

***Catalyzing a Resilient and Sustainable Future for All***  
2021-2025 Strategic Plan for the Sustainability Institute at Penn State  
(updated September 2021)

**The VISION of the Sustainability Institute**

*The Sustainability Institute will be an indispensable partner and catalyst in our collective university efforts to build resilient, inclusive, and sustainable communities on our campuses and across the world.*

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Since the release of the 2016-2020 Penn State Strategic Plan, the Sustainability Institute has actively engaged in redefining the way Penn State approaches and advances sustainability. The concept of sustainability has broadened beyond environmental and climate issues to incorporate the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which address the interconnectedness of issues related to poverty, hunger, gender equity, social justice, energy, and climate. Additionally, engagement and participation in advancing sustainability has become more equally dispersed across the university's budgetary units. Today, we see solutions for working, teaching, and operating more sustainably originating more often from within colleges, units, and campuses, instead of primarily from the Sustainability Institute. These are all indicators that interest in holistically institutionalizing sustainability at the university is increasing. This progress has been essential for enhancing Penn State's resilience and providing the best possible foundation for continued progress over the next five years.

*Catalyzing a Resilient and Sustainable Future for All: The 2021-2025 Strategic Plan for the Sustainability Institute at Penn State* was developed by the staff of the Sustainability Institute amidst a global pandemic and countless national tragedies. These challenges have been devastating, but have also clarified how informed, strategic sustainable development can make a positive impact on nearly every challenge we face as a society. With this heightened awareness that there is no possibility of returning to the 'way things were,' the Institute's staff collaborated for nearly six months to develop a 2021-2025 strategic plan to lead Penn State and the Institute in a direction that will contribute to a more resilient, just, and inclusive future for everyone.

This strategic plan has three goals: *Facilitate Lifelong Learning, Enable Transformative Action, and Expand Innovative Leadership*. Each goal is supported by a set of objectives, and each objective is supported by a set of action items that define how each goal will be approached and achieved.

## Three Goals:

### 1. FACILITATE LIFELONG LEARNING

Provide and support educational experiences for ALL students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members to become lifelong learners who continually pursue *sustainability literacy*, defined as “the knowledge, skills and mindsets that allow individuals to become deeply committed to building a **sustainable** future and assisting in making informed and effective decisions to this end.” (*UN Sustainable Development*)

### 2. ENABLE TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION

Empower Penn State’s students, faculty, staff, administrators, and our community to become engaged citizens committed to making informed, sustainable choices that transform our communities into a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable society.

### 3. EXPAND INNOVATIVE LEADERSHIP

Elevate Penn State as a transformative and innovative leader in sustainability that builds leadership capacity to address systems-level sustainability challenges in our colleges and units, on our campuses, and in Pennsylvania communities. The Institute will convene and strengthen networks of sustainability champions to accelerate transformative leadership by example for Penn State's students, employees, alumni, and communities.

Countless challenges also present countless possibilities, and Penn State is well-positioned to not only adapt but evolve expertly to provide those we serve with the knowledge and skills needed to envision and realize the great potential for all of us to live as part of a healthy, balanced and thriving society. This plan outlines how the Sustainability Institute will bring these possibilities into reality, advance the University’s Strategic Plan, and enhance everyone’s access to a sustainable future.

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[www.sustainability.psu.edu/2025](http://www.sustainability.psu.edu/2025)  
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## INTRODUCTION

As we reach the end of 2020, the world continues to rapidly and dramatically change. Beyond the immediate global pandemic resulting in economic recession, loss of jobs, and food insecurity, we are contending with systemically ingrained racial and social injustices and the civil unrest and demonstrations trying to unseat them. In addition, climate change is acting as a threat multiplier for a host of problems--disrupting ecosystems, harming human health, and exacerbating economic challenges, particularly among the most disadvantaged people in every country. Against this reality, the pursuit of sustainability is a necessity for humankind's survival and Penn State's flourishing.

## MISSION

The Sustainability Institute at Penn State uses the integrated framework of the 2030 Global Sustainable Development Goals to advance the causes of people, planet, shared prosperity, peace, and partnerships for current and future generations by working collaboratively with the entire Penn State community to ensure the institutionalization of sustainability across our colleges, campuses, communities, and the state of Pennsylvania.

The Institute increases sustainability literacy, expands commitment to sustainable practices, addresses systemic challenges, and builds capacity for leadership toward a sustainable, peaceful, and prosperous future through Penn State's teaching, research, outreach, and operations.

## VISION

*The Sustainability Institute will be an indispensable partner and catalyst in our collective university efforts to build resilient, inclusive, and sustainable communities on our campuses and across the world.*

## VALUES

The Sustainability Institute embraces the Penn State values of Integrity, Respect, Responsibility, Discovery, Excellence, and Community, enhanced with the following **five core beliefs**.

1. Every member of the Penn State community can play a positive role in our shared sustainable future.
2. Who individual people *are* matters as much as what they *do*.
3. We must walk hand in hand with all people—but particularly the marginalized—to confront injustice and to achieve social, economic, and environmental justice.

4. All people must have a chance at a right livelihood and the opportunity to do honest work that dignifies others and our natural world.
5. Respecting planetary boundaries and prioritizing the health and interconnectedness of all life forms is essential for the environmental and ecological well-being on which human health and economic stability depend.

## GOALS & OBJECTIVES

**Three strategic goals** and accompanying objectives detail the framework and approach for implementing this strategic plan. These goals will be achieved through the accomplishment of key action items by one or more of the four working groups at the Institute. These groups are referred to as the *Administration Group*, *Education Group*, *Operations Group*, and *Outreach Group*. The group or groups responsible for accomplishing each objective is listed next to each action item throughout the plan.

### **Goal # 1 – FACILITATE LIFELONG LEARNING**

Provide and support educational experiences for ALL students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members to become lifelong learners who continually pursue *sustainability literacy*, defined as “the knowledge, skills and mindsets that allow individuals to become deeply committed to building a **sustainable** future and assisting in making informed and effective decisions to this end.” (*UN Sustainable Development*)

#### **Goal # 1 Objectives:**

- 1.1: *Develop & Deliver Lifelong Learning:* The Sustainability Institute will develop and deliver high-quality, robust learning and engagement programs and experiences that equip students, employees and the public with the knowledge and skills needed to make sustainable choices in their personal, professional, and civic lives and the transformative leadership capacity to critically and cooperatively advance the Sustainable Development Goals.
  - 1.1.1: Deploy SULI test for a sample of Penn State students to assess Penn State student sustainability literacy. (Education Group)
  - 1.1.2: By 2025, achieve a 15-20% average annual increase in the number of Penn State students who gain exposure to sustainability through the Institute’s signature programs, including but not limited to the Sustainability Experience Center, Sustainability Showcase Speaker Series, and the Intersections Film Series. (Education and Outreach Groups)
  - 1.1.3: By 2025, achieve a 5-10% average annual increase in the number of Penn State students who experience sustainability-focused scholarship through programs affiliated with the Institute, including but not limited to Sustainable Communities Collaborative, Student Farm at Penn State, and City Semester. (Education and Outreach Groups)
  - 1.1.4: By 2025, increase participation in the Institute’s sustainability educational offerings aimed at Penn State employees, including but not limited to the Green Teams and Green Paws programs and the *AIR*

newsletter, and evaluate their effectiveness in fostering sustainability literacy. (Operations Group)

- 1.1.5: By 2025, ensure that all Sustainability Institute programs offer at least one connected opportunity for attendees to get involved in transforming sustainability systems or personal actions that enhance sustainability. (Outreach Group)
- 1.1.6: Provide meaningful work experiences and sustainability education through the Institute's Internship Program, as measured through exit interviews, that contribute to sustainability literacy and leadership skills. (All Groups)
- 1.1.7: Create a master plan for the Sustainability Experience Center by 2025 to support educational programs for learners of all ages, research opportunities, and outreach initiatives that engage the broader community. (All Groups)

1.2: *Facilitate & Operationalize Lifelong Learning*: The Sustainability Institute will collaborate with internal and external partners to assist them in developing and delivering learning opportunities that increase sustainability knowledge, competencies and skills among students, university employees, and community members. The Institute may provide tools, resources, and expertise that enable colleges, campuses, and other units to cultivate sustainability literacy among their constituencies and foster a community of sustainability engagement across Penn State.

- 1.2.1: Work with employees in operational units to identify sustainability projects (Living Labs) in their units and connect students, faculty, and staff with project opportunities. Ensure completion of at least 3 operational sustainability projects each year. (Operations Group)
- 1.2.2: Contribute to continual annual increases in the number of Penn State students who gain exposure to intentionally designed sustainability educational offerings by working with campus partners to increase the number of opportunities available and students participating in them. (Education Group)
- 1.2.3: Contribute to continual annual increases in the number of Penn State students who engage in 'sustainability experiences' where sustainability learning is applied to concrete, real-world problems through participation in intentionally designed sustainability opportunities offered by campus partners. (Education Group)
- 1.2.4: By 2025, increase by 25% the number of outside programs SI supports for internal and external partners related to sustainability education and outreach, including but not limited to Green Gov Council and internal PSU units such as OLLI, Shaver's Creek. (Outreach Group)
- 1.2.5: By 2025, work with 50% of strategic planning units to co-develop employee sustainability trainings tailored to their unit goals or embed sustainability into existing trainings. (Operations Group)

- 1.3: *Perpetuate & Institutionalize Lifelong Learning*: The Institute will work with existing governance and decision-making structures at Penn State to institutionalize policies, procedures, and practices that support sustainability literacy as an outcome of Penn State's educational mission.
- 1.3.1: Work with Undergraduate Education and Faculty Senate toward creation of a curricular requirement and designation for courses that legitimately meet the criteria of providing a curricular sustainability experience. Work with these units to conduct a forensic inquiry to determine and guarantee capacity. (Education Group)
  - 1.3.2: By 2025, work with campus and college partners to increase the number of intentional experiences developing 'sustainability expertise' for Penn State students,' defined as *participation in an intentionally designed sequence that results in the application of their understanding to concrete, real-world problems, in an increasingly competent way*. (Education Group)
  - 1.3.3: Work with HHD, RPTM, Shaver's Creek and the colleges to double the number of students who complete the Sustainability Leadership Minor from the amount in Fall 2019-Spring 2020. (Education Group)
  - 1.3.4: Work with University partners to ensure an introductory sustainability training is mandatory for all employees. (Operations Group)

## **Goal #2 – ENABLE TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION**

Empower Penn State's students, faculty, staff, administrators, and our community to become engaged citizens committed to making informed, sustainable choices that transform our communities into a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable society.

### **Goal #2 Objectives:**

- 2.1: *Encourage & Support Transformative Action*: The Sustainability Institute will encourage and support all Penn State strategic planning units and a diversity of Pennsylvania community partners as they identify and remove barriers to and implement solutions for ensuring a sustainable future for all.
- 2.1.1: By 2025, nurture a sustainable, inclusive, and interconnected network of staff, faculty, administrators, and students who are actively working to increase the sustainability of Penn State's operations by providing resources, recognition, and opportunities for collaboration and training. (Operations Group)
  - 2.1.2: By 2025, work with Undergraduate Education, Outreach Division, and Global Partners to partner with Commonwealth Campuses to establish strategic partnerships with at least five or more Pennsylvania communities to help them remove barriers to sustainability, encourage pro-sustainability behaviors, and advance community sustainability goals. (Outreach Group)

- 2.2: *Institutionalize & Perpetuate Transformative Action:* The Institute will work with existing governance and decision-making structures at the university toward institutionalizing sustainable practices, policies, procedures, and systems across Penn State's operations in order to make sustainability the default choice for our institution, e.g., by working with University Risk Mgmt., Faculty Senate, Investments, the Sustainable Operations Council, Procurement, etc.
- 2.2.1: By 2025, work with HR and Sustainability Councils to provide training and recruitment materials towards a goal of 100% of strategic planning units including sustainability in their job recruitment and onboarding materials. (Operations Group)
  - 2.2.2: Partner with decision-making bodies at the University, including but not limited to Faculty Senate, University Staff Advisory Council, University Risk Council, Investment Office, to ensure sustainability progress is continuously prioritized, assessed, and benchmarked against other universities. (All Groups)

### **Goal #3: EXPAND SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP**

Bolster Penn State leaders at all levels as they address sustainability challenges in our colleges and units, on our campuses, and in our communities. The Institute strengthen networks of sustainability champions to accelerate transformative leadership by example for Penn State's students, employees, alumni, and communities.

#### **Goal #3 Objectives:**

- 3.1: *Lead by Example:* The Institute will help elevate Penn State's status as a sustainability leader by engaging our partners to assess sustainability performance across the University and demonstrating sustainable ways to work and live in all that we do.
- 3.1.1: Through 2021, participate in external sustainability assessments, such as AASHE and Times Higher Education, and use feedback to promote continuous improvement in strategic efforts to advance sustainability. (Operations Group)
  - 3.1.2: By 2022, coordinate a university-wide group to select the sustainability rating systems to participate in, and to collect and publish the required data and information. (Operations Group)
  - 3.1.3: Annually convene sustainability leaders through various councils and groups, as well as events such as the Sustainability Spotlight and Commonwealth Campus Forums, in order to build communities of practice and foster connections across units. (Administration Group)
- 3.2: *Participate in Leadership Networks:* The Institute will connect and engage with internal and external networks to openly share ideas and collaborate in order to advance and promote sustainability across leading universities and organizations.
- 3.2.1: Participate in external networks to share Penn State's resources and help apply innovations on behalf of Pennsylvania communities including,

but not limited to PA Municipal League, PA Association of Municipal Managers, Sustainable Pennsylvania, and PA Green Gov Council. (All Groups)

- 3.2.2: By 2025, help facilitate at least one alumni and/or community sustainability programming effort with each of the 13 college sustainability councils annually. (Outreach Group)

3.3: *Institutionalize sustainability leadership at PSU:* The Institute will engage with college, campus, and unit leaders to encourage and guide units to develop and implement solutions and strategies for advancing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that align with their specific mission and goals and have the greatest potential for positive impact and success.

- 3.3.1: Increase the number of College and Unit Sustainability Councils to 80% of colleges and units, Commonwealth Campus Champions to 80% of campuses, and SI Affiliates to 250 by 2025. Make explicit a goal of diversifying recruitment of affiliates across all affiliate groups. (Administration Group)

3.4: *Elevate Penn State's and the Sustainability Institute's visibility as a leader in sustainability:* The Institute will increase awareness of sustainability efforts and successes across the university and 'sustainable' will become a well-recognized value and defining aspect of the culture at Penn State.

- 3.4.1: Host all Institute-led events in a way that demonstrates best sustainability practices, including but not limited to partnering with sustainability-focused vendors, producing minimal waste, and reducing the use of finite natural resources. (Administration Group)
- 3.4.2: Achieve continual annual increase in the number of website visitors, e-news subscribers, annual event attendees, and social media followers, ensuring that those who want to learn about, teach on, or engage in sustainability-related topics and efforts are able to locate the right information at the right time and experience 'ease of use' when utilizing these resources. (Administration Group)
- 3.4.3: Share sustainability innovations and best practices from across Penn State campuses with internal and external audiences (AASHE, BTAF, PERC, NCSE, etc.) via conferences presentations, news releases and the Institute's annual sustainability report. (All Groups)

#### **A LIVING PLAN FOR A CHANGING WORLD:**

The Sustainability Institute is committed to responding to ever-changing national landscapes by continuously self-assessing and improving internal performance and processes to ensure successful accomplishment of the Institute's mission and goals. Therefore, this plan is a living, breathing document that will be adjusted as needed in order to improve our ability to continually improve and adapt over the next five years. The SI staff will review and revise this plan each year, asking ourselves the following questions:

- Are we building our capacity as sustainability professionals through continual professional development and engagement in national and international sustainability networks?
- Are we harnessing the power of data to diagnose and focus our efforts and continually improve?
- Are we ensuring the long-term economic viability of our work by continuing to merit the university's investment and to secure external funding?
- Are we crafting compelling and consistent communication with our constituents?
- Are we fostering new synergies among internal and external programs?
- Are we leveraging the power of Penn State campuses to advance sustainability throughout Pennsylvania to advance sustainability globally?

Resource Assumptions: This ambitious strategic plan was made in the environment of an evolving university-wide budget crisis and financial uncertainties brought on by the COVID recovery process. Currently the SI has 14 staff members with an anticipated full strength of 15, and a budget commensurate with the Institute's mission and vision. In 2020-21, unit budgets were reduced by 3% and additional budget reductions are expected in 2021-22. The expansion of activities over five years are based on budgetary continuity and marginal expansion. Activities may be scaled back in case of budgetary reductions and staffing limitations.

The Sustainability Institute has been closely involved in Penn State's Strategic Planning process, working to ensure sustainability is integrated where applicable in all units' strategic plans. The SI's own Strategic Plan has been drafted with an intention to continue supporting the institutionalization of sustainability across the university system. It is also a work in progress, and we welcome the review and comments of those who are also involved in this work.

Please provide any feedback on this living document to Michele Halsell ([mwh16@psu.edu](mailto:mwh16@psu.edu)).

We appreciate your efforts in this shared mission.