

The Culture of Sustainability: A Study in Environmental Ethics

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Introduction:

This study aims to explore how students, faculty and staff understand, define, and express environmental values. This research explores the lived experience of SCU community members as they do or do not embody—in belief or practice—the environmental awareness and values present at the institutional level. The following questions will be addressed:

- Is sustainability an issue of personal and ethical importance to the community?
- What do people think it means to be an environmentalist – do they consider themselves environmentalists?
- How do people define and understand sustainability?
- Is there a strong link between institutional programs and the values of the individuals?

Methodology:

Qualitative methods such as interviewing and participant observation is best used to provide a textured and in-depth understanding of variety within a community.

Semi-structured interviewing of individuals and groups (size 2 - 11) facilitated discussion. Personal story-telling was encouraged and informants were allowed to determine the trajectory of an interview.

Participant observation at a variety of events with a relevant environmental context supplemented individual and group interviews by cross-analyzing consistency between what informants say and what informants do.

Informant population was strategic rather than random. Students, staff and faculty community members were chosen to represent a diversity of majors, departments, and job posts. Due to the practical nature of soliciting lengthy interviews, many individual student interviewees were recruited through personal contact. Snowball sampling was also utilized (in which informants suggest the names of other potential informants). Efforts were made to recruit students with little knowledge of the researcher, in order to avoid biased interviews.

To date, 44 individuals have been interviewed: ¹

- 2 faculty
- 5 staff members
- 37 students

Future plans include interviewing between 15 and 20 additional informants, particularly those from engineering backgrounds and several strategic staff and faculty representatives mentioned throughout other informant interviews.

Interview Questions:

- **Storytelling questions** were used to solicit personal narratives revealing the individuals relationship to sustainability.
- **Definition-based questions** were used to uncover underlying explanatory structures for complex concepts such as “sustainability” and “environmentalist.”
- **Situational questions** were used to elicit responses to hypothetical possibilities and explore the boundaries of an individuals ethical.

Results:

Due to the magnitude and amorphous nature of interview data collected, the following themes have been split into three categories: environmental, economic, and social. This is merely one way to represent qualitative data that is best represented in a textual analysis.

Environmental

- Extreme difficulty and discomfort when asked to define sustainability. Definitions vague or confusing “acting in a sustainable manner,” or “sustaining what we have.”
- Technology/Materials vs Ideas/Lifestyles rhetoric -vast majority of informants define sustainability in terms of materials (“when I think of sustainability, I think of materials that are biodegradable”) or in terms of technology (“I think of hybrid cars”). Only two informants discussed sustainability in terms of lifestyle changes or a new way of thinking.
- Almost every informant exclusively volunteered “recycling” when asked to story-tell about sustainable decision making or experiences.
- Prevalent definition of “environmentalist” as person who devotes his/her life to learning and advocating for the environment. Informants with this definition did not consider themselves environmentalists, though acknowledged that they could easily learn more and be more sustainable. (Time cited as main barrier.)
- Secondary definition of “environmentalist” as anyone who tries in even small ways to “help” the environment. (“everyone has a little environmentalist in them”). Informants with this definition acknowledged that they could be an “environmentalist.”
- Very few informants were comfortable self-identifying as an “environmentalist.” Business focus group among the only informants willing to consider themselves “environmentalists.”

Economic

- Majority of business students vehemently express frustration at misconceptions about perceptions of business inherent “need for profit.” Anger at lack of public understanding about the details of bringing sustainability products to market.
- Common belief among informants that sustainability is ethically important but should not harm the economy.
- Criticism, particularly among more environmentally-involved informants, that sustainability has become a simplified marketing plot, but this is perhaps a necessary evil.
- Staff informants expressed both happiness that sustainability in the workplace can save budget money, but also frustration that making sustainable decisions can cost more. Informants cited instances when he/she chose to save money or achieve higher quality product by making a less-sustainable choice.

Environmental

- Business student informants expressed great concern over divisiveness of campus sustainability rhetoric and reacted against alienating actions or rhetoric, particularly when rhetoric involving altering ones lifestyle.
- Students cited peers/friend groups or hometowns (primarily being from Oregon or Washington state) as influencing their environmental beliefs.
- Several students emphasized the importance of community in their discussion of learning about and acting more sustainably. Sustainability appears not to be incorporated into general courses, though some informants did cite a few environmentally-focused core classes as formative experiences.
- Group interview dynamics were particularly indicative of the importance of community in shaping environmental beliefs. Group members overwhelmingly agreed with one another, and often reacted much more positively toward sustainability when reinforcing one another’s beliefs.

Social

Economic

Social

Conclusions:

Common Ground in Ethical Reasoning:

Groups traditionally perceived as disinterested or as working at cross purposes to the environmental movement (participant observation identifies business students as the primary perceived “opposition group”) express similar environmental ethics to those who identify with the movement. The superstructures of sustainability (details in messaging and failure to acknowledge complexity) are what alienates campus community members, leading to misconceptions, divisiveness and lost opportunities for partnership.

Limitations in Environmental Language:

Confusion around concepts like “sustainability” and stigmatization around identities like “environmentalist” appear to fuel misunderstanding and inaction. Sustainability as a buzzword has confused or frustrated a good portion of informants. Confusion is in part due to a lack of concrete understanding of sustainability, and could be addressed with further awareness-raising. However, a large number of students appear to lack linguistic categories and vocabulary to easily articulate what identifying with sustainability might entail. They do not want to appear as environmentalists, but have little idea what a non-environmentalist person who cares about sustainability might look like or be called. Campus programming (trash audits, low-carbon diets, etc) appears to further fuel this confusion about sustainable living

Cultural Politics:

Many informants are concerned with the politics of environmentalism and sustainability as a cultural movement. Informant-directed conversation often centered on what “the environmentalist students are doing,” revealing political criticisms that have more to do with how sustainability is done, rather than why it is done. Several students pointed to a culture in which dissent has been labeled politically incorrect, in which “sustainability is presented as a new religion - an unquestioned dogma.” Another informant described this as environmentalism’s “rather brilliant self-defense mechanism,” in which no time to wait means no time to think.

Applied Research: Moving Forward On Campus

Preliminary suggestions include:

- Create the space and opportunity on campus for open dialogue between students of differing beliefs. A student-led debate series in which environmental “dogma” could be intelligently and passionately discussed would be valuable for bridging ideological divides on campus.
- Diversify visible sustainability programs on campus. Recycling is the primary (if not the only) sustainability message heard by the general student body, and leads them to believe reducing and reusing are of little consequence.

¹ Original plans had included a greater number of faculty and staff interviews, but as the study progressed, it became more clear that students were learning about sustainability from their peers, not in class—and that the majority of internal divisions and contested grounds of thought on campus are between students, not between students and staff or faculty.