

Student Sustainability Associates: Where Business Meets Real Impact

By Rachel Gonsalves (MBA '27)

Before HBS, I spent three years at McKinsey working on clean energy and technology engagements, finding a deep passion in learning about ways to combat climate change. When I heard about the Student Sustainability program, I was eager to apply and have the opportunity to share my passion for the environment with classmates.

The Student Sustainability Associate (SSA) Program, is HBS's peer-to-peer sustainability education program. One SSA is selected from each first-year section to connect classmates with sustainability topics that intersect with business - from climate and energy to food, and water. It's a 3-4 hour per week commitment. But more importantly, it's one of the most hands-on, tangible leadership opportunities I found in my RC year.

What I Worked On

Fall Semester - Food Campaign:

One of my favorite things I did as an SSA was launching a community recipe campaign around vegetarian and lower-carbon eating. The idea was simple: instead of lecturing people about the environmental impact of meat consumption, invite each section to share something they already love - food. We asked students to submit their favorite plant-based recipes, framed around reducing dietary carbon footprints in a way that felt approachable and even fun.

The response genuinely surprised us: over 400 submissions. That kind of organic participation tells you something. When you meet people where they are and make sustainability feel accessible rather than prescriptive, they show up. It was a great reminder that behavior change at scale does not always require a policy or a mandate.

Spring Semester - AI and Sustainability Research Project:

In the spring, my co-SSAs and I took on a research project that felt very timely: quantifying the AI sustainability awareness gap at HBS. AI usage on campus has exploded, students are using it to prep cases, draft documents, synthesize research, but almost no one was talking about the environmental cost sitting behind every query.

We designed and distributed a 15-question survey to HBS MBA students, collecting 60 valid responses from 109 respondents (a 55% response rate), followed by in-depth interviews with 8 students. What we found was interesting: 45% of students expressed concern about AI's environmental impact, yet environmental considerations ranked dead last among the factors they weigh when choosing an AI tool.

We used the data to develop four student personas and proposed three recommendations for HBS:

- Launch an AI and Sustainability Awareness Campaign integrated into existing HBS programming
- Develop targeted messaging by segment, since a one-size-fits-all approach will not move the needle
- Elevate AI's environmental impact alongside bias, privacy, and job displacement in campus conversations about AI risk

This project included survey design, data analysis, persona development, and strategic recommendations. It also felt meaningful. We presented our findings to the Office for Sustainability, and I hope it becomes a baseline that future SSAs build on.

Why You Should Apply

If you care about sustainability and want to do more than talk about it, apply to be an SSA. You'll run real campaigns, lead a project you get to shape, connect with faculty and staff doing serious work in this space, and build community with classmates who share your values.

Looking back, the SSA role was one of the most grounding parts of my RC year. In a curriculum that moves fast and can feel abstract, it was a consistent anchor to work that felt real.

The SSA program is supported by HBS Operations and offers a flexible time commitment (3-5 hours/week) at \$23/hour and is open to all HBS RC students. SSAs have the opportunity to network with like-minded MBAs, test their leadership skills and make an impact here at HBS...all while earning some cash. For questions or to apply for an SSA position, please visit the [SSA website](#) for more information or email sustainability@hbs.edu.