

Social Equity & Environmental Justice at HBS: Understanding opportunities for student community engagement

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Equity is a central theme of Harvard University's Sustainability Action Plan, which reflects social equity and environmental justice's growing importance to students, administrators, and the broader community. Put simply, social equity and environmental justice (SE/EJ) seeks to ensure everyone has access to a healthy environment and that environmental benefits and burdens are fairly distributed. Previous HBS Student Sustainability Associates have looked at environmental justice within operations and academics – and this year, we explored the topic in the context of student engagement with the local community.

What is Environmental Justice and Social Equity?

Environmental justice is the equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens across all communities, regardless of race, origin, socio-economic status, and other factors. It's grounded in the right to clean air, land, water, and food for all, and equitable participation in decision-making processes.

Social equity extends this concept to broader societal issues, ensuring fairness and justice in the distribution of resources & opportunities, as well as the planning/decision-making processes behind them - ensuring that traditionally disadvantaged groups are not left behind.

Sources: Environmental Protection Agency & Natural Resources Defense Council websites

Our objectives for this project:

1. Understand the community impact ecosystem at Harvard and HBS
2. Identify select organizations that could serve as potential partner candidates
3. Devise action plan for improved integration between HBS students and other Harvard community engagement organizations

Importance of Local Involvement in SE/EJ

Many areas in Massachusetts, including parts of Boston where HBS is located (Allston/Cambridge), are designated Environmental Justice Communities. Our engagement with these communities is crucial for HBS as a local stakeholder and as an institution shaping future leaders.

Previous SSA surveys, as well as volunteer groups within HBS, indicate that there is interest in community engagement and environmental justice at HBS. The missing piece is a way to connect the disparate groups within Harvard/HBS to concrete opportunities with local partners. Our project this year aimed to disentangle the complicated ecosystem of community engagement at Harvard and provide a better understanding for future planning.

Key Findings: Harvard Community Engagement Ecosystem

We quickly found that the Harvard community engagement ecosystem is widespread and active, with 140+ non-profit and community partners throughout the Boston area and beyond. More difficult, however, was identifying the Harvard stakeholders responsible for managing these partner relationships, the status of each partnership, and specific ways for students to get involved. In many cases, relationships were managed by specific schools within Harvard University (e.g., the Chan School of Public Health) or by another Harvard entity like the EdPortal. In other cases, the relationship was more *ad hoc*, with engagement less frequent and the current stakeholders more difficult to identify.

As we sought a way for HBS students to make sense of this network, we identified a few “best-in-class” examples of what student-level engagement communications might look like. Harvard Chan Engage, for example, is an online portal that provides public health students with a central clearinghouse for community events and volunteer opportunities. Harvard Medical School offers a similar online database. The Harvard EdPortal, an organization focused on community engagement with the Allston and Brighton neighborhoods, also has plentiful opportunities for students to get involved.

HBS students have many claims on their time and our calendars are consistently full of events for, among other things, recruiting, social, or academic pursuits. HBS students also have *many* chances to get involved in sustainability efforts, from the HBS Energy & Environment Club, to the Sustainability Club, to cross-school (e.g., Harvard-MIT) clubs and organizations. Volunteer events are planned and executed by the Student Association or section-level service reps, but these events are often single-sourced based on the organizer’s personal relationship with volunteer organizations or non-profits. We therefore considered a few ways for HBS to “plug in” to Harvard’s rich community engagement ecosystem and leverage the interest we know HBS students have in contributing to SE/EJ efforts.

Recommendations:

In the short term (over the next year), we considered a few discrete steps that could help unpack what we view as tremendous opportunity for student involvement:

- Connect sustainability/community engagement leaders within HBS - with intent to share existing volunteer efforts
- Reach out to potential partner organizations - which, based on discussions with Harvard stakeholders, we’ve begun to define - to highlight opportunities for HBS student involvement
- Scope 3-5 clearly outlined projects with this short-list of partner organizations
- Incorporate projects into SA volunteer calendar to ensure broad dissemination to the student body
- Track student participation in this pilot program and field a survey (of both HBS *and* partner organizations) to assess efficacy

In the long term (over the next two years), we recommend the following:

- Connect Harvard community engagement leaders with similar roles across schools
- Define the nature of Harvard’s relationship with all listed community partners (we noted ~140 current non-profit partners)
- Begin to compile a cross-school community engagement “clearinghouse” with exclusivity

- for expertise-specific opportunities
- Continue to track student participation and student/partner organization feedback

Our hope is that these efforts break down silos between Harvard schools and ultimately unify community engagement efforts. More practically, we believe these steps can provide HBS students - especially those interested in SE/EJ and sustainability objectives - with a chance to give back to the community with durable, long-lasting partnerships.

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