Bridging Finance and Sustainability: Reflections from My SSA Experience
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As part of the Student Sustainability Associate (SSA) program at Harvard Business School, I had the opportunity to engage in projects that brought together operational sustainability and academic inquiry. The experience provided not only a platform to contribute to real initiatives on campus but also a lens through which to explore the intersection between financial systems and environmental outcomes.

One of my core responsibilities centered on increasing awareness and usage of the HBS Surplus Center, a resource designed to promote material reuse by allowing students and staff to donate and pick up gently used items—furniture, appliances, and basic home essentials. Working alongside Perle Sand, we designed a communications strategy that included targeted flyers across the College campus, particularly near high-traffic areas and donation bins, to enhance visibility. While the effort may seem simple on the surface, it revealed a layered insight: promoting the Surplus Center not only mitigates unnecessary waste and contributes to campus circularity—it also enhances economic accessibility.

In parallel, one of the most intellectually engaging aspects of my SSA placement was organizing and moderating a Lunch & Learn on Sustainable Finance with HBS Professor Philippe Van der Beck. The session aimed to move beyond superficial ESG narratives and explore how capital markets are evolving in response to environmental and social imperatives. Philippe's research takes a rigorous, data-driven approach to understanding the flow of funds into ESG and impact-oriented products and the implications these flows have on asset prices, risk premia, and corporate behavior.

A key insight from the discussion was the following: as ESG-labeled investments attract increasing capital inflows, the expected future returns of these assets decline. This phenomenon is often misunderstood. While some view the lower expected returns as a drawback, it is in fact consistent with standard asset pricing logic. Investments that align with sustainability preferences—whether due to climate risk hedging, ethical alignment, or reputational concerns—face a demand shift that pushes up prices and compresses discount rates. In effect, capital markets are internalizing sustainability preferences by lowering the cost of capital for greener projects, thus improving their net present value and making certain initiatives financially viable that previously were not. This mechanism plays a crucial role in accelerating the transition to a low-carbon economy, especially in marginal investment cases.

I enjoyed my time as an SSA immensely. It was a valuable learning experience, exposing me not only to diverse facets of sustainability, but also to a warm community of environmental and impact-oriented people committed to driving positive change. If you’re looking to make an impact as an incoming student at HBS, I encourage you to apply as an SSA.