenes. Two students mentioned a need for greater transparency on the decision-making process so that students know how to better advocate for their interests – one student even mentioned the possibility of including a module on this topic in first-year seminars.

As concerned members of the university community, the students were passionate about being heard on environmental issues. They felt a deep need to use their organizations to make the university better and to assist the surrounding community. The Office of Sustainability was established during the course of these interviews and so two of the RSOs had the opportunity to react to the establishment of the Office.

For the students who were interviewed after the Office was established there was some bafflement and skepticism. One group had been working on a long-term campaign to establish the Office and that routinely emailed the Provost's Office, was contacted by the Provost with a request to 'desist, because the Office will be happening.' However, even when it was established it was viewed as a soft launch: "...I feel like there should have been a mass email when the sustainability plan went out. Because I had no idea about it. And I'm so involved in that campus and I had no idea." Another student expressed concerns about how the Office might utilize the work done by the Sustainability Council:

You know, how the sustainability council put out this sustainability plan... I just feel like it wasn't really even taken into consideration. It was just kind of looked at for a little bit, they talked about it for a week, they sent out an email saying "hey, look, they put out this plan," and then it's just thrown into a desk drawer and not really talked about anymore. On top of the fact that the plan alone just had what I felt was very broad goals for the University without a specific plan on how to actually achieve them. Granted now we have this Office so hopefully the process will become more streamlined and we'll be able to start working on how to achieve a lot of the goals they outlined in said plan.

Mostly what the students expressed was frustration. Many interviewees expressed feeling undervalued by the university as social justice RSOs. Ultimately, they hoped that student voices and the work of RSOs would be treated as valuable sources of assistance. As one student remarked, seeing them "as people who really want to make a change and want the university to improve."

Concluding Thoughts

One finding that merits further research by scholars across the U.S. is the hesitancy by university administrators to elevate issues that are considered 'social justice' as well as the need to address the legacies of settler colonialism and the land grab as part of addressing environmental issues and climate change even while the university is under attack. It is clear that within and outside university settings there will need to be clearer communication, more inclusive dialogue, and an effort to peel back the layers of university bureaucracy for students (and others who are less familiar) so that it is clear who to take ideas and issues to and where to find leverage to create action. If we are to withstand the climate crisis, making a better effort at sustainability in institutions of higher education is only one step.

While student experiences at the University of Delaware are likely not unique even if most institutions of higher education have sustainability initiatives, the data we present here is still important if we are to consider how to address the climate crisis from the settler colonial, neoliberal university. It is clear that universities will need to be expansive in the 'we' of climate

change through working not just in research contexts and classrooms, but through engaging in meaningful dialogue with the campus community as a whole—particularly undergraduate students who see themselves as the inheritors of the crisis. One of the main goals of the overarching research project, which supported the collection of this data, is “bridge building between UD, environmental agencies, and underserved communities in Delaware.” However, not only must bridges be built between UD and external environmental agencies, but also internally, between university leadership and the environmental organizations within its own student body.

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¹ In the time of writing, the Executive Orders issued by the 47th president of the U.S. underscored a wholesale reevaluation of any appearance of supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion. While the university evaluates its many ongoing initiatives that facilitate social-justice oriented actions the Land Acknowledgment webpage is no longer functional.

² The plan was never updated, and no new plan has been written. The link to find the plan on the university website is broken. An archived version of the Plan is housed on the Sustainability Council website.

³ Second Author was a member of the Council from 2019-2022.

⁴ As an example, in what is present day California there is a park sited the land of indigenous caretakers: Chap-pah-sim; Co-to-plan-e-nee; I-o-no-hum-ne; Sage-womnee; Su-ca-ah; We-chil-la, which was "seized by unratified treaty, May 28, 1851 and granted to the State of Delaware for the benefit of the University of Delaware, payment of \$0.00" (Lee and Ahtone 2020). "The land was sold for \$83,000 between 1869 and 1872, and invested in State of Delaware bonds bearing 6% interest, payable semi-annually" (Lee 2020).