2022 Sustainable Solutions Challenge

University of Richmond

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The 2022 Challenge

  The University of Richmond has taken many steps to integrate sustainability into our campus. However, there are many more opportunities to make the environment a priority in every aspect of our campus experience. To live truly sustainably, the programs that we implement on our campus must align with the wants and needs of campus stakeholders. In other words, sustainable initiatives must be material to our unique campus needs. ***For this year's challenge, we invite you to propose an initiative of your choice that would make the environment a priority at the University of Richmond.***

Background on the 2022 Challenge[1]

Sustainability at UR

  Before thinking about a project to promote sustainability on campus, it's important to understand how the University defines sustainability. According to the Office for Sustainability, it is defined as "... [C]reating environmental, social, and economic conditions that foster health and well-being for people and the natural world in this generation and generations to come."[2] The University of Richmond has made sustainability a priority since 2010 with its Climate Action Plan, and further defined its goals towards sustainability within the University Sustainability Plan. The website reads:

> *"Through University of Richmond's first Sustainability Plan, we reaffirm our commitment to sustainability. Goal 1 focuses on academics and preparing our scholars to develop solutions to complex social, environmental, and economic problems. Goal 2 works to instill a stewardship mindset and incorporate sustainability practices into everyday life. Goal 3 describes specific operational strategies to assess the impact of our*

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[1] The Stakeholder Interview Appendix contains the summaries of interviews we conducted for this project with the primary stakeholders in departments involved in sustainability initiatives.
[2] "What Is Sustainability? - Office for Sustainability - University of Richmond." (2022) https://sustainability.richmond.edu/office/about-sustainability/index.html.

actions, eliminate harm, and work toward the establishment of regenerative practices that rebuild and restore the systems upon which we depend. Finally, [Goal 4](#) identifies the leaders and resources needed to activate and support sustainability at all levels of the University. Collectively, these initiatives inform our ongoing efforts to foster stewardship and drive innovation to meet the most significant challenges of our time.[3]"

Figure 1: A student educating Organic Krush diners about composting

While these commitments are an important step in creating a sustainable campus, we need to implement projects that make these visions a reality. There are currently several initiatives that work directly towards these goals: most notably is the composting pilot that the University rolled out in the 2020-21 academic year. The initiative needed the support of cross-functional teams to be successful, from the Office for Sustainability, Dining Services, and Custodial Services, to name a few.

Although it is important to recognize that the initiative was built from the foundation of years of support, the pilot was launched directly in response to students calling for the need of compostable materials during the pandemic, when reusable dining materials were converted to single-use in order to reduce contamination.

While the University has made significant progress in sustainability goals thus far, there are still issues surrounding the awareness of these initiatives and what sustainability means

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[3] "About the Sustainability Plan - Office for Sustainability - University of Richmond." (2022) https://sustainability.richmond.edu/goals/plan1/plan-about.html.

within campus. "I think that [people who are unfamiliar with sustainability] think that environmentalism is the barrier, they think it's a subject area, and not a lens, and a solution-oriented way to invite people to come up with ways that we can live better. They think it's about recycling or electricity, but it's about living out of balance, it's about intersectionality," states Rob Andrejewski[4], the Director of Sustainability at UR. For example, Heather Sadowski, Director of Health Promotion, encourages students to consider wellness in the context of sustainability and she is excited to hear ideas for the Wellbeing Center.

There are many organizations, programs, and initiatives that students may want to support on campus, but it is important to propose a solution where students are passionate about the issue. Scott Lincoln[5], Associate Director of Custodial and Environmental Services, believes that student buy-in is most important for this competition, since students will likely have the most face interaction with a suggested proposal.

The steps that UR has taken to become more sustainable are commendable, but it may be useful to look our past campus to understand how other universities act on issues. Andrejewski also recommends these universities to research to help students get a clear picture of how sustainability look on other campuses:

- Harvard University

- Stanford University

- Arizona State University

- Colorado State University

- Cornell University

- University of New Hampshire

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[4] For the full interview see the Stakeholder Interview Appendix.
[5] For the full interview see the Stakeholder Interview Appendix.

- Yukon University

Guidance for the 2022 Challenge

The Importance of Materiality

While previous years of the Sustainable Solutions Challenge centered around certain initiatives for students to provide their ideas[6], this year's challenge allows participants to create a solution to a problem they identify on campus as a student. Because of the general nature of this problem statement, materiality is especially important in creating a viable solution.

Materiality can be defined simply as the importance of a matter to the relevant stakeholders[7]. In corporate sustainability, they are the issues that a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) team identifies as most important for their business and their stakeholders.
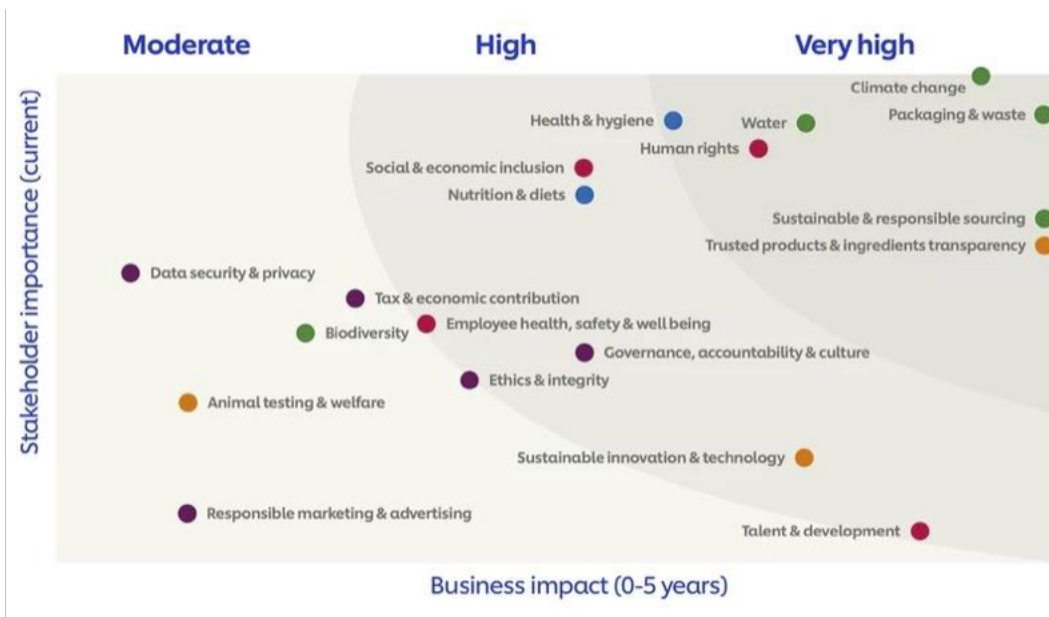
Figure 2 shows the materiality assessment results of Unilever. By identifying their most important issues, Unilever

Figure 2: Unilever Short-term Business Impact Materiality Assessment

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[6] In the previous two challenges, students were asked specifically to implement a solution surrounding a certain topic. The first year, students created alternatives to plastic water bottles on campus, in order to lower waste to landfill on campus. The second year, students were asked to propose solutions for inducing behavior change to increase the rates of composting in an effort to keep the initiative profitable and sustainable.

[7] Datamaran. "Materiality Definition: The Ultimate Guide." (2020) https://www.datamaran.com/materiality-definition/.

is able to focus their efforts on projects that will create the most impact and have the most support from their stakeholders.

Similarly, for a proposal to be successful, participants must create an initiative which has relevance to the University's current sustainability goals, as well as have demonstrated support by stakeholders, such as students. To make initiatives such as composting successful, Scott Lincoln, other partners involved had to gain both student and administrative interest.

Barriers to Implementation

While the University of Richmond has historically been open to receiving ideas for sustainable initiatives, especially with the relevant stakeholder support, there are certain factors around competing university priorities which can prevent a viable solution from moving forward.

First, budgetary restrictions are important to keep in mind when proposing a solution. Each department's budget is unique during each fiscal year, and by keeping the costs low, the relevant departments may be more willing to take on the project.

Another important aspect is university bandwidth to support a project. Even if a project can be viable in other ways, if the department has no extra resources to take on the initiative, it will not be pushed through. A possible solution to this is to keep the solution simple, with limited oversight necessary. Terry Baker[8], Executive Director of Dining Services, suggests that students focus on what issues are most important to stakeholders, and what is most effective with the simplest solution. This makes up her two-pronged approach:

1. Understanding the issues and choosing the most salient one to focus on and,

2. Analyzing the chosen problem and how to implement a relevant solution.

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[8] For the full interview see the Stakeholder Interview Appendix.

Successful Implementation

The proposed solution must be a proposed initiative to benefit the campus environment. This can come in the form of any aspect of sustainability as it relates to our campus community, such as climate change, health and wellbeing, or waste. It can be a solution that is based on the initiative of another university or public/private entity, or it can be a solution that is completely unique to the University and its needs.

A strong initiative proposal will include most or all of the following:

1. <u>Relevance to the current Sustainability Goals at the University of Richmond</u>

2. <u>Materiality to campus stakeholders</u>
   a. Preferably, measured quantitatively (Via survey, interviews, etc) to determine that there is interest in the proposed solution.

3. <u>A plan for implementation</u>
   a. Is *NOT* simply a consulting recommendation. From a student's proposal, the relevant department should have all the information needed to execute the plan into action.

4. <u>Has statistical analysis to back up its potential for success (Economic, Environmental, and Social)</u>
   a. Ex: GHG Accounting, Cost-Benefit Analysis, and/or Other relevant frameworks.