

Ohio Wesleyan University Sustainability Case Study

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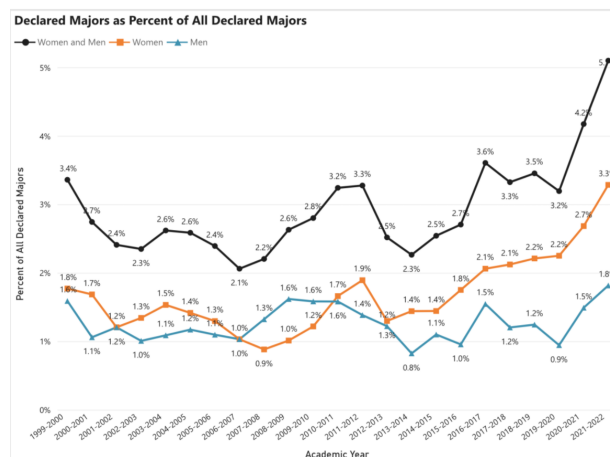
Introduction

The goal of this case study is to examine Ohio Wesleyan University’s past, present and possible future sustainability mission (academically and operationally). Special attention will be given to whether increased efforts could bolster the school’s future financial stability and overall prosperity. I will use the example of other small liberal arts schools as well as an envisioned future sustainability plan as the comparative lenses for this study.

Background

Ohio Wesleyan University is a small private liberal arts school in central Ohio with ~1,350 students and ~100 full time faculty members. It was founded in 1842 as a United Methodist School, an affiliation which is now only symbolic. Their mission is to impart knowledge, enhance important capabilities of students and to place education in the context of values. The school is known for its “Sagan National Colloquium” annual lecture series, the large international student population (~28%) and the “OWU Connection”, an international travel learning series which 91% of students participate in¹.

While OWU does not have a sustainability commitment which their administration is actively pursuing, there is some history here academically. The school was the first Ohio college to offer an Environmental Studies program in the 1970s. Since then, the program has evolved (including some meaningful overlaps with the Geography program over the years) and has graduated hundreds of majors off to rewarding careers in fields like forestry, park service, mapping and public policy². Today, the program is known as the Department of Environment and Sustainability and it has shown a marked growth in interest among students (especially considering the modest breadth of its offerings).



¹ *The Owu Connection*. Ohio Wesleyan University. (n.d.). Retrieved December 20, 2021, from <https://www.owu.edu/academics/the-owu-connection/>

² Krygier, J. (n.d.). *General Correspondence RE OWU sustainability*.

Fig. 1 Graph of Declared Majors as a Percent of all Declared Majors³

The graph above shows the steady growth in interest of students who have declared majors in Environmental Studies, Environmental Science or Geography (all which sit under the heading of the Department of Environment and Sustainability). While this growth from 2.3% to 5% over the last 7 years may seem small, it is more impressive when you consider that these majors are the 8th most popular offerings at a school with over 70 possible majors, including in the 23 majors which attract more than 1% of the student population (see Fig. 2 below).

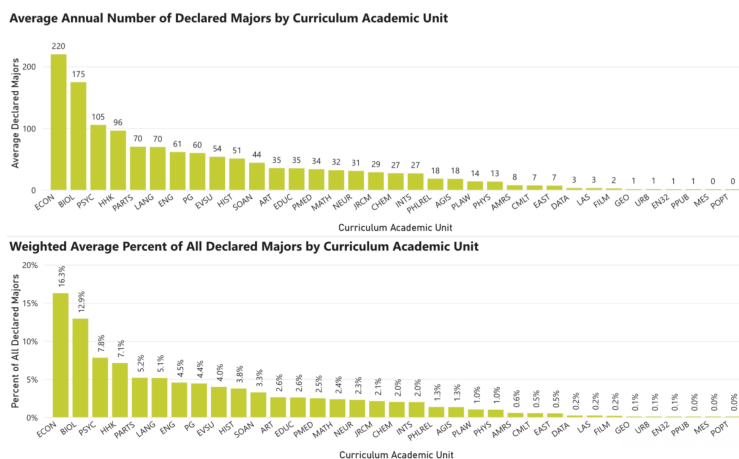


Fig. 2 Graph depicting percentage of students across popular majors⁴

Again, I want to emphasize how impressive this is given OWU’s limited environment and sustainability offerings, the department’s petite budget and the widespread availability of more robust sustainability programs at similar schools.

Over the last 12 years, the Ohio Wesleyan administration has flirted with different sustainability programming, but has lacked the personnel, commitment or funding to create any long-lasting measures. In 2009, a campus environmental task force was created which recommended the appointment of a sustainability coordinator which the school was able to afford for two years thanks to a short-term American Reinvestment and Recovery grant⁵. The coordinator, Sean Kinghorn, was able to enact several changes which helped the school implement some cost-saving efficiency programs. When the grant ended in 2013, neither the grant nor his position were renewed for the future. During this period, the administration also opened their first LEED silver certified building. “The Meek Aquatics Center” is temperature regulated in part by an impressive geothermal energy system.

³ Krygier, J. (n.d.). General Correspondence RE OWU sustainability.

⁴ Krygier, J. (n.d.). General Correspondence RE OWU sustainability.

⁵ Krygier, John and Emily Howald. "'Scrappy' Sustainability at Ohio Wesleyan University." In Sustainable Cities and Communities Design Handbook: Green Engineering, Architecture, and Technology 2nd edition, edited by Woodrow Clark, 561-572. Cambridge: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2018.

After the departure of OWU's sustainability coordinator in 2013, the era of "grassroots sustainability" began. This was a time filled with small-scale initiatives which required little to no resources from the administration and which were often short-lived (as student-led efforts often can be). Despite its limitations, this period yielded several lasting improvements such as water bottle fill stations, low/no meat options and returnable food containers from dining services, bike share programs and community gardens. In 2017, a renewed enthusiasm for sustainability in the faculty and student body resulted in the creation of a new campus sustainability plan. While it included a few ambitious items like solar commitments and sustainability curricular offerings, the plan was non-binding, unfunded and called for no true involvement from the administration. At the time of this writing, it appears this plan has spurred no real changes. It is important to note that in the four years since the plan's release, the world has also been rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused many businesses to hit pause on sustainability efforts and go into "self-preservation" mode.

Additionally, like many small liberal arts schools, OWU has been struggling over the past few years from a decline in enrollment. This has been caused in part by a decline in US college-aged students, lessened popularity in the small liberal arts model, the coronavirus, lessened support from state governments, etc. This pressure has already caused the closure or merger of more than 50 colleges and universities in the US since 2015 and more are expected this year⁶. In response to these concerns, Ohio Wesleyan has done much in the last two years to become more lean and efficient, including the merging of academic departments and reduction of its faculty size by about 25%⁷.

OWU is now much better situated to survive this uncertain period for small liberal arts institutions than it was prior to these changes. Beyond these measures, OWU is evolving its strategies. Internally, OWU's guiding strategy is now to a) develop a distinctive and transformational student experience, b) build a diverse and inclusive campus community and c) to achieve financial sustainability through innovation and entrepreneurship. In terms of attracting new students, I would summarize OWU's strategy as: emphasizing "the OWU Connection", prioritizing diversity and highlighting career mentoring and internship opportunities.

But what of Sustainability? Despite past failures to launch, now may be the perfect time to reapproach this area of opportunity as the strategies above could use a tangible polestar for the community to look to. According to Unesco, over 90% of college students say their place of study should actively incorporate and promote sustainable development⁸. According to the

⁶ NBCUniversal News Group. (2020, August 7). A crisis is looming for U.S. colleges - and not just because of the pandemic. NBCNews.com. Retrieved December 20, 2021, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/education/crisis-looming-u-s-colleges-not-just-because-pandemic-n1235338>

⁷ Krygier, J. (n.d.). General Correspondence RE OWU sustainability.

⁸ Most students want sustainable development as part of all university courses, survey reveals. UNESCO. (2018, October 12). Retrieved December 20, 2021, from <https://en.unesco.org/news/most-students-want-sustainable-development-part-all-university-courses-survey-reveals>

Princeton Review, over 75% of prospective students actively look at the sustainability offerings of schools they are considering attending⁹. I hope this case study begins to make the case for why robust administrative and academic commitments to sustainability makes sense for the university in terms of future financial stability and the regrowth of prospective student interest.

Strategy and Metrics

While Ohio Wesleyan is not currently taking actions around a sustainability strategy, the OWU community did put forth a sustainability plan in 2017. That plan, which OWU still has published on its website, outlines four major categories of focus: (1) committing to sustainability on campus and in the community, (2) reducing OWU's impact on global climate change, (3) increasing the community's health and wellbeing and (4) living better on campus and on earth. Within each category, there are specific strategic goals outlined and for the purpose of this study, I've selected one strategic goal from each category to examine.

Within the first category is the goal to build a strategy for funding a full-time sustainability coordinator by 2020. The vision was that this staff member would be both traditional (creating energy efficiency projects, reducing organization emissions, etc.) and unique (serving as a mentor for student projects, driving student participation, etc.). No progress has been made towards this goal as there has been no true administrative moves to fund it. However, Denison University, another small central Ohio liberal arts school, serves as an exemplary model of what a vision like this looks like when fulfilled. Denison has had a full-time sustainability coordinator, Jeremy King, on staff since 2009¹⁰. During that time, Jeremy has saved the university millions of dollars in energy efficiency upgrades, has mentored dozens of sustainability-minded students, guest lectured in classrooms, forged valuable connections with donors and prospective students and entered Denison into sustainability business and collegiate organizations (among several other accomplishments)¹¹.

Within the second category is a goal to commit to high ROI energy efficiency projects on campus by 2018. While this hasn't come to fruition at OWU, Denison has shown an exceptionally fast turnaround with several of its early efficiency projects such as a 2012 effort to replace and delamp the entire campus lighting system. This typically involved replacing 4 bulb T12 fixtures with 2 bulb T8 or T5 fixtures. The project cost about \$600,000 and within a few years, they had made back their investment plus a payback of \$150,000¹². Kenyon University, another peer liberal arts school in Ohio, had a similarly successful quick ROI efficiency project when they replaced the heat recovery wheel at their athletic center in 2016. This project cost about \$40,000, paid itself off within three years and continues to drive energy efficiency savings to this day as it is ~46% more efficient than the previous equipment¹³.

⁹ PRINCETON REVIEW (See second ref to this coming later)

¹⁰ King, J. (n.d.). General Correspondence RE Denison sustainability.

¹¹ King, J. (n.d.). General Correspondence RE Denison sustainability.

¹² King, J. (n.d.). General Correspondence RE Denison sustainability.

¹³ Get in touch. Getting to Zero - Kenyon Alumni Magazine. (n.d.). Retrieved December 20, 2021, from <https://bulletin.kenyon.edu/feature/getting-to-zero/>

Within the third category of OWU's 2017 sustainability plan is the goal to create a campus composting plan by 2018. While the school had a short-lived composting program with Price farms organics around 2016, it faltered as it was often contaminated and the company went out of business. Since then, no progress has been made on this goal thus far, other than recent conversations between a local composting company out of Columbus, OH and Prof. John Krygier (one of OWU's chief sustainability advocates). Denison has a mixed history with composting. From 2005-2013, they operated their own pre-consumer composting operation and moved to include post-consumer materials in 2013. Running this operation themselves proved to be costly in time and labor, so they hired a third-party vendor in 2017 who charges them roughly \$25,000/yr for the composting of produce, meat bones, dairy and compostable to-go ware. Kenyon University has some unique success here as their school has its own working farm, complete with a class 2 composting facility. Every day, food waste is picked up from campus and brought to this facility for composting. It is eventually used on their farm fields and Kenyon hasn't sent food waste to landfills for over twelve years (even a conservative estimate would put these savings over \$100,000).

Within the fourth category is the goal to implement a reusable food container program on campus. This is one area in which the OWU community has already taken some impressive steps. In 2015, an OWU student named Allie France worked with campus food services to evaluate the feasibility of a reusable food container program on campus¹⁴. The initial hurdles included the need to purchase a new industrial dishwasher, the reusable containers themselves and then encouraging the adoption amongst the student body. The program had some success but ultimately struggled as the deposit and return system took a lot of extra time compared with the disposable food container system. Today, there aren't many students who utilize the service because of this inconvenience¹⁵. However, I believe that some updates to the withdrawal and return system could greatly increase the adoption of the reusable containers. Additionally, if OWU were to implement a composting program like what Denison or Kenyon has, dining services could more comfortably switch to using compostable to-go containers.

Importance of Sustainability

In some ways, sustainability has always been important to Ohio Wesleyan. The school has the oldest environmental studies program in the state, the student body has an admirable record of grassroots projects and sustainability-related curricular and extracurricular offerings continue to grow. However, the school has yet to invest in meaningful or lasting sustainability measures (on an administrative or academic level). We can reasonably assume this is due to OWU's small size and budget, an already broad set of concerns and the sense of risk and cost that a sustainability program invokes. Additionally, as OWU has worked to stand out from the pack, it has put many of its eggs in the "OWU connection" basket (the travel learning series referred to earlier). While it is an impressive program which must certainly attract new students,

¹⁴ Krygier, John and Emily Howald. "'Scrappy' Sustainability at Ohio Wesleyan University." In Sustainable Cities and Communities Design Handbook: Green Engineering, Architecture, and Technology 2nd edition, edited by Woodrow Clark, 561-572. Cambridge: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2018.

¹⁵ Correspondence with Graham Steed, OWU Student Sustainability Coordinator

the fixation here may have hindered the school's ability to diversify its tools of attraction. We can also reasonably assume that OWU hasn't taken these steps because the administration might not see clearly enough the direct benefits and returns on investments which a well executed sustainability program will yield.

First, I believe sustainability needs to be prioritized because of what it can do to attract new students. Data tells us this is important to college applicants! According to the 2021 Princeton Review College Hopes and Worries Report, 75% of students say a college's environmental commitment would affect their decision¹⁶. This is a 12% increase from the 66% of students who responded that way one year prior. Clearly, sustainability is on the mind of college-aged students and given OWU's small sustainability program and no operational initiatives to speak of, this is a huge group of students who may not be considering OWU.

To give some context, another area the Princeton report featured as one of great importance to students was college career services and whether their college choice would lead to a good career. Unlike sustainability, This is something OWU is paying close attention to: OWU has a marked focus on career mentorship, internships, an entrepreneurship center and a redesigned home for the career services team in the Slocum Hall renovation.

Real-world evidence of the Princeton Review's claim can be found just up the road at Denison. Their sustainability coordinator gets 2-3 calls per month from prospective students and parents to ask about the school's sustainability initiatives¹⁷. That is hard proof that prospective students are thinking about sustainability! While that number may feel small, bear in mind that's just the people who picked up the phone - think about how many didn't but are still actively reviewing Denison's sustainability initiatives.

Second, I feel OWU should prioritize sustainability because of its potential to increase donor activity. Like prospective student interest, consistent donations and donor interest are always top of mind for a school. Denison has a particular group of donors who are fixated on this issue, giving directly to sustainability programs and even advocating for the inclusion of sustainability in Denison's strategic plan. Kenyon University has several sustainability and environmental programs which have drawn donor attention, like their school farm, campus environmental center and the recently created and donor-seeded green revolving fund¹⁸. I think if current active OWU donors understood how much academic and administrative sustainability programs could mean for the school, they would consider steering new donations to this kind of programming.

To further test this idea, I conducted a survey of OWU Alumni. Participants ranged from graduating classes as far back as 1969 to as recent as 2017, with most respondents graduating in 2011 and 2012. Of this group, 46.67% said they had never donated to Ohio Wesleyan. Of that

¹⁶ 2021 College Hopes & Worries Survey results are here! 2021 College Hopes & Worries Survey | The Princeton Review. (n.d.). Retrieved December 20, 2021, from <https://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings/college-hopes-worries>

¹⁷ King, J. (n.d.). General Correspondence RE Denison sustainability.

¹⁸ Heithaus, D. (n.d.). General Correspondence RE Kenyonsustainability.

subset group, 64.28% of those respondents said they would consider making their first donation if they knew Ohio Wesleyan was launching an academic and operational sustainability strategy¹⁹. The point here is that committing to a sustainability strategy could be a way to attract new donor activity, which could even pay for it.

Third, OWU should prioritize sustainability because the climate crisis is here, it's getting worse and it's going to dominate the lives of current and future generations. I want this document to focus on OWU's lack of sustainability programming and examine what said programming could do for the school's future. However, it is also important to offer some context for this case study. The climate crisis is causing a rise in global temperatures and sea levels, the melting of polar ice caps and the sixth global mass extinction. It will soon lead to further resource wars, widespread climate refugee migration, millions of deaths from famine, disease and excess heat (just to name a few of the horrors to come). We are a few short years away from the point of no return and the best of our college-aged students know this and want an education in it. Aren't those the kind of changemakers OWU would hope to educate. Doesn't OWU want to be in the business of shaping tomorrow's leaders? Every second that goes by without staking a claim here is a second wasted. Further, as more college applicants question the liberal arts approach, what better way to demonstrate its value than to champion sustainability: the ultimate interdisciplinary field. Any sustainability professional should have a broad academic background which could include studies of environmental science, business, politics, economics, history, philosophy - offerings which OWU already provides, many with direct roots in environmental studies. That is the merit of the liberal arts - the chance to understand things holistically. OWU should be in the business of educating students in this field and should be taking its own operational steps to become more sustainable as well.

Resources

As OWU does not have a current administrative sustainability strategy, there is no full time personnel or budget to speak of. Academically, OWU's Department of Environment and Sustainability has a modest budget and a handful of full time professors. There is also a larger circle of professors whose work is connected to this department and it's majors (think environmental ethics, natural resource economics, human ecology, etc.²⁰).

After reviewing the most recent publicly-available OWU financial report (2019 and 2020²¹), it is clear that there are no unrestricted funds available for new programs. That being said, as with any budget, this doesn't mean that new monies can't be raised or that funds can't be moved around, especially if a strong case can be made for ROI and the attraction of new students and donors. If it comes to this, OWU may need to take a hard look at things like new five-figure spends on athletic programs, for example. How tangible are the benefits of a new turf field

¹⁹ <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/SLFGRS8>

²⁰ Owu Course Catalog and Handbooks. Program: Environmental Studies Major - Ohio Wesleyan University - Acalog ACMS™. (n.d.). Retrieved December 20, 2021, from https://catalog.owu.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=28&moid=5270

²¹ Ohio Wesleyan University and subsidiaries consolidated ... (n.d.). Retrieved December 20, 2021, from <https://www.owu.edu/files/resources/owu-fs2020-short-final.pdf>

versus something sustainable? One example might be the direct ROI on an energy efficiency upgrade which will pay the university in savings for years to come. Another example would be the creation of a new interdisciplinary course on sustainability and inner city climate justice which could entice new prospective students. It is important to note that this is a fictional example. I recognize some spends on athletic infrastructure can do great things for a school, but it's possible these go unscrutinized and therefore I feel this is an area and comparison worth examining further.

Most schools of OWU's size have sustainability programs which run on impressively tight budgets. Outside of the Sustainability Coordinator's salary, for example, Denison has its revolving fund for efficiency projects (which at this point pays for itself) and between \$10-\$20,000/yr for things like part-time student sustainability workers, professional development, campus sustainability programming, professional memberships, etc. Looking at the most recent AASHE (The Associate for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education) salary report, we can estimate a salary for a coordinator at about \$60,000/yr²². That salary plus a \$15,000/yr operating budget brings us to a total of \$75,000. A good hire in that role with a revolving fund to work with could have years of low-hanging (and profitable) energy efficiency wins ahead of them. According to Denison's Coordinator, their school saw hundreds of thousands of dollars annually in efficiency savings for at least the first ten years of their sustainability work.

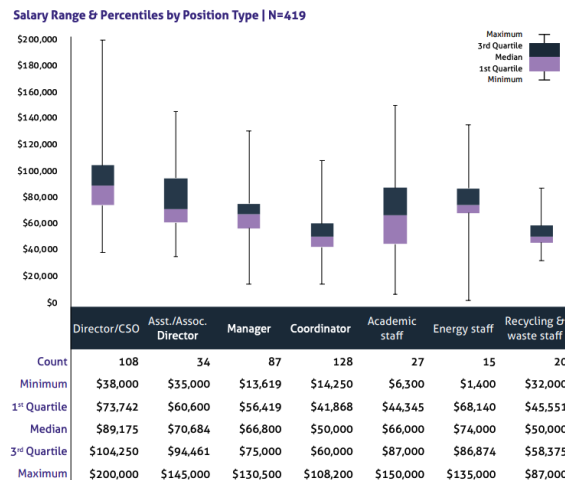


Fig. 3 Chart depicting salary range and percentiles by position type, AASHE

This is all to say that there is ample evidence that creation of a sustainability program and the hiring of a full time coordinator will pay for itself and then some.

The Future of Sustainability at OWU

The future of sustainability at OWU comes down to whether or not the administration is willing to do it. As with any other kind of business, a college which does not pay attention to sustainability risks backlash, decline in revenue - even failure. Conversely, a school which leans

²² Salaries & Status of sustainability professionals ... - aashe. (n.d.). Retrieved December 20, 2021, from <https://www.aashe.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020-staffing-survey-report-1.pdf>

into sustainability could attract new donors, new students and a new sense of stability and purpose. If OWU is ready, there are certain steps ahead which are clear and objectively necessary and there are others in which the various stakeholders of the school should have a say. Here is a preview of what I believe those steps should look like.

Step 1 - Division of process and creation of steering committee: It's important that from day one, this mission is separated into two pieces: academic and administrative. Sustainability in academics means expanding OWU's educational offerings to include more sustainability content. Sustainability in the administration means assessing OWU for efficiency, emissions and waste reductions - things like that. Sitting above both these pillars should be some sort of guiding vision statement from which all objectives can flow. A small steering committee of community members and stakeholders should be formed to guide this process fairly.

Step 2 - Materiality Assessment and Peer Benchmarking: In a materiality assessment, we would conduct a broad survey of students, faculty, staff, administration and board members, alumni, donors, prospective students - any parties who are part of the OWU community in some way big or small. This survey would be a gauge of what under the "sustainability umbrella" is actually important to OWU stakeholders. Usually, this process confirms what a steering committee already envisions, but occasionally it can point out a concern which should be given higher (or lower) priority. Below is an example of the product of such an assessment in matrix form.

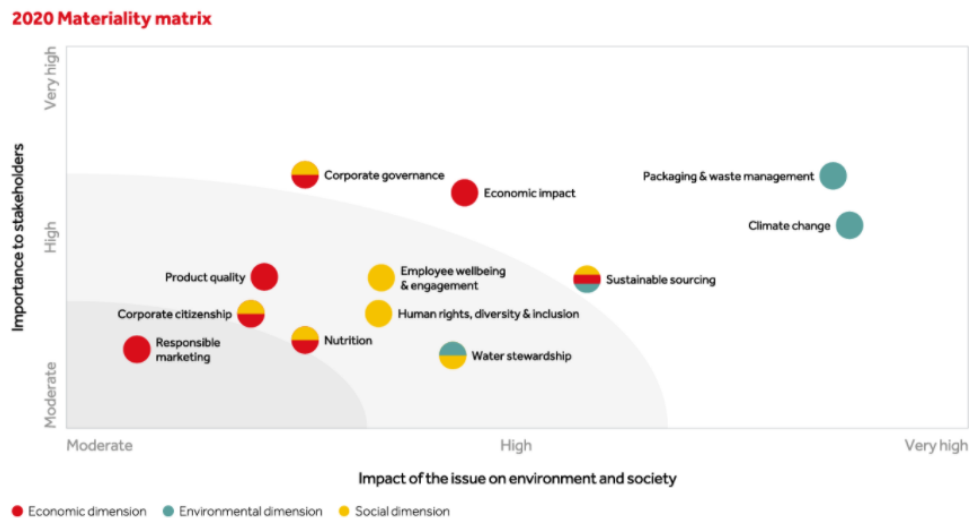


Fig. 4 a materiality matrix from Coca Cola company

This phase is all about enabling the committee to build a plan which is actually representative of what the community wants. The committee should also conduct some basic peer benchmarking research to determine what other peer schools are incorporating in their sustainability strategies. This should be easy as most schools publish their plans and have coordinators who are all too excited to "share notes".

Step Three - Create an updated sustainability plan: At this stage, with materiality and peer benchmarking complete, the steering committee should be able to create a new

sustainability plan for Ohio Wesleyan. Though this plan will come from the community, I have provided an example below of early steps which it could possibly include:

	Administrative	Adademic
1	Hire a Full Time Sustainability Coordinator	Create an ambitious timeline for the repackaging of current sustainability offerings and release of new sustainability curriculum
2	Create a timeline for obtaining an AASHE rating (including an OWU GHG emissions audit)	Build new (and identify existing) sustainability connections to entrepreneurship center, OWU connection program and career center
3	Create a revolving door fund and ID some high-ROI energy and waste projects to begin with	Find ways to engage students and faculty with some of the longer term goals on the administrative side (a GHG emissions audit or green energy strategic planning for example)
4	Roll out with a bang: Creation of sustainability alumni board, donor fund and a sustainability communications strategy	Create new direct connections from academic sustainability efforts to OWUs strategic pillars of transformational experience, building a diverse and inclusive community and innovation and entrepreneurship

Fig. 5 Examples of four goals from each plan “pillar”

This document should be as specific and detailed as possible, including financial projections, budget and a timeline for execution with checkpoints along the way. That component is crucial as it is often the difference between programs which succeed and those which falter.

Step Four - Present business case and sustainability plan to administration and board:

Once the steering committee has completed a reasonable yet ambitious sustainability plan, it should build an accompanying data-filled business case proving the financial viability of this action. These two should be submitted together to the administration and board of directors for review.

Step Five - Begin to execute on plan with the hiring of a full time sustainability coordinator: Assuming that the administration and board recognize the incredible opportunity this plan presents, they will approve it. Shortly after, a post should be released for the hiring of a full time sustainability coordinator as that person can take responsibility for the rollout and implementation of the rest of the plan. It may also be prudent at this time to consider what a more permanent community sustainability body might look like to support and steer this work at OWU.

Conclusion

This case study is just a short glimpse at five discrete segments of a much more dimensional picture of Ohio Wesleyan’s sustainability story. However, I hope it serves as a strong evaluation of what is and what could be. While some might see OWU’s sustainability future scattered with obstacles and challenges, all I see are opportunities. A robust sustainability plan could be OWU’s ticket to greater financial efficiency and profitability. It could help to attract new students and engage with new donors. Committing to sustainability could open new curricular doors to better reflect both prospective student interest as well as future workforce needs. A robust effort here could help to restate the relevance of the liberal arts: the chance to put humanity’s greatest threat (and opportunity) in the crosshairs of intersectional academic study.