

Social Equity & Environmental Justice in University Operations

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Last year, [Student Sustainability Associates](#) (SSAs) explored the topic of Environmental Justice—what is Environmental Justice? How are other top universities incorporating Environmental Justice into their curriculum and extracurricular activities? How can we integrate it more heavily into our curriculum?

Interested in building on their work, but taking a different lens, we sought to develop an understanding of what Social Equity and Environmental Justice could look like in the context of University Operations. How are we ensuring that the different communities we impact, especially those historically excluded, have a voice in decisions being made within [Harvard Business School](#) (HBS) and broader [Harvard University](#) (HU) operations, and have access to economic and educational opportunities on campus? These communities include Operations employees, Harvard students, the local Allston-Brighton community, the broader Boston community, and the global community involved in the supply chain of products and services that make HBS function.

Key definitions for this work

Social Equity: Ensuring that all communities are treated fairly and are given equal opportunity to participate in the planning and decision-making process, with an emphasis on ensuring that traditionally disadvantaged groups are not left behind.

Environmental Justice: Grounded in the right to clean air, land, water, and food. Ensuring everyone, regardless of race, culture, ability, or income, enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work.

Environmental Justice Community: Groups who are overburdened by environmental harms and risks caused by disproportionate exposure to these dangers and reduced access to resources like healthcare. In the U.S., these communities are often low income, minority, tribal, or Indigenous populations who have been historically excluded from public policy making and development decisions.

Project objectives

To begin to get at this important question, we had two objectives for this project: (1) understand how HBS & broader Harvard are incorporating Social Equity & Environmental Justice into their operations decision-making today and (2) benchmark against other top universities to identify new opportunities.

On our campus today

Starting internally, we talked with employees from HBS and broader Harvard operations, as well as various offices across Harvard. For both internal and external conversations, we focused on four areas:



Internal processes

- E.g., Making the hiring process more inclusive



Purchasing & procurement

- E.g., Creating a set of questions for purchasing decisions



Capital projects

- E.g., Working towards social equity LEED credits



Community engagement

- E.g., Gaining input from the community on university decisions

Through these conversations, we built a picture of the strong pockets of Social Equity & Environmental Justice-related initiatives happening around campus.

A small sub-set of example initiatives include:

- Internal processes: Enabling employees to pursue further education during work hours through the Bridge program ([Bridge Program](#)).
- Construction: Engaging the services of a construction-specific diversity consultant in order to assess policies and procedures and recommend the services of diverse businesses ([Cash House Renovations](#)).
- Purchasing and procurement: Partnering with the HBS dining services provider, Restaurant Associates, to increase the number of local, minority and women-owned food vendors.
- Community engagement: Providing career transition services and small business training to the Allston-Brighton community ([Ed Portal](#)).

From our conversations it was clear that there is a lot of momentum behind SE&EJ initiatives. They also highlighted the presence and need for not only strong SE&EJ initiatives, but support mechanisms to help reach those initiatives. If the goal is a more diverse vendor base, it is greatly benefited by supporting new local, minority, and women-owned vendors in navigating the requirements of a university context. If the goal is to make a more accessible campus, we need to make accessibility top of mind when projects are being proposed and budgeted for.

Being explored on other campuses

After getting a good lay of the land internally, we looked outward, conducting research and talking to other universities to find out how others are considering these important topics as they make operations decisions.

Example initiatives happening or being considered on other campuses:

- Internal processes: Tufts Office for Sustainability created an Equity and Justice Plan highlighting key action items they plan to incorporate into their visioning, communications, programming, and administration, in acknowledgement of the importance of social and racial justice in achieving a sustainable world ([Tufts Equity and Justice Plan](#))
- Construction: Several universities are piloting different inclusion-focused construction credits and frameworks including Social Equity LEED Credits, Living Building Challenge, and the Envision System
- Purchasing and procurement: MIT partnered with the non-profit food business incubator Commonwealth Kitchen (CWK) to rotate local, minority, and women-owned food vendors in their new food court ([MIT Launchpad](#))
- Community engagement: Williams College set up a Community Climate Fund to financially support local minority and low-income communities with projects that focus on energy efficiency / renewable energy ([Williams College Community Climate Fund](#))

Along with highlighting several new initiative ideas, our external conversations also highlighted two common themes that mirrored our internal conversations. (1) A need for support mechanisms to make initiatives successful and address some of the structural challenges that have hindered their success in the past (2) A need for not only bottoms-up initiatives by passionate individuals, but also a top-down set of values and mission that lead to the integration of SE&EJ into the foundational processes and policies of the university. This work must live on past any specific individual's tenure in a role.

Next steps

This work identified new initiatives that HBS and broader Harvard could consider exploring further. We focused on initiative breath rather than depth. We focused on high-level considerations for implementing a broad-based effort to support SE&EJ-minded decision making across campus rather than the implementation itself. Moving forward, there is therefore still a lot of work to do and many areas for future SSA projects, including (1) deep diving in on the new initiatives highlighted in the external benchmarking (2) building case studies on what it might look like to filter high-level values down through a team or department's processes and policies and (3) delving into how the school can track success against the initiatives in place.

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