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Underrepresented Student Involvement with the Office of Sustainability

Jelitsa Fonseca
jelitsafonseca@sandiego.edu

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Underrepresented Student Involvement with the Office of Sustainability

Jelitsa Fonseca

University of San Diego
Abstract

The purpose of this study is to further understand the disconnect between sustainability efforts and the underrepresented student population at the University of San Diego (USD). One of the main concerns of this study is why underrepresented students are not getting involved in sustainability activities on campus, and whether or not that is due to being a minority on campus, which may impact how they choose to get involved in these efforts. The main research questions are: How can I help the Office of Sustainability at USD reach out to underrepresented students who may have stigmas and/or stereotypes towards sustainability? How is the department of Sustainability reaching out and encouraging underrepresented students to become more sustainable? How can change be created within the office to provide a more inclusive environment for underrepresented students to become involved in sustainability efforts? An undergraduate student demographic survey, focus group, and office presentation have been utilized to address these questions and concerns over the course of the 2017-2018 school year at USD.
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Introduction

Throughout the course of my life I have had an affinity for conservation and learning about how Earth is affected by our day to day actions. Living a more sustainable life and working towards being as environmentally friendly as I can has led me to think about how other students who may come from a different culture may be affected by San Diego and the University of San Diego’s (USD) view on sustainability. Neither of my parents came from particularly consumerist countries, my father was born and raised in Venezuela and came to the United States (U.S.) at the age of 27. One example of a cultural difference that my father – as well as the rest of my Latin family – and I have experienced lies within my choice in becoming vegetarian. This choice was influenced by what I have learned on how living with a vegetarian or vegan diet is more environmentally conscious. Not only has it been a struggle to educate my family on how their diet and excessive consumption of meat plays a factor in global warming and decrease in resources, but it has also been a struggle for them to understand the financial benefits as well. Another factor that has led me to this research is a lack of accessibility to goods, such as organic foods or fair trade clothing – that are seen and perceived as sustainable or better for our health overall. I grew up in a lower income household where purchasing organic, free range, and natural foods were – and still often are – more expensive than average grocery items. Similarly, other students from a lower socioeconomic household may financial concerns and lack the same access to resources as students coming from a higher socioeconomic status.

Compassion, community, and conservation - or as I refer to them, the three C’s - are values that have influenced the scope of my interests and shaped the research topic at hand. One of the changes I hope to see as a result of this research is an increase in the participation and sense of inclusion for underrepresented students in sustainability efforts both on and off campus.
Following the Merriam-Webster definition, sustainability is a “method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged” and “a lifestyle involving the use of sustainable methods” (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Another hopeful change is infusing the passion of wanting to create a more sustainable future for our community and the world in underrepresented students like myself. The purpose of the study goes back to the three C’s. The first is learning what the various responsibilities and priorities are for underrepresented students at the University of San Diego, and how sustainable living and efforts fit into that picture. The second part is how we can educate and support underrepresented groups and make them feel more included in sustainability efforts and that a sustainable way of life can be attainable even with the other priorities they may have. Building community around sustainability culture, educating students on conservation efforts, and cultivating concern and compassion for the environment are the ultimate goals at hand. I believe that the importance of this research is rooted in the desire to create a more inclusive environment for students, and giving them the necessary education and support through their collegiate experience.

With the combination of the above concerns and my interest in learning about the underrepresented student experience at a predominantly White, faith-based institution comes the research topics and points of inquiry. The first being how can I help the Office of Sustainability at USD reach out to underrepresented students who may have stigmas and/or stereotypes towards sustainability? Second, how is the department of sustainability reaching out and encouraging underrepresented students to become more sustainable and active with their initiatives, events, and internships? And third, how can change be created within the office to provide a more inclusive environment for underrepresented student to become involved in sustainability efforts?
For the purpose of this research, I am defining “involved” as attending events, pursuing an internship, and general outreach for more information.

**Context**

The University of San Diego is comprised of 5,774 undergraduate students as of Fall 2017 (University of San Diego, 2017). USD is a predominantly White university, with 51% of the undergraduate population being White, 38% identifying as students of color, 9% international and 2% unknown (University of San Diego, 2017).

For the context of this research, the Office of Sustainability was utilized as well as the underrepresented student population – defined by race and, or ethnicity and low family socioeconomic status – that do and do not participate in the Office’s efforts, events, activities, and internships. The underrepresented races and ethnicities observed are Hispanic, Latino, American Indian, Asian, Black or African American, Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and International. The Office of Sustainability’s purpose is “to promote sustainable initiatives throughout USD’s campus” and “work[s] to create various programming and outreach to help educate not only USD but the local community as well regarding various sustainability issues” (Office of Sustainability: Purpose and goals, 2017). They have a number of principles that help guide sustainable work on and off campus, in order to “cultivate the capacity of individuals to promote sustainability, expand campus awareness and commitment to sustainability, and build campus infrastructure that promote sustainability” (Office of Sustainability: Purpose and goals, 2017).

**Review of Literature**

Although not much research has been done on this topic of sustainability participation from underrepresented students in higher education, there is plenty of research on how
underrepresented students have a different journey through college than those that fit into the “majority” category (Ruiz, 2015). The other relevant body of research is on overall environmental education and ecological practices. Synthesizing this information and being able to see the commonalities and overlapping themes is important to support this research. I believe that one of the common misconceptions is that living a sustainable life – or at least adopting some practices of doing so – is expensive or time consuming when in actuality it is not.

The first area of focus is surrounding the topic of environmental education. Ballantyne and Packer (2005) seek to provide an understanding of sustainable practices that can be adopted in all contexts of day to day life. Both formal and informal sustainable practices can be taught – formal being in a classroom setting and informal being taught through other means such parents or the media. This paper emphasizes the importance of teaching through informal educational settings in hopes of increasing the concern of environmental conservation and sustainability practices. Although there was no explicit statement of data collection methods, the authors assessed four forms of informal educational contexts and explained their benefits as well as how they impact sustainable attitudes and behaviors. The four contexts include: encounters with nature, sustainable tourism, school field trips – such as national park visits – and issues exhibitions at museums and science centers (Ballantyne & Packer, 2005, p. 292). The main arguments from the author is that informal educational contexts provide learners with opportunities to engage both with and in a specific environment, creating a more meaningful learning experience.

Cortese (2003) discusses the vital role that higher education plays in sustainability efforts and environmental education. He explains the need for a more cohesive understanding of
environmental issues and collective mindset in regards to what is currently being done on the topic of sustainability. Cortese also gives value to conservation and sustainable practices while explaining how these play out in the long run and affect people globally. He posits that creating a more sustainable world is not seen as a universal responsibility or as of high importance to humans globally (Cortese, 2003, p. 16). He emphasizes that institutions increase awareness and knowledge of sustainability efforts but that there is still a vast need to put this education into practice. This is where the gap lies in the need for higher education institutions and the general public to be educated on what they can do in terms of creating a better future. He also explains the need to educate compassion when it comes to sustainability efforts. Lastly, he states that higher education institutions need to take up leadership and ask their students to challenge common assumptions such as “resources are free and inexhaustible” (Cortese, 2003, p.17).

Wright (2002) sets out a framework of understanding for others to build upon while learning and educating on environmental sustainability. She focuses on examining and explaining environmental sustainability on a national and international level in a higher education setting. Wright identifies common themes among various policies, such as ecological literacy, as well as where some of the main priorities lie and how institutions perceive their own commitment to sustainability efforts through their statements of environmental sustainability. Wright highlights these commonalities while recommending areas for future research, like research on the accountability and efficacy of declarations and policies universities have proposed.

Fenwick (2007) offers a variety of strategies and discusses practices that organizations can employ in regards to ecological sustainability. Ecological sustainability refers to “both social
and environmental responsibility, ranging from issues of human rights to viability of local communities and conservation of natural resources” (Fenwick, 2007, p. 633). One of the strategies she proposes is commitment and involvement to sustainability from everyone within an organization. She uses case studies from small businesses to consider certain successes and weak points in ecological sustainability practice strategies used. Fenwick also uses various literatures in ecological learning and social responsibility to provide a context for ecological sustainability strategies. Some of the findings include insufficient cost-benefit analysis on the business’ end, as well as insufficient management of focus and strategy the businesses were “using” (Fenwick, 2007, p. 643).

In regards to research on how the underrepresented student experience is a different journey than those in the “majority” category while in college, Jones, Castellanos, and Cole (2002) did a study on students’ experiences that identified as ethnic minorities in a predominantly white institution. Through focus groups, these researchers sought to understand the overall experiences, similarities, and differences of four ethnic minority groups – African American, Asian-Pacific American, Chicano/Latino, and Native American – during their time in higher education. To ensure equal representation, the researchers conducted campus wide marketing for participation and made sure that each ethnic group had a separate focus group with a minimum of seven participants per group, with a total of 35 participants. Within these focus groups, the researchers and students were able to discuss six main topics including campus services, general campus climate, and student involvement. One of the findings in regard to campus climate was that students did not feel that diversity was supported on campus, with one African American student stating “the institution administrators spoke a lot about diversity but acted minimally toward creating a culturally diverse, tolerant, and sensitive environment” (Jones,
Castellanos & Cole, 2002, p. 28). Two of the groups talked about how they collectively felt that race and ethnicity played a large role in their experience; they felt a “sense of alienation and facing discrimination” in college (Jones, Castellanos & Cole, 2002, p. 28). Overall students expressed that there were various challenges they faced at a predominantly white institution and that their ethnic background was often something they had thought about in addition to other challenges of being in college such as balancing school and work life.

One aspect of this research that stands out is the sense of belongingness. Within the context of USD – a predominantly upper class, White, faith based institution – one of the concerns is the experience of underrepresented students. Belongingness is a concern for higher education professionals who should be educated on the different ways in which students experience belonging, or not belonging, throughout their collegiate journey. Ruiz (2015) examines the working-class students’ perspective on social class within higher education; particularly how they navigate their social class throughout college. A finding was that first-generation students involved on campus had a greater sense of community and felt that the “safe spaces” they sought out – clubs and organizations – were filled with people who understood their background and identities, helping them to feel validated. It is important as student affairs professionals to assist students in finding a community of like-minded students in which they can relate and feel supported; a sense of belongingness.

Along with the topic of belongingness comes the concern of students’ psychological well-being. Kenyon (2009), took an in depth look at the well-being and psychological state of freshmen coming in to college and living in residence halls. For many this is the first time that they have this sense of individualization and independence from their parents, which can cause them to be distraught or in other cases help them thrive more. This study looks into how this
transition period away from parents is handled by college freshmen moving into dorms and what they do in terms of mental stress, autonomy, and their overall well-being (Kenyon, 2009, p. 1146). Online surveys were used to ask students to describe their experience within the first week of classes, and a follow-up three months afterwards. Findings indicate that those students who still had an emotional connection to their family, but were still functionally independent, were in a better state of mental health than most of their peers. In relation to this research, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that students come from diverse backgrounds and family traditions and beliefs. That being said, there is value in being able to understand their emotional well-being when transitioning into a university setting, where some practices and concepts of sustainability may have been lacking before.

**Needs assessment**

Being an underrepresented student of color at USD has given me a different lens at higher education and participation. Throughout my undergraduate career, the overall concern was lack of participation for events and activities; there was not a concern with a particular population of students not participating. Coming to a predominantly White university has allowed me to look at the underrepresented student experience in a different manner and see the value in mobilizing these groups towards participation, allowing for the opportunity to gain a sense of belongingness. My interest first stemmed from attending events and not seeing people that I identified with, ethnically for example, present. In speaking with the previous graduate assistant for the Office of Sustainability, Teresa Ta, I realized that this was a problem that the office has been facing for a while and one that they wish to improve upon. Not only in speaking with Teresa did I gain an understanding of the Office’s hope to have increased participation of underrepresented students but I also heard this from Trey McDonald, the University’s Climate
and Energy Manager. Trey was working as the interim supervisor for the Office’s two graduate assistants during the Spring 2017 semester, and he was gracious enough to begin working with me on this topic and allowing me to conduct this research.

During our conversations about involvement, Trey highlighted and informed me that involvement with the Office is reflective of the field of sustainability. He explained that a majority of individuals with a career in sustainability are White females and that that might not be the best representation for our nation’s problems. We then briefly discussed how communities with marginalized racial minorities in America are often faced with unequal amount of access to resources, such as water, and are more exposed to pollutants. This can in part be due to the fact that policymakers are not representative of the populations these decisions are affecting.

**Methodologies**

With the topic of sustainability and my personal connection to it, I believed that an ethical perspective and approach should be taken as this is a topic with many facets of social consciousness. I utilized McNiff and Whitehead’s (2011) cyclical model of action research, as it incorporates personal reflection. This model calls for the researcher to observe, reflect, act, evaluate, modify, and then move in a new direction, as seen in Figure 1 (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011, p. 9).
Because the overall intention is to increase underrepresented student participation as well as improve outreach within the office, this model has allowed me to carefully assess information gathered to see what has and has not been working throughout the process to improve and modify future cycles. I appreciated the opportunity this approach opened to inputting myself in the work and allowing for my own knowledge and experience to be brought into the mix. This model is the most relevant to this particular topic because, as McNiff and Whitehead (2011) explained, in action research the “practitioner is able to offer their own explanations for what they are doing” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011, p. 11). Thus, it is important to recognize the role that we as graduate assistants play in our offices and what we are doing to contribute to the work at large.
The epistemology of this work is rooted in a holistic approach with an ethical vision. My own perspective is that learning happens through conversation and active listening, thus this research incorporates an aspect of group dialogue to better understand students’ lived experiences. From a qualitative perspective, a survey was utilized and distributed to students who identify as underrepresented — again, defined by the race or ethnic associations described in the Context section (p. 6) and low socioeconomic status — on the USD campus. This survey also helped to identify what areas students are involved in on campus, reasons that may prevent them from being involved, and if students were informed of and could identify Office of Sustainability events. The validity of this research is in part attributed to students’ direct experiences, as well as the incorporation of multiple cycles allowing me to reflect and make necessary adjustments moving forward.

**Pre-cycle**

**Observe**

The observation of this pre-cycle occurred over Summer 2017 and the beginning of the Fall 2017 semester. This was mainly due to the fact that I was not working within the Office of Sustainability until July 2017 and needed time to grasp what the office dynamics were, what the office was lacking, what the hiring process of student interns was, as well as the demographics of students that were interviewed for intern positions.

According to the Director of Sustainability, Michael Catanzaro, the Office had received the most applications for student intern positions during the Fall 2017 hiring process than any of the previous years. One of the observations I made during the interview process was that a majority of the students interviewed were White; there was a total of three students of color who were interviewed for positions. Of those three interviewees, only one of them received a
position. It was also made known to me by Teresa Ta that a majority of students interning during the 2016-2017 academic year were White. I was also able to see first-hand that a majority of students who expressed interest in receiving more information about the Office and getting involved at Alcalá Bazaar, USD’s involvement fair, were predominantly White. Lastly, when looking at the attendance of the Office’s Fall 2017 events they were also mostly attended by White students.

Reflect

These observations led me to question many aspects of who chooses to get involved with the Office and why. Why is it that there were not more students of color that wanted to receive more information about ways to get involved with the Office or that applied for internships? Are students not informed that the Office is present on campus and there are various ways they can participate? One of my speculations was that this might be due to the fact that underrepresented students on campus were already involved in areas of campus where they had already found community. I know that as a person of color, if I had attended a predominantly White university for my undergrad I would have quickly searched for a community that I felt aligned with and spoke to one of my personal identities.

Act

The action portion of this pre-cycle was to conduct an undergraduate student demographic survey (Appendix A) which helped identify areas students of color are participating in on campus, what they do and do not know about the Office of Sustainability, and factors that might prevent them from being involved on campus, among other things. This survey was open for one month, was administered through Google Forms and dispersed via email. The email solicitation for participants was sent out to the Office of Sustainability’s student interns, Be Blue
Go Green, and to fellow Graduate Assistants working at USD who regularly work with and have relationships with undergraduate. The Graduate Assistants were asked to forward the email to any students that they advised, supervised, or had frequent interactions with within their office.

**Evaluate**

As a Graduate Assistant in Office of Sustainability, I regularly work with students who are involved with the office which has allowed me to establish relationships with them. I am also the advisor to Be Blue Go Green, a student organization at USD that advocates for an ecologically, economically, and socially sustainable campus, which regularly collaborates with the Office of Sustainability on events. That being said, the answers to the survey may be skewed due to my access to students that are already engaging with the Office of Sustainability.

In terms of race and ethnicity, there was a fairly diverse group of students that participated in the undergraduate student demographic survey. The hope was to incorporate answers from underrepresented students on campus and of the 15 students that participated, 61.3% identified as students of color. Figure 2 demonstrates the racial and ethnic breakdown of the survey participants.
Students were also asked what extracurricular clubs, organizations, activities and/or programs they were a part of on campus. Each organization identified was grouped into one of the eight categories based on the organization's overall mission and purpose. The eight categories consisted of environmental, multicultural, academic and professional, social and philanthropic, sports and outdoors, religious, military, and other. For a list of organizations that were stated in the survey responses and the categories they were placed in, please see Appendix B. It was clear based on the responses that the participants were very active on campus; most students responded to being involved with three or more organizations. About half of students stated that they were a part of a multicultural affiliated organization on campus. This led me to the idea that students are perhaps less involved with environmentally based organizations and more active in
multicultural affiliated ones as they finally have the ability to openly explore their intersecting identities - see Figure 3.

![Bar chart showing types of involvement areas](image)

**Figure 3**: Types of Involvement Areas. Areas of involvement based on answers to question nine of the Undergraduate Student Demographic Survey.

I hypothesized that Chickering’s (1969) Theory of Identity Development may be a helpful framework to understand why students are often choosing to participate in multicultural based organizations as opposed to environmental ones. Chickering posits that there are seven vectors of development that emerging adults work through during their life and more specifically throughout higher education. These vectors are not seen as linear as individuals may move through each vector at a different time. The seven vectors consist of developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identities, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Patton et. al, 2016, p. 297-299).
Traditional undergraduate students are often leaving home for the first time where they have the opportunity to explore their personal identities. I believe that environmental morality may fit into the last vector of developing integrity and that students might not be able to address this vector as they are working through other vectors. The draw towards multicultural organizations may be in part due to students finding community, especially for underrepresented students on campus, but also in part due to students working through vectors four and five, developing mature interpersonal relationships and establishing identity. As mentioned, higher education is a time when students have the opportunity to further explore their identities or explore ones that they might not have been able to openly do beforehand. Students have the opportunity to further understand and acknowledge differences among various intersecting identities, such as ethnic background, gender, and sexual orientation.

The survey results suggest that students have many priorities and not a lot of time to commit to activities outside of what they are already a part of. Maybe this lack of time has forced them to only be able to balance a certain number of aspects in their life, such as school, work, and developing relationships and competency within groups that speak to their identities. When asked if there was anything preventing them from getting involved on campus, almost half of the student responded to not having the time to participate; the varying answers included having a family, being a commuter student, and focusing on academics.
Modify

Students who stated in the survey that they would be interested in participating in a follow-up activity were invited to participate in the focus group. Multicultural student organizations that were mentioned in the survey responses, such as the American Indian and Indigenous Student Organization (AIISO) and Filipino Ugnayan Student Organization (FUSO), were also invited to participate. This addressed the fact that students currently participating in a diverse pool of organizations on campus, per the survey, expressed interest.

Move in new direction

As a result of the demographic survey, I decided to modify the way in which I was reaching out to individuals about participating in my research. Rather than solely using the
Office interns and my cohort to disperse the survey, I would also be reaching out to various offices and student organizations to garner interest in joining the focus group.

**Cycle 1**

**Observe**

In February 2018, I was able to attend an event that was co-hosted by the Office of Sustainability and the Black Student Resource Center (BSRC), titled Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the Environment. This event included a presentation and dialogue around sustainable issues and environmental racism in the United States. The attendants were a combination of students, faculty, and staff members which allowed for a diverse pool of knowledge throughout the conversations. There were many students of color in attendance who were very passionate about environmental issues and wished to educate our community about these problems and what could be done. One thing that stood out to me was that these same students were not present at any Office of Sustainability events and had not reached out in the past about education opportunities for the community.

**Reflect**

I was fortunate enough to have a conversation with a student at the Alcalá Bazaar who explained that sustainable living is something that she practices daily and advocates to others. She explained that one of the challenges she faces living on campus is not living with people that have the same lifestyle, which I believe is true with most cases of students living on campus. Her biggest concern was some of her roommates do not properly dispose their waste, more specifically recyclable items. When asked why she believed that was the case she stated that it might be attributed to the fact that they are international students and came from countries where they do not have the same practices as the United States, more specifically those in San Diego.
This brought me to question potential gaps in education to USD students in regards to practices on campus and how these gaps might be filled. I sat with this as I entered the action portion of this cycle in hopes of finding some clarity or further information in this regard.

**Act**

The action portion of this cycle consisted of conducting a focus group which lasted approximately one hour where students were asked seven questions regarding their interest areas, their knowledge of the Office and their initiatives and events, as well as their opinions on belonging and their sense of it at USD (Appendix C). The email solicitation for focus group participants was sent to all students that opted-into participating in a follow-up activity in the Undergraduate Student Demographic Survey (Appendix A). The email was also sent to fellow Graduate Assistants at USD who regularly work with undergraduate students and to all student organizations that are classified as multicultural-based (University of San Diego 2017).

**Evaluate**

Although the focus group only garnered interest from two students in attendance, they each provided great insight into their lived experience at USD thus far. For confidentiality purposes, the two students participants will be referred to Student A and B. Both participants self-identified as students of color but described themselves very differently. Student A described themselves as a transfer student that is very active with the Office of Sustainability, as they are a student intern, and explained that they have a passion for social justice and they participate in multicultural organizations on campus. Student B described themselves as a Sophomore and less social and not really involved in any organizations or activities on campus. They explained that their purpose for being at USD was to get an education as well as fulfill their
duties and commitment to the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC). These two areas were present throughout many of Student B’s answers.

Throughout the dialogue it seemed as if each student was on opposite ends of the spectrum of sustainability and this allowed for great conversations on various topics. When asked about sustainable practices Student A highlighted that living sustainably had been present in their life since the age of six, while Student B discussed how this had not been present in their life until more recently. Student B went on to explain that he and his family emigrated from Africa to the United States when he was 10 years old and during his adolescent years, he and his family were “first getting assimilated into society and catch[ing] up with others.” It was not until the latter half of high school that sustainable living was present as something people practice. He then stated that he began doing “minimal stuff like recycling and donating” old items. I hypothesize that the difference in answers is largely due to the fact that countries across the world have varying views on sustainable practices. When asked about diversity and inclusion at USD each student again had contrasting answers. Student A described diversity as being “a lot of experiences and backgrounds being shared in one space,” whereas Student B explained that they could not grasp what diversity and inclusion meant at USD. He explained that he felt as though this was a buzzword and did not understand the ideal behind it at an institution where groups were so siloed.

Where the two students did have similar answers was in relation to sense of belonging on campus. Student A felt like they had a stronger sense of belonging at USD as opposed to the previous university they attended. She attributed this to having already worked through addressing and exploring her intersecting identities and knowing exactly the types of organizations she would get involved in once transferring. Student B described that academics
and ROTC were his main focus during his first year at USD and now that he is in his second year he is beginning to explore his other identities, such as race, and slowly finding more connections within these new communities.

During the dialogue, outreach was discussed and it was suggested that the Office of Sustainability needs to expand their presence on campus so more students are aware and educated. This might be carried out through communication to specific groups, more presentations in classrooms, and collaborations with student organizations. It was also highlighted that through their outreach, they should be catering to specific areas on campus, much like how the BLM and the Environment event was catered to the BSRC. Meeting groups where they are at and discussing topics they are interested in that intersect with sustainability is key. Lastly, Student A mentioned that she believed that leadership within each area fosters what the community will look like, and it is up to the student leaders to initiate changes they would like to see.

Modify

Due to the perceived success of the BLM and the Environment event and feedback received from students in the focus group, I thought it was best to take a step back from attempting to get students involved and rather get them educated on the Office of Sustainability, their initiatives, and events they host in hopes of educating communities that would otherwise not engage with the Office. I believe that the key here is outreach and collaboration. From there, students will have the necessary information to make a decision about participating with the Office either through an internship or events.

Move in new direction
The new approach was to reach out to offices and potentially collaborate on educating and holding a dialogue with students involved in that area. A more centralized and direct approach might allow the Office of Sustainability to engage with students who might not otherwise choose to get involved. Through the focus group and the conversation I had with the student at Alcalá Bazaar, I came to the conclusion that the new direction of this research would be to focus on one area of campus that the Office of Sustainability had not yet collaborated with, the International Center.

Cycle 2

Observe

In choosing to collaborate with the International Center for the purpose of this last cycle, I took the time to further understand the demographics of this population and observe what role they played at USD. The international student population makes up 9% of USD’s undergraduate population, and there are students from over 70 countries represented (University of San Diego, 2017).

To gather more information, I met with Bianca Chau who serves as the Graduate Assistant for the Office of International Students & Scholars. In that role she is also the advisor to the International Student Organization (ISO). This meeting allowed me to get an understanding of typical events and activities their office and student organization hosts, as well as her personal insight to sustainability as an international student herself. In this meeting, she spoke about how ISO holds a weekly coffee hour for students where they are given the opportunity to take a break from other responsibilities and build relationships with fellow international students. I also learned that sustainability has not been incorporated into
programming and education for international students in the past, partly because of the varying responsibilities that students have when coming to USD and differing global views on the topic.

**Reflect**

Reflecting on this meeting led me to question why sustainability had not been incorporated into the programming and education of international students, especially at a university that prides itself in being progressive and has been recognized as one of the top ten most sustainable colleges in the nation (Market Insider, 2017).

Envisioning 2024 is USD’s strategic plan for the future, incorporating guiding principles, pathways, goals and visions for the future of the University (University of San Diego, 2016). Part of this strategic plan touches on Global Citizenship and states that,

USD is in an excellent position to build upon the success of our global initiatives, including study abroad and the growth in international students. This principle supports programming that develops a global mindset in USD graduates as demanded by Pope Francis in his rejection of the globalization of indifference and a throwaway culture. USD seeks to set the standard as a school that produces liberally educated leaders with a global mindset, who embrace difference at home and abroad and act with integrity and compassion as changemakers engaged in a complex and ever-changing world. (University of San Diego, 2016).

The plan also explains that one of the pathways in achieving the vision is Care for the Common Home. It states that we should:

- take immediate action in concrete ways at all levels of the university to care for our common home. From messaging on campus for our visitors and our community, to...creating and supporting curricular efforts at all levels, we identify areas of
opportunity to create a truly shared and lived vision for Care for Our Common Home (University of San Diego, 2016).

As some of our guiding principles, I find interesting that sustainability is not more incorporated across campus, and that there is a lack of knowledge of the existence of the Office of Sustainability. I believe this calls for the Office of Sustainability to take up this work to educate and mobilize the university to fulfill these aspects of the strategic plan. This starts with collaborating with other areas of campus to begin the process of education on Care for Our Common Home and Global Citizenship.

Act

The action portion of this cycle first involved follow-up communication with Bianca to see if there was a potential for collaboration between our offices. We discussed what this collaboration and vision for the Office of Sustainability presentation might consist of and decided it would be best to present and speak to the ISO executive board to get an understanding of their perspective on incorporating a sustainability presentation into their programming. This would allow me to find out how the information might best be communicated to the international student population.

I presented at the ISO executive board meeting on April 3rd with eight board members from various countries such as Italy, Saudi Arabia, and Mexico, and their two advisors in attendance. My presentation and conversation with the ISO executive board included a brief introduction of my Action Research and findings up until that point, an explanation of the purpose and content of the Office of Sustainability presentations, and how this collaboration would potentially support USD’s strategic plan. I communicated that the hope was to initiate future collaborations by giving a sustainability presentation to international students while
providing a space for dialogue. The sustainability presentation would be similar to the one currently given to classes and student organizations by the Office of Sustainability but would be modified to the international student population. I asked if they had any questions or concerns about this collaboration, what their perspective is on incorporating this presentation into their programming, and how they think it might benefit the international population.

**Evaluate**

The board members understood the value of sustainability at USD and expressed an overall interest in incorporating sustainability into their programming; they believed that it would be great to further educate the international student population. They explained their perspective on the importance of sustainability and the dialogue then turned into the students expressing their experience with sustainability in their home countries and at USD, while highlighting the major differences.

One student stated that in his home country of Saudi Arabia, sustainability is not really a part of the culture and something that they practice. He spoke about how it was difficult to understand the value of certain practices, like recycling for instance, and it took him a while to fully incorporate small changes into his daily life. It wasn’t until he returned to Saudi Arabia during his Junior year that he realized how apparent sustainability was in his daily life in San Diego. He attributed this understanding and change in practice to his roommates of two years who were San Diego locals and continuously taught him about how his habits were contributing to an overall problem. Hearing about this experience helped me understand that in some cases students are moving to a community, San Diego and USD, where sustainability might be more present then in the past and that it takes time for practices to become engrained in the mind. Based on this, I speculate that students may not have an interest in getting involved with the
Office of Sustainability because they are unaware of the presence and importance of sustainability to USD.

The board also suggested that while a presentation would be helpful, that it might not be beneficial in the long run. As the students explained, it takes time for sustainable acts to become second nature and it would take more than one presentation to really change students’ practices. They suggested that there should be continuous interaction and presence between the Office of Sustainability and the international student population in order to get the message across and that this continuous engagement might spark interest in getting involved with the office. The board expressed the value in personal interactions and said that it could be the key to diversifying involvement; having meaningful dialogue with students that might encourage them to get involved.

**Modify**

Changing the presentation into active education would be the best modification based on the ISO executive board feedback. Rather than giving students a list of all of the things they should know about USD’s mission towards being more sustainable and how they can incorporate sustainable practices into their daily lives, the Office of Sustainability should break the presentation down into portions that provide hands on experience for students.

**Move in new direction**

The new direction moving forward would be to incorporate more than one opportunity for collaborations throughout the year between the Office of Sustainability and another office or organization to ensure that there are multiple interactions and reminders of the practices and initiatives the Office of Sustainability is promoting. Campaigns seem to have less of an effect, as the ISO board explained, but actively working with students is more impactful.
Limitations

There were many limitations that I faced over the course of this research. One of them was the lack of presence of students with lower socioeconomic status throughout the cycles. This may be due to the fact that this factor can be more difficult to have students self-identify with and disclose as opposed to race and ethnicity. With the limitation of time and access to information, the main focus was on race and ethnicity. A second limitation I found was in the retention and lack of students involved with the cycles, predominantly between the pre-cycle and cycle one.

Students that participated in the demographic survey were asked if they would like to receive follow-up information regarding being involved with the cycle one focus group. One of the undergraduate survey participants had informed me that a number of students who received this follow-up email solicitation about the focus group had transferred out of USD.

Not beginning my employment at the Office until after the genesis of this research also set the timeline back. I needed to incorporate enough time to analyze the context, understand the needs and goals of the Office, and to observe and reflect during the pre-cycle to inform future cycles and overall research.

Recommendations

One of the recommendations for the future is to collaborate with other offices at USD to garner awareness and interest. For example, it was clear that there were many students of color that expressed an abundance of knowledge and interest in environmental injustices during the Black Lives Matter and the Environment event. I believe that the success of this event was in part due to the fact that there was a collaboration between the Office of Sustainability and the Black Student Resource Center (BSRC). Another aspect that attributed to the success of this event was the fact that it was hosted within the BSRC, an area where students felt comfortable
and had already established their sense of belonging which allowed them to have these challenging conversations around environmental racism. As a result, I believe that it is vital to incorporate more collaborative events that allow for the Office of Sustainability to enter spaces where students have established community and hold educational conversations with relevant topics to them. One of the goals is to diversify student involvement, which first calls for education and awareness that the Office exists and serves as a resource to educate and mobilize the community when it comes to topics of environmental injustices for instance.

Another recommendation would be continuous engagement and collaboration. As the students in cycle two expressed, rather than having a one-time informational presentation it would be more beneficial to have frequent interactions of actively working with students to understand the importance of sustainability, and that these encounters might foster relationships and spark interest in involvement. This continuous engagement could potentially involve having a representative from the Office of Sustainability at the hosting organizations’ events to ensure that it is a zero-waste event, that everyone is disposing of their waste properly and using that space as an educational one.

**Conclusion and Final Reflections**

Over the course of this research I have learned that students truly value when others take the time to educate and work with them on something, no matter the topic. Learning by doing is an aspect of education that must be incorporated into all aspects of spreading the message about sustainability to USD. We cannot expect students to get involved if there is no active engagement from our end and we must take it upon ourselves to work alongside them as they are learning and growing. Underrepresented students may have a lot on their plates and be actively involved with other areas of campus, but if the Office of Sustainability engages with them in
their established spaces of comfort and invests time in them it may spark an interest for any student which can then further diversify the sustainability community.

I am pleased that I was able to have personal interactions and dialogue through this project with students that I may not have encountered otherwise. Upon completing this research, I reflected on my experience as an undergraduate student and to what extent sustainability was a part of my life. Although sustainability did not have a strong presence in my life until after I graduated from undergrad, I thought about the areas that I was involved with such as the Residence Hall Association and how the student leaders within that organization first engaged with me. I remember feeling like they invested time into learning about me and my interests and that was what sparked my interest in getting involved within Housing. Some students coming into a new environment may not have the ambition to throw themselves into various clubs and organizations, and it takes time for them to find their place and sense of belonging. Sometimes part of that experience involves the active engagement from the other party to generate a relationship and interest.

Lastly, I would like to thank David Horber, Andrea Dame, Elizabeth-Aiello Coppola, Callie Sharp, Bianca Chau, and the Office of Sustainability staff for supporting me and being my critical friends throughout the process of this research.
References


Appendix A

Email Solicitation for Undergraduate Student Demographic Survey

Subject line: Searching for Action Research Participants

Body:
Hello everyone!

I wanted to reach and see if any of you could help me in gathering responses to my Undergraduate Student Demographic Survey for my Action Research. The purpose of my research is to examine the extent to which underrepresented students at USD – defined by race and/or socioeconomic background and status – engage with the Office of Sustainability; while assessing and implementing ways in which the office can further engage this population of students.

The pre-cycle to my research is conducting a demographic survey. I would appreciate it if you could email the following blurb out with the survey link to any students you work with.

"Hello,

My name is Jelitsa, a graduate student in the Higher Education Leadership program and I am looking for participants for my Action Research. The purpose of my research is to examine the extent to which underrepresented students at USD engage with the Office of Sustainability; while assessing and implementing ways in which the office can further engage this population of students. The first cycle of my research is an Undergraduate Student Demographic Survey:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScDB8mBghYC4lq3S4V7TpICti3hK9tLCzU4agfTVlfNZZypKA/viewform?usp=sf_link

By completing this survey you will help me in identifying areas students of color are participating in on campus, what they do and do not know about the Office of Sustainability, and factors that might prevent them from being involved on campus, among other things. This survey will take no more than 35 minutes to complete and will give me a basis on which to move the study towards. Your participation would be greatly appreciated! You will find that the first page of the survey is a consent form. If you wish to participate in the survey please fill out the first page of the form before continuing. A copy of your consent form will be emailed out you upon completion of the survey.

If you have any questions please feel free to email me at jelitsafonseca@sandiego.edu.

Kind Regards,
Jelitsa Fonseca"

I appreciate you taking the time to read this and helping me with my research.

Thank you all,
Jelitsa
Appendix B

Undergraduate Student Demographic Survey Consent Form.

Thank you for your interest in participating in my Action Research! Before continuing to the survey, please read through this consent for and sign below should you agree to participate.

Email Address: ________________

For the research study entitled: Underrepresented Student Involvement within the Office of Sustainability

I. Purpose of the research study
The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which underrepresented students at USD – defined by race and/or socioeconomic background and status – engage with the Office of Sustainability; while assessing and implementing ways in which the office can further engage this population of students.

II. What you will be asked to do
If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:
Participate in an online survey about your demographic information and experience of being a student of the USD community. You will be answering a series of questions to understand what you know about the Office of Sustainability as well as sustainability efforts and events on campus. Your participation in this survey will take no more than 35 minutes.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts
Sometimes when people are asked to think about sensitive issues and their feelings, they can feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day 7 days a week: Access and Crisis Line, 1-888-724-7240. To talk to someone on campus, you can call the University of San Diego Center for Health and Wellness: 619-260-4618.

IV. Benefits
While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand the experience of underrepresented students and their engagement and participation at USD.

V. Confidentiality
Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher’s office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name).

VI. Compensation
You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can
refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you’re entitled to or your employment or grades. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

VIII. Contact Information
If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Jelitsa Fonseca
Email: jelitsafonseca@sandiego.edu
Phone: (925) 595-7779

2) Dr. Annie Ngo
Email: maianhngo@sandiego.edu
Phone: (858)232-6217

A copy of your consent form will be emailed to you upon completion of the survey.

Thank you in advance for your participation!
Jelitsa Fonseca

1. I agree to participate in the research study. I understand the purpose and nature of this study and I am participating voluntarily. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without any penalty or consequences.
   Yes
   No

2. I grant permission for the data generated from this survey to be used in the researcher's Action Research on this topic.
   Yes
   No

3. Please type your name in the box below to indicate agreement to participate in this study.

______________________
Appendix C

Online Undergraduate Student Demographic Survey Questions and Answers

1. **What is your class standing?**

   - Freshmen - first year: 46.7%
   - Sophomore - second year: 13.3%
   - Junior - third year: 26.7%
   - Senior - four or more years: 13.3%

2. **Are you a transfer student?**

   - Yes: 60%
   - No: 40%

3.
4. What is your gender identity?

5. Which of the following best describes your race and ethnicity?
7. Do you live in on or off-campus housing?

8. What is your current intended major?

9.
What extracurricular clubs, organizations, activities and/or programs are you a part of?

Conservation Intern at Office of Sustainability, VP of Intellectual Development for Phi Alpha Delta Pre-Law Fraternity International, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, University Ministry, Business Law and Mediation Team

Office of Sustainability interns, BBGG member, marine science club member

AIISO, Office of Sustainability, Queer Womxn, Ultimate Frisbee, OA, Women Of Color Discussion Group

BBGG, Vigor, Torero Ambassadors, SOAR Ambassadors, Marine Science Club, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu

SOAR, Ole Ambassadors, MEChA, CASA, Student Support Services, RCIA Program

Torero Program Board

Torero Program Board, Women's Center, Student Success Committee, KIPJ Peace Partners

Student Veterans Organization, People of the Islands, Military and Veterans Program Work Study program

Associated students, Student veteran organization

fuso, its, vpса, nonprofit club

SVO

IUISO, Kappa Delta, PT/OT Club, Torero Ambassadors, research, Water and Sports PT internship

Climbing, AIISO

Be Blue Go Green, Intramural Soccer, Navy ROTC

Student Veteran Organization, International Student Organization

10. How do you prefer to have events, activities, and opportunities on campus communicated to you?

15 responses

![Pie chart showing preferences]

- 66.7% Flyers
- 26.7% Emails
- Other

11.
Are there any reasons that prevent you from being involved on campus? Please explain any reasons.

- already too involved and busy with other clubs, work, and classwork
- no

TOO busy :)
-No!
-Money, for example I would love to participate in Greek life, however I cannot afford to be apart of it.
-N/A
-Homework is a huge factor. Ultimately, I am here to go to school, so that always comes first.
-Time and familial commitments
-Going home to cook dinner, take care of pets, spend time with family
- no time
-No
-No. I have a pretty packed schedule which is why I don't get involved in anything else.
-None
-scheduling conflicts
-Its hard to be very involved and be a commuter

12. How many times have you attended Office of Sustainability (OS) events and/or activities?

15 responses

13.
What events or activities are you aware of that the Office of Sustainability hosts?

Green Office, Green Room, DIY series, waste audits, tabling, farmer's market, collaborations with Cultivate and Collaborate LLC, Rideshare Week, Lung Force Walk, zero waste events, composting events and workshops, etc. (I work here, so I am aware of pretty much all of them)

As an intern, I have been aware of all activities happening this semester

The succulent planting

Unsure, but I am interested in attending events hosted by the Office of Sustainability

none

N/A

I think they did the Al Gore thing.

n/a

N/A

none

None

Not sure... was that the apple festival?

None

They collaborate with Outdoor Adventures to organize hikes, they conduct research (like eco-audits), etc.

14. Are you willing to participate in a follow-up activity related to this research? The activity will consist of a small discussion on your experience at USD and a group activity.

15 responses

33.3% Yes

66.7% No
Appendix D  

Breakdown of Involvement Areas

Each answer input in question nine of the Undergraduate Student Demographic Survey (Appendix A) is listed below by group based on the mission and purpose of each club, organization, activity and/or program.

- **Environmental based**: Office of Sustainability intern, Be Blue Go Green (BBGG), Marine Science Club, Vigor Garden Club
- **Multicultural based**: American Indian and Indigenous Student Organization (AIISO), Queen Womxn, Women Of Color Discussion Group, Torero Ambassadors, Student Outreach And Recruitment (SOAR) Ambassadors, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanx de Aztlan (MEChA), People of the Islands, Filipino Ugnayan Student Organization (FUSO)
- **Academic and professionally affiliated**: Phi Alpha Delta Pre-Law Fraternity International, Pre-Physical/Occupational Therapy (PT/OT) Club, Research, Water and Sports PT internship
- **Social and philanthropy based**: The Mulvaney Center for Community, Awareness and Social Action (CASA), Torero Program Board, Associated Students, Kappa Delta, Nonprofit Leadership Student Association, Joan. B Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (KIPJ) Peace Partners
- **Sports and outdoor based**: Ultimate Frisbee, Outdoor Adventures (OA), Climbing, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, Intramural Soccer
- **Religiously affiliated**: University Ministry, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) Program
- **Military affiliated**: Student Veteran Organization (SVO), Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps (NROTC), Military and Veterans Program Work Study program
- **Other**: International Student Organization, Information Technology Service (ITS), Vice President of Student Affairs office (VPSA), Women's Center, Student Success Committee, Business Law and Mediation Team
Appendix E

Email Solicitation for Focus Group Participants

Hello,

I am reaching out to see if I can get some students to attend my second cycle of Action Research, a focus group of undergraduate students with a discussion on their experience at USD, predominantly geared towards the underrepresented student experiences, but open to all. If you know of any students that might be interested in joining this discussion do you mind passing this along to them? You can use the following blurb or forward this email to them.

A little more about my action research:
The purpose of my research is to examine the extent to which underrepresented students at USD - defined by race, ethnicity and/or socioeconomic background and status - engage with the Office of Sustainability; while assessing and implementing ways in which the office can further engage this population of students. The first cycle of this research is to conduct a focus group where students will have the opportunity to discuss their experience at USD.

The focus group will be held from 1-2PM on Thursday, Feb 22nd in Camino 109.

Link to RSVP: https://goo.gl/forms/TwgEoXng2sCB13DB2

I would very much appreciate it if you could pass this along to your students, friends, club members, or anyone that you think may provide valuable knowledge to the research I am conducting.

Thank you,
Jelitsa Fonseca
Appendix F

Focus Group Consent Form

University of San Diego
Research Participant Consent Form for Focus Group Participants

For the research study entitled:
Underrepresented Student Involvement within the Office of Sustainability

I. Purpose of the research study
The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which underrepresented students at USD – defined by race and/or socioeconomic background and status – engage with the Office of Sustainability; while assessing and implementing ways in which the office can further engage this population of students.

II. What you will be asked to do
If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:
Participate in a focus group – with group activities – based on your life as an emerging adult and a student of the USD community. You will be participating in group dialogue and activities to gauge what your responsibilities are, how they compare to your peers, and what commonalities and differences are shared. Your participation in this focus group will take one hour.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts
Sometimes when people are asked to think about sensitive issues and their feelings, they can feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day 7 days a week: Access and Crisis Line, 1-888-724-7240. To talk to someone on campus, you can call the University of San Diego Center for Health and Wellness: 619-260-4618.

IV. Benefits
While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand the experience of underrepresented students and their priorities and responsibilities while attending USD.

V. Confidentiality
Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher’s office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name).

VI. Compensation
You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can
refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you’re entitled to or your employment or grades. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

**VIII. Contact Information**
If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) **Jelitsa Fonseca**  
   Email: jelitsafonseca@sandiego.edu  
   Phone: (925) 595-7779

2) **Dr. Cheryl Getz**  
   Email: Cgetz@sandiego.edu  
   Phone: (619) 260-4289

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant      Date

________________________________________________________________________
Name of Participant (Printed)

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Investigator      Date
Appendix G

Cycle 1 Focus Group Introduction and Questions

Hello and thank you all for taking the time to participate in this focus group. Today we will be having a dialogue around the topics of sustainability and your live experience at USD thus far. I will be asking a series of open-ended questions and my intention is to create a dialogue amongst the groups so we can share and compare experiences. This will only be a one hour session. Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in my office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name) so you do not have to worry about this information being traced to you.

Group dialogue: We are going to begin with questions as I mentioned before. This is a safe space to speak freely about your opinions and experiences. Let’s all respect others speaking and give them the space to talk. Feel free to answer any question when you feel inclined, or to work off of another person’s answer.

Questions

1. Have you participated or attended any of the Office of Sustainability (OS) events and/or activities?

2. What events and opportunities are you aware of that the OS facilitate and offer?

3. Can you describe your background or practices around sustainability?

4. What does diversity and inclusion mean to you?

5. Do you find it difficult to engage with certain groups or offices on campus?

6. To what extent do you feel you belong at USD?

7. Are there any reasons that prevent you from becoming involved on campus?