

# Bringing Sustainability into the HBS Required Curriculum

## Background

Prevalence of Sustainability Themes in Harvard Business School's first year (RC) curriculum is an independent project first initiated in 2014 by a three-member Student Sustainability Associates (SSA) Team. As an ongoing project in its third year, we were fortunate to have a strong platform to build on and focused our efforts on not just further refining the initiatives, but also developing an improved understanding on topics and engagement channels that our student population desired.

The overarching objective of our project was to better understand both the presence and significance of sustainability focused themes in the life of a typical HBS student. To achieve our objective, we focused on the following three components:

- Documenting sustainability topics present in the RC cases, gauging effectiveness of in-class sustainability discussions and suggesting next steps to improve effective delivery of such topics
- Ensuring an ongoing discussion on sustainability outside of the RC curriculum via SSA campaigns
- Developing and executing a simple survey to gauge student's attitude towards sustainability topics

We defined our key deliverable as being able to develop SMART (specific, measurable, actionable, realistic and time-bound) recommendations that could help guide future RC curriculum, BEI (Business & Environment Initiative) projects and SSA campaigns.

## Methodology

To effectively develop the ongoing project, we sketched out and then delivered on an action plan that consisted of four key steps:

1. **Develop a Baseline Understanding:** Involved reviewing existing project documentation, interacting with BEI leads and previous SSA teams.
2. **Collate and update insights on RC Curriculum:** This involved updating documentation identifying key themes of sustainability and mapping RC cases to these themes; meeting RC Course heads to better understand case writing and inclusion process; and reviving the SSA classroom feedback survey to gauge effectiveness of class discussion on sustainability topics.

3. **Targeted SSA campaigns:** Continued the SSA tradition of four key campaigns (Waste, Energy, Water, Climate Change) to disseminate information to students on relevance of sustainability themes and University initiatives. As part of these campaigns, the SSA team conducted fun activities to engage students on sustainability themes outside the classroom setting, such as the [Garbage Games](#) and [Spinning for Watts](#).
4. **Student Interest Survey:** In a first for the project, we developed and rolled out a simple six question survey to gauge students' interest on sustainability topics. The survey received ~10% response from the RC class.

## Project Findings

Our project was instrumental in highlighting some key findings:

- While there was sustainability related discussion in 50% of classes focused on a case featuring a sustainability theme (i.e. Tesla, IKEA, BP Oil Spill), less than 10% of the class time was actually spent discussing sustainability.
- Majority (~85%) of students believe that sustainability will impact their future careers.
- Students believe that climate change, renewable energy, and environmental policy and regulations are topics that deserve the most attention from a career perspective.
- ~75% of students wanted class discussions to proactively tackle sustainability themes, while ~15% want learning opportunities outside class and ~10% felt such learning was best self-driven.
- Technology & Operations Management (TOM) Climate Change Challenge sparked many interesting discussion in classes. ~65% students felt that climate change initiatives by companies were largely 'marketing' initiatives and not always driven with long-term positive intentions.
- ~65% of students wanted sustainability themes tackled in RC year and ~25% preferred learning modes outside the classroom (SSA activities and optional learning sessions).

That said, we recognize that to further improve our findings, an even higher response rate is desirable. This would require an even greater push in the coming year by the new SSA team. Some initial ideas include incorporating the survey as part of BEI kick-off event, SSA Campaigns, E&E club events, TOM feedback poll, etc. Additionally, we are keen to run this survey again in EC year (for current pool of survey takers) to validate the findings that sustainability focused themes should be heavily geared towards the RC year.

# Recommendations and Next Steps

Findings from our project highlighted that promoting sustainability themes is critical, with opportunities existing both inside and outside the classroom. At a high level, we bucketed our recommendations under three categories:

1. **RC Curriculum:** Dedicate 1-3 RC cases with sustainability as the core case theme thereby leading to proactive discussions in the classroom. We felt that RC courses such as TOM, BGIE and LCA are possibly the best fit for such a discussion. Additionally, course heads should consider providing structured teaching notes/slides that stress the sustainability theme to ensure consistency of message across sections. Finally, Independent projects in Fall/Spring of 2017-18 could serve as a platform for HBS students to aid the faculty in the writing of dedicated sustainability themed cases.
2. **TOM Climate Change Challenge:** Given the perceived success of this initiative, we recommend converting a few top blogs into the 'Portrait Project' style format that can be displayed in Spangler lobby during the week of TOM Challenge. This will promote improvement, engagement and participation for future RCs. Additionally, the team felt that the detailed note 'Climate Change in 2016', could be better disseminated through a more formal discussion in a classroom setting or a professor led lunch and learn.
3. **SSA Campaigns:** We continue to believe that SSA activities represents a great opportunity to share sustainability themes outside the more defined RC curriculum. Our survey responses highlight that within the sustainability realm our students are most interested in climate change, renewables and environmental policies. Future SSA teams should take this into consideration while planning their campaigns. Additionally, closer engagement between SSAs and Energy & Environment (E&E) Club Leadership team through the co-hosting and promoting of events together would go a long way in driving sustainability themes. Finally, we recommend having a dedicated SSA/E&E budget to facilitate Movie and Popcorn Nights featuring 2016 Climate Change documentary 'Before the Flood' and other similar documentaries that can spark interesting debates among our student community.

## A Note of Thanks

We were extremely fortunate to have had the incredible support from BEI Leads and the HBS Operations Team throughout the project. The faculty and staff provided us with insights and guidance on the direction of this project, and helped catalyze our thinking on appropriate recommendations and next steps. Continuing the survey in future RC classes will help future SSA teams further refine the findings and develop new ways of integrating Sustainability Themes in the RC year.