**LET'S TALK TRASH: IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

---

**Julie Ira**, Program on the Environment, University of Washington  
Site Supervisor: Liz Gignilliat, UW Recycling  
Staff Advisor: Amanda Dassoff, UW Recycling  
Faculty Supervisor: Gary Handwerk, Program on the Environment, University of Washington  

---

### Background

- With a world population projected to reach 9 billion by 2050, the planet is approaching the limit of its ability to provide.  
- Higher education institutions (HEIs) are forces of change that can lead the global sustainability transformation to combat climate change.  
- Campuses serve as experimental locations where new methods to reduce environmental impacts can be tested and implemented.  
- HEIs must redesign existing structures and rethink aspects of production and consumption, thus they face many barriers to the implementation of sustainability at such a large scale.

### Research Question

What are the barriers to the integration of sustainability in higher education and the best practices to overcome them?

### Internship & Methods

- Interned with UW Recycling.  
- Conducted the UW's first Zero Waste Assessment with the Post-Landfill Action Network (PLAN).  
- Interviewed and surveyed 46 campus stakeholders about waste infrastructure, policies, and procedures on campus.  
- Data collected was used to create a report detailing long-term zero waste solutions for the UW to implement (See Figure 1).  
- Performed a literature review on effective ways to implement sustainability. Compared results with case study data.

---

### Assessment & Review Results

#### Major Barriers to Sustainability

- **Insufficient Sustainability Data:** There is a shortage of reliable tools to measure sustainability progress. There is little known about broader trends in HEI environmental performance.
- **Greenwashing & Communication:** Universities fall victim to the external pressures of branding and rankings, shifting their efforts to maintain a reputation-oriented focus (See Figure 2).
- **Absence of Sustainability Context in Academics:** There is no framework to facilitate sustainability in academics. Trying to include sustainability in specific disciplines becomes a burden that falls on faculty.

#### Assessing Stakeholder Awareness of Sustainable Purchasing Policies

- Unaware/Unenforced: 39.1%  
- Aware/Unenforced: 10.9%  
- Aware/Enforced: 50%

---

### Results cont.

#### Best Practices & Recommendations

- **Tracking & Assessment Tools:** Establishing regular assessment strategies of HEI sustainability performance provides the ability to set progress baselines and identify best practices.  
- **Reporting:** Dissemination of information to stakeholders is critical to spreading awareness and creating a shared understanding of what sustainability means to a campus.  
- **Generating Sustainability Competencies:** Providing sustainability pedagogy resources for faculty and creating key sustainability learning objectives for each academic discipline.

---

### Significance & Broader Implications

- Results identify the gaps in sustainability performance at the UW.  
- Report serves as the foundation for establishing and enforcing more ambitious zero waste initiatives at the UW.  
- Results emphasize the significant role that campus stakeholders play in the successful integration of sustainability.  
- Next steps include conducting outreach to stakeholders to help them implement PLAN report recommendations.  
- Sharing the UW's zero waste journey can inspire others to develop a plan to help their respective universities combat climate change.

---

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to Liz Gignilliat and Amanda Dassoff, as well as the program coordinators at UW Recycling for their help. Thank you to the PLAN staff for their guidance, and to Gary Handwerk for his continuous support and feedback. A special thank you to my family and friends for their support.