

# Challenges Faced by Student Leaders in Sustainability: Creation, Adaptation, and Resistance

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Student leaders on California higher education campuses face a variety of challenges when working towards sustainability goals, including bureaucracy, lack of awareness of resources, student attrition, time constraints, and even opposing forces. Students must at times collaborate with campus administration, create methods of progress outside of the purview of campus administration, and even resist the actions of campus administration that do not align with sustainability goals.

## Introduction

The Office of Sustainability (OOS) at University of California, Riverside (UCR) has been understaffed and insufficiently supported for many years. Student leaders at UCR were nevertheless previously able to leverage the resources at OOS to implement change and work towards common sustainability goals shared across campus. Working with administration allowed students to succeed in multiple efforts such as increasing public transportation usage, increasing usage of the community garden (R'Garden), and creating a partnership between the Graduate Student Association and OOS, work acknowledged with a Best Practice Award at CHESC 2016.



## Project Goals

At the onset of the 2016-2017 academic year, the UCR Carbon Neutrality Initiative Fellows had identified several goals for the year, some of which included:

- Increase student engagement by amplifying the presence of OOS at student events
- Strengthen the newly formed relationship between OOS and the Graduate Student Association (GSA), including passing a Sustainability Fund referendum
- Extend the pilot-scale Green Labs program into a full campaign within Bourns College of Engineering and the College of Natural & Agricultural Sciences
- Update UCR Climate Action Plan, Water Action Plan, and Waste Action Plan

Some goals would require support from OOS, and some would require support from campus administration, while other goals of students were outside the scope of campus administration.

## Challenges

In fall 2016, UCR Vice Chancellor of Planning and Budget (VCPB) terminated the Director of Sustainability position within OOS, as well as non-renewed the contracts of the Green Labs Coordinator and the R'Garden Director.

CNI Fellows who relied on OOS for guidance and support during their fellowship term were immediately abandoned at the campus level. Ongoing projects and programs through OOS were suspended indefinitely or terminated altogether. UCR lost a seat at the UC Global Climate Leadership Council, with no intention of it being refilled.

## Responses

CNI Fellows and other students realized that campus administration could no longer be relied on. Previously, some goals of students had been outside the scope of campus administration, such as eliminating waste from student organization events, and students had managed to muster the agency to accomplish those goals.

Unfortunately, the decisions made by VCPB were in direct opposition to the goals agreed upon by campus stakeholders, and student leaders were challenged to adapt to changing circumstances.

It was acknowledged that students must:

Continue to work **with** administration



Work **around** campus administration



**Resist** campus administration when necessary



## Outcomes

As an example of working around administration, CNI Fellows created a student organization, the Graduate Sustainability Network, to bring together the passion and skills of students across campus, some of whom had never before engaged with the Carbon Neutrality Initiative. This unified body was capable of advancing sustainability goals that the disparate CNI Fellows would never have been able to accomplish on their own, such as organizing over 20 events for Earth Week 2017.



Students joined forces with faculty allies to resist many of the moves made by VCPB. As a result, the Green Labs Coordinator position was reinstated, the R'Garden was adopted by a different administrative unit on campus, and faculty have assumed greater oversight on sustainability efforts moving forward, including the restructuring of sustainability positions on campus.

Both CNI and Global Food Initiative Fellows have achieved some success working with administration; a Chancellor's Sustainability Committee will be revived, and new partnerships between students and Facilities and Dining Services are growing.

It is our hope that CNI Fellows will have the necessary UCR support next year, as the program has been picked up by the School of Public Policy, and that UCR can return to making progress towards our carbon neutrality goal.

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