From College to Sustainability Career in Four Steps

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Walk out of our MBA classroom in mid-town Manhattan, and you can see big signs that sustainability is sexy—literally, big signs—Vornado: NYC’s Most Sustainable Landlord, and Sprint: Environmental Stewardship / Ethical Sourcing.

Sustainability has clearly caught some mainstream cachet. Big companies are competing on green because they perceive a competitive and reputational advantage. Start-ups and social entrepreneurs are building new business models aimed at directly solving social and environmental challenges. And small firms in sectors including food, retail, and travel are increasingly embracing sustainability as a part of their rationale for being in business in the first place.

Business sustainability has come a long way very quickly. In an era of transparent supply chains, IT-enabled local production, expanded entrepreneurial opportunities, megalcity growth, climate change, water shortages, and millennial demands for meaningful work, it is not going away. The good news for young people looking for careers: saving the planet is a growth field.

Green business provides one of three possible directions for a sustainability career. The other two are education (broadly defined) and policy. The first step in a sustainability career choice is picking one of these three roads. The second step is making the grad school now/later/TBD call. The third step is to identify where you want to live and build a power network there. All along the way, hone your leadership skills, and learn to let the magnitude of the challenges we face empower, not paralyze, you.

Step 1: Your Career Bucket

Sustainability work falls into one of three big buckets. The first is education, including the familiar professions of teacher, professor, and researcher, but also rabbi, preacher, imam, artist, filmmaker, and journalist. Education workers include all those whose job it is to communicate about the moral and scientific dimensions of the sustainability challenges of the coming decades.

The second bucket is policy. Policy is the world of rules: laws and regulations. Young people pursuing a career in policy intend to work on changing the rules, fighting bad laws and policies, and replacing them with good ones. These rules are set at the international level through the UN, in national capitals like Washington, DC, or Beijing, at state and city levels, and also, increasingly, within big companies and large nonprofit organizations. Microsoft, for example, has an internal carbon tax. Every major corporation, big hospital, or college or university has a chief sustainability officer or director, whose job it is to change the rules within those organizations, whether to source more local or organic food, to reduce carbon emissions or water consumption, or...
to strengthen and watchdog human rights practices.

Policy jobs—changing or enforcing the rules—are thus found within government agencies and legislative offices and also in large companies and organizations. Many policy workers are also found in the offices of domestic or international NGOs, where educators, advocates, and lobbyists try to influence from the outside, the rules that are actually set by government or business. Greenpeace employees, for example, engage in high-profile efforts to shame large banks into changing their lending practices in developing countries.

The final bucket is business. If policy work is about changing the rules, green businesspeople want to play the game. Within the confines of the existing rules, they seek to build financially viable organizations that directly solve social and environmental problems. This kind of mission-driven business is a new invention in the history of political economy. In the past 20 years, we have seen the emergence of new companies, and centers within traditional businesses, that view environmental and social problems not as costs to be externalized, but rather as opportunities to be profitably solved.

Careers in this space include all the functional areas of business: management, finance, strategy, human resources, operations. Note that sustainability directors in the private sector are not typically in the green business space as defined here. Rather, they are mostly involved in policy work, greening the operations of conventional businesses. Green businesspeople, by contrast, work for companies (or for branches of companies) whose active mission is to solve social and environmental problems.

For example, someone engaged in logistics for Clif Bar is in the green business world. Clif actively manages for five bottom lines, including employee well-being, brand integrity, business success, community engagement, and environmental sustainability. Clif’s most recent environmental commitment, well integrated with its role as a food company, has been to promote organic seed development. The company is also an active member of BICEP (Business for Innovative Climate and Energy Policy), a business lobby for action on climate change. Logistics is a critical business support function for the social and environmental mission of the company.

By contrast, the sustainability team at McDonald’s do policy work: trying to change the rules of the game inside McDonald’s to reduce the company’s footprint. Clearly, these categories overlap. Education work is done in the service of driving policy change, and business is often a dominant force in lobbying to change government policy. In addition to driving corporate policy change, sustainability directors can help firms innovate, pushing traditional companies to find new sustainable business opportunities.

Despite the overlap, this trichotomy is a useful way to organize the range of sustainability careers. All three—education, policy change, and green business vision and execution—are needed to build a sustainable future.

The first choice in moving from college to career is to determine which category appeals to an individual’s skills and talents. A defining difference relates to patience. Education for sustainability is a long-term strategy. Policy work also requires patience to work toward midrange goals in bureaucratic government and corporate environments. Business sustainability is for more impatient folks who like to build things. Which is your bucket?

**Step 2. The Graduate School Choice**

To pursue a sustainability leadership career in business, policy, or education, eventu-
ally you will need a graduate degree, typically a master's or law degree for business or policy, and a master's or PhD for education. One can certainly find entry-level work in these fields with only a bachelor's degree, but a leadership career will generally require graduate school. The question for most college graduates seeking sustainability careers is thus: now or later?

From the point of view of the planet, the answer is now. Consider a student who understands the depth of the sustainability challenges asking, “Should I take time off before going to grad school?” That would be like my dad asking to take time off before going to fight the Nazis in Germany. We are alive at an extraordinary moment in human history, one in which we need all hands on deck attacking problems with maximum skill and ability. Students who attend graduate school right out of college can tool up faster and step into leadership roles more quickly, making a difference soon.

That said, there are three reasons not to go right to graduate school. The first is if, instead, you are able to land a good job in sustainability education, policy, or business, that is, a position that really helps grow your leadership abilities (although in a down economy and a difficult job market, prevalent in recent years, this has not been easy). If, however, you are looking at a couple of years of working odd jobs and taking on low-level internships, go to grad school instead.

The second reason is if you are unsure of the direction you want to pursue. You don't need to know the exact career. Grad school will help you sort that out. But you do need to know in which big bucket you want to be, at least initially: business, policy, or education.

The final reason is if you are deeply in debt from your undergraduate education. That said, moderate debt should not scare you off from graduate school. You will need to make the investment sooner or later. The sooner you make the investment, the sooner you will be in a higher paying position and better able to pay off your loans. The U.S. government advises that students should not take on more total combined debt from undergraduate and graduate school than they expect to earn annually in their first job. For policy students, that might be $40,000-$60,000; for sustainability MBAs, $50,000-$80,000 annually. The government also offers a loan forgiveness program for graduates who work for 10 continuous years in the nonprofit or government sector after completing their education.

Of course, graduate schools might prefer you to have a few years of work experience. That way you bring more diversity of experience to the other students. But that is the school's concern, not yours. If admitted, go, and take advantage of the wealth of your fellow students' work experience to accelerate your career.

Given the amount you will be investing in graduate school, here are some key features to look for in any program worth your money.

**Rigorous Academics**

Beware of cafeteria-style programs with two or three core courses and a menu of others in which you select five from list A and five from list B. A collection of vaguely related courses is unlikely to provide the core toolkit that you will need. Look for a carefully curated program.

**Career Focus**

Does the program provide a clear pathway to a sustainability career? What kind of career development support is offered? What kind of jobs have recent alums taken?

**Accessible, Involved Faculty**

Some master's programs are cash cows in which courses are largely staffed by faculty with little commitment to the program or
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Students. This is either because the faculty are primarily focused on their research (or their PhD students or undergrad students), or because they are adjuncts with little connection to the program. High-profile faculty research might be eye-catching. However, it is genuine faculty interest in your work that will get you a job.

**Commitment to Experiential Education**

Challenging, extended internships or consultancies that are carefully embedded in the academic curriculum are critical for a professional master's degree in sustainability. By contrast, short, low-level internships—internships as an afterthought—do little to advance your understanding or career.

**Individual Mastery**

Master's students should develop mastery of a subfield in their discipline. This requires a rigorous independent thesis or capstone. Many master's degree programs have dropped the individual capstone, replacing it with a group project because of the expensive requirement for excellent, one-on-one faculty advising. This is not okay. The thesis or individual capstone is a critical dimension of the master's experience, and the primary foundation for career success.

**Step 3. Location, Location**

Once you have picked your career bucket and either completed graduate school or made the decision to delay, the next step is to consider geography. Determine the city or town in which you want to start your career. Why start with location? Because job searching these days is all about creating your power network (see Step 4). Despite each of us having Facebook friends scattered across the globe, the real work of finding work involves meeting people face-to-face.

Apply for a job online and you will be one of 300 highly qualified applicants. Tell your story to a passionate sustainability professional, and he or she will introduce you to three other people in the community to whom you can also tell your story, and they will introduce you to nine more people, some overlapping, until you have impressed everyone in town you need to in order to get your career going. It takes a village to get sustainability work done. Find your village, and start developing colleagues.

**Step 4. The Power Network**

Networking means collecting a group of supporters who are genuinely interested in you and the contributions that you can make to local and global sustainability challenges. A power network is one in which your network members are powerful people; power is simply the ability to make change. There is power in song, intellect, charisma, diversity, access to resources, empowering others, poetry, positions in hierarchy, empathy, effective teamwork, and storytelling, to name some. To make change, you need to surround yourself with, and learn from, people who have these powers.

Alan Atkission says sustainability professionals need to “play with power.” Note his triple meaning: **play with power** (be creative and have fun in the work you do); **play with power** (don’t waste your career time or your network building with people who don’t have power); and **play with power** (bring your own power to the game).

How does one build a power network? In this wired world, it is straightforward. Find the powerful people—the people doing the most effective work in your field in your city—and offer to help them. As a student, here is one strategy:

1. In your chosen location, find the three organizations doing the most interesting work.
2. In each of those organizations, find one person doing the most interesting project—perhaps they have written an article or blog post about it.

3. Write or call the person and ask to interview him or her for an article you are writing about leadership in the X industry in Y city.

4. Interview the contact, and write the article. Show what a good analyst and writer you are. Demonstrate thought leadership in the field.

5. Publish the article in your student newspaper or on a blog. If you can't find a place, we will publish it on the Bard Center for Environmental Policy (CEP) EcoReader Blog.

6. Send the link to the article to each of the interviewers.

What happens then? They send it to their mom. And when they write to thank you, then you can say, “by the way, I am looking for work or an internship in your field, and do you have time to meet for coffee?” Notice the key to networking is not first asking for help, but rather first offering to help. In this day and age, each of us can be a journalist; we can always help others simply by creating exposure for their ideas.

A great reference on networking, and a host of other career strategies, is a book in which authors Billy Parish and Dev Ajula wisely observe that “even though we imagine ourselves to be masters of our own lives, we inevitably become a kind of average of the 15 people we spend the most time with.” The book provides specific additional guidance on how to build powerful “inner” and “outer” networks.²

Empowered, Not Paralyzed

These steps are largely generic, but quite useful, career strategies. What is unique about sustainability work is the starting point: a desire to save the planet. Of course, the planet itself will be fine. Give it a few million years, and however deep the damage humans manage to inflict this century, it will be erased by the magic of evolution, and the earth will once again be rich in biodiversity. That said, from the vantage point of billions of humans and our collective ways of living, the planet saving that needs doing in the next 30 years is immense. Accelerating extinction rates, forest loss, ice-sheet collapse, dead zones, impending water shortages, toxic bioaccumulation, and the reality that we must meet the needs of yet another three billion human souls—all of this data can be enough to burn people out of productive careers, turning playful and creative sustainability workers into cynical curmudgeons.

The mental trick is to turn what for most people are paralyzing forecasts into warning signs that motivate us to empowerment ourselves, and by doing so, change the future. One form of empowerment is the creation, and linking, of our individual power networks. Another is to build our own power skill sets, the soft leadership/career skills that employers say they are seeking most: visioning, effective communication, asking for money and time and commitment, and finding the courage of our convictions. As students move from college to career, they should continuously develop and hone these skills.

How? One way is to seek out these opportunities at work, through internships, political campaigns, or volunteering. A second way is in community: find workshops and trainings that specifically focus on leadership skills. At Bard CEP we offer weekend training workshops for undergraduates and recent graduates to help specifically with these career skills, through our C2C Fellows network (see: http://www.bard.edu/cep/c2c/). Other organizations offer similar workshops: Sierra Student Coalition, Starting Bloc, Well-
Commentary

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stone Action. Look for a local Toastmasters forum to work on public speaking.

The key to career success in sustainability is to go big, as big as you can imagine, in your twenties. For most people, this is the decade of maximum freedom: no kids, no mortgage debt. It is the time to experiment, fail fast, and gain the experience and tools to change the world.

References