

October 17th, 2021

Dear Student Body,

I am writing today to address the concerns expressed in the op-ed titled, "[I am concerned about sustainability at UConn](#)" published on April 21st, 2021.

Please allow me to start by apologizing to any students who have felt alienated, tokenized, or otherwise harmed by our office and to those students who have avoided our programs, internships, and activities as a result.

Though I can only speak for actions which have occurred during my three years at UConn, I acknowledge that I have witnessed microaggressions and have likely committed them myself over that period of time. For that I am sincerely sorry. I have learned that good intentions are not enough, and that I have not always been successful in transferring those intentions into meaningful impact. While we are working hard to ensure the OS and its internship programs are an inclusive and welcoming environment, there is still much work to be done—especially in regaining the trust of students of color. I look forward to that challenge and am especially eager to connect with the many first and second year students who are experiencing campus life for the first time this year.

In the 2020 study, *The UConn Racial Microaggressions Survey*, it was revealed that "Forty-three percent of students who completed the survey reported feeling as though they need to minimize aspects of their racial and ethnic background to fit in at UConn."

As an employer and mentor of student interns whose success and wellbeing I am deeply invested in, this report is very sobering. Our office is committed to understanding how to become better allies for students of color and marginalized identities. Though there is more to do, we have already begun acting on many of the concerns expressed by students. Here are just a few examples:

1. The environmental movement is rapidly evolving, and our office is working to establish meaningful goals which address environmental justice. To this extent we have conducted research, participated in numerous webinars, and have met with key collaborators, like the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to help guide a handful of proposed goals which would become part of UConn's 2025 strategic sustainability plan.
2. Upon the retirement of our Director on Oct. 1st, the Acting Director of the Institute of the Environment (IoE) is creating a sustainability working group comprised of faculty, staff, and students to help shape the future of the Office of Sustainability at UConn. An important task of the working group will be to consider how the OS should address issues of inclusivity, equity, and intersectionality of sustainability.

3. We have committed to ongoing annual equity trainings, beginning this fall, which will be conducted by an external consultant who specializes in addressing biases and microaggressions. Future trainings will not only include the OS staff and intern team, but the entire Institute of the Environment (IoE), to which the OS reports.
4. We are implementing more equitable recruitment and hiring practices for students. In partnership with ResLife, the OS has created a new paid EcoCaptains position to hire 20 additional students to serve as point persons on sustainability in their residence halls. This will provide a large influx of student leaders tasked with engaging their peer residents in sustainability programming. Promotion for this and all future positions in the OS has and will be done broadly through JobX, the Daily Digest, and social media posts without recruitment from peers or “cherry-picking” from specific populations of students.

In closing, I would like to reiterate a quote from Marissa Alba Naclerio’s op-ed:

“At our core, the environmental community has so much potential if we devote more of our energy to solidarity. Authentically support environmentalists of color. Step back, listen, practice empathy. The environmentalist community is so full of passion. Many of us practice radical love for our Earth — let’s direct more of it to the people working alongside us.”

We are in the midst of major transition in the Office of Sustainability. If UConn is to achieve its ambitious sustainability goals and maintain its status as a global leader in campus sustainability, we recognize that we must unify our efforts by fostering inclusive, collaborative relationships and a culture of respect and empathy. My office is always open to any and all students and student organizations who are passionate about sustainability issues and eager to make a difference.

Sincerely,

Patrick McKee
Sr. Sustainability Program Manager
UConn Office of Sustainability