UBC CLIMATE HUB

Advocating for Climate Content Throughout Campus Curricula

A Guide for UBC Students

Introduction

The goal that guides the academic advocacy work of the UBC Climate Hub is for every undergraduate student to understand and engage with climate change and climate justice in the coursework and/or applied projects of their degree program. This goal is mirrored by the target set out by the University in its 20 Year Sustainability Strategy: [to] "[p]rovide each student, regardless of their degree program, with access to sustainability education" [1]. The enactment of these goals takes different forms. The formation and subsequent work of the UBC Sustainability Initiative (USI) and its Teaching and Learning Program is a remarkable example of formal work that has occurred. But amongst the formal efforts, there is also a significant body of informal student-led advocacy; this work gives voice to students in the teaching and learning process and can produce immediate changes to teaching content. The abundance of these efforts or interest in leading these efforts inspired the writing of this document - a guide to student-led academic advocacy for climate teaching and learning.

Purpose

To synthesize the learning from past student-led academic advocacy for climate teaching and learning into a document that can guide students engaging in this work presently.

Outline

1. CONTEXT

A summary of background that frames academic advocacy work: the state of the climate, the history of climate teaching and learning at UBC, and the rise of momentum for climate action.

2. PAST EFFORTS: LESSONS

A summary of the knowledge gained in past student-led academic advocacy efforts organized into six key lessons.

3. APPROACH

A basic framework to use when designing and carrying out student-led academic advocacy.

4. CASE EXAMPLE: BACHELOR OF INTERNATIONAL ECONOMICS

A case example of student-led advocacy that improved the state of climate teaching and learning in the Bachelor of International Economics Degree program.

Context

There are three important pieces of context that frame this work: (1) the state of the climate, (2) the history of climate (sustainability) teaching and learning at UBC, and (3) the swell of the momentum that marks the past 2 years.

1. CLIMATE

The abundance of evidence documenting the critical state of the climate allows this section to be brief. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) sets a timeline of 45% emissions reduction by 2030 and net-zero emissions by 2050 (relative to 2010 levels) to limit global mean surface temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius [2]. This timeline simultaneously informs and supports this work. The state of the climate informs the curriculum content that should be advocated for; for example, this curriculum should emphasize urgency, the inevitable need for adaptation, climate justice and the magnitude of systems change that is required. Simultaneously the timeline supports student-led advocacy over other pathways for changing climate teaching and learning; student-led work can produce immediate changes in line with the remaining window for limiting warming.

2. HISTORY

There is an extensive history of efforts to create and improve climate and sustainability teaching, learning and research at UBC [3]. The period from 1990 - 2009 is characterized by a scattered assemblage of signed declarations, policies on sustainable development, and working groups centred on sustainability. In 2009, these efforts were formalized into the Sustainability Academic Strategy (SAS) [4]. This strategy laid in place much of the formal work on sustainability (and climate) teaching and learning that persists today. The UBC Sustainability Initiative (USI) was created in 2010 as a result of a recommendation in the SAS and is the institutional home for this work. The key activities, concepts and programs first outlined in the SAS are carried out by the USI's Teaching and Learning Program; examples include sustainability pathways (concept), the Sustainability Ambassadors, Sustainability Scholars, and Sustainability Fellows programs, and the maintenance of a database of sustainability courses [5]. In 2014, UBC published its 20-Year Sustainability Strategy [1] - a high-level guiding document that integrates sustainability principles and targets across all parts of the University; this document reiterated the principles set out in the SAS.

This background is important for two reasons. First, it demonstrates the extent of past work that has occurred (and is occurring) around climate teaching and learning, which any student wanting to lead academic advocacy for climate teaching and learning should understand. Secondly, it is a reminder that the goals guiding UBC's development of sustainability teaching and learning are typically aligned with the goals of students leading these advocacy efforts.

3. MOMENTUM

The past two years have been marked by a swell of momentum for climate action. The youth-led climate strikes, declarations of climate emergencies, and legal actions centred on climate are notable examples. This momentum has also made its way into the UBC community of people and organizations connected to climate teaching and learning. The creation of the Climate Hub is a direct result of this momentum. The Climate Hub's transition from its roots as the student-led Sustainability Collective to a university-funded office housed in the UBC Sustainability Initiative signifies the impact this momentum can carry. UBC's most recent strategic plan references climate change frequently. Within in, there are renewed efforts to improve and broaden interdisciplinary teaching and there is a formal call for the declaration of a climate emergency that requires a reassessment of climate teaching and learning.

All of these activities indicate momentum. This momentum can justify and strengthen student-led advocacy for climate teaching and learning.

Past Efforts: Lessons Learned

The following list is a summary of six key lessons learned in various student-led academic advocacy efforts in recent years.

1   START BY LEARNING

It is important to be equipped with knowledge of existing work, gaps where solutions could be implemented, and relevant dates and deadlines in the academic setting you are trying to effect.

LESSON

Take the time to acquire this fundamental information before you make major asks and/or start your advocacy with a period aimed at meeting key individuals and learning.

2   FIND CHAMPIONS

There are climate champions throughout UBC's academic institutions. Aligning and garnering support from them will strengthen and legitimize student-led advocacy efforts. These champions are also often the ones most willing to teach climate content.

LESSON

Identify and build relationships with the climate champions that are in your academic institution.

3 · FORMAL CURRICULUM CHANGE IS HARD

Creating new courses, opening up courses to students in other faculties/degree programs, or having a course become accredited for a degree can be difficult work. Any change that needs to pass through Senate can be challenging due to barriers such as administrative ones. For example, if a course is opened to students in another faculty, which department pays for it? Which department would staff it? Administrative barriers are a real and significant barrier to curriculum change at UBC.

LESSON

Start with solutions that do not require Senate approved formal curriculum change (*see below*). These solutions can be immediate ways to increase or improve climate content in curricula and can lay the groundwork for formal changes in the future.

4 · BUT INFORMAL IS RELATIVELY EASY

Any change that can occur within the bounds of existing academic and administrative structures is more likely to succeed than a formal change requiring restructuring. For example, there is lots of room in a course description. Individual professors have autonomy over what they choose to teach under a course description.

LESSON

Asking for an informal curriculum change is a good starting place that can (is likely to!) create immediate changes. This could include asking for a lecture or module on climate in a class or for the approval of a directed studies class focused on climate.

5   STUDENT ASKS CARRY WEIGHT

Both faculty and administrative figures in an academic institution can be responsive to student voices, especially if those voices are many and unified. For example, in the lead up to the September 27th, 2019 Climate Strike numerous departments and faculties issued formal public statements of support; many of these statements were the direct result of organized calls from students.

LESSON

Organizing support amongst students in an academic institution can create a strong voice that can be used to submit asks. Student clubs/associations and signed petitions are good resources/tools to consult.

6   PROVIDING RESOURCES AND SOLUTIONS IS CRITICAL

Asks for changes to teaching and learning, big or small, puts pressure on the professors and administrators responsible for delivering that curriculum. Providing solutions and resources will make asks for curriculum change more feasible for those receiving them.

LESSON

Incorporate potential solutions and available resources into asks; these could include already existing open-source modules on climate content, ideas for potential guest lecturers, or analyses that identify gaps in a degree program/department where climate content could be integrated.

Approach

The lessons learned (above) and various experiences with student-led advocacy for climate teaching and learning can be synthesized into a rough framework. This is an ever-evolving form of advocacy that will look different in varying contexts, but we hope you can at least use this as a useful framework to guide your action-taking!

STEP 1	LEARN THE SYSTEM + IDENTIFY CLIMATE CHAMPIONS

LEARN THE SYSTEM: Take time to understand the academic unit you are working in. This unit could be a classroom, a degree program or a department. Map the system and identify gaps and work that is already occurring.

IDENTIFY CHAMPSIONS: This often goes hand-and-hand with learning the system - climate champions are a wealth of information about the academic system they work in. Relationships with these champions can occur naturally or spontaneously, but it can also require more formal and strategic relationship-building. Faculty, however, are nearly always open to initial student inquiries.

STEP 2   DEFINE AN ASK(S)
+
SOLUTIONS AND RESOURCES

DEFINE AN ASK: Asks should be well-defined, resource-sensitive, and impactful. Smaller asks for informal curriculum change are good starting places. Larger asks for formal changes to the curriculum are more difficult and will require more work, evidence, and backing.

DEFINE SOLUTIONS AND RESOURCES: An ask should be accompanied by suggested solutions or resources to support solutions. It is not the student's responsibility to develop curriculum but providing a starting place for the faculty who do develop their own curriculum will make the ask more successful. Check out the resource guide for ideas.

STEP 3   GARNER SUPPORT

Garnering support from both faculty and students will strengthen and legitimize an ask. Students can be accessed through student clubs and associations. Involving faculty is more of a challenge, but it is possible to reach them at gatherings in the academic unit (e.g., departmental meetings). This task may require scheduling individual meetings. Signed letters are good tools for documenting and demonstrating support.

STEP 4   SUBMIT AN ASK

Submitting an ask could be as informal as a meeting with a professor or as formal as presenting at a department meeting. Choose an appropriate venue and highlight support for the ask and its impact on student learning.

STEP 5   FOLLOW-UP AND TRACKING SUCCESS

FOLLOW UP: The path to submitting an ask is fairly similar; it is the response and process afterward that is inevitably varied and requires creativity and adaptability. Be prepared to work with your academic unit to add student input to potential solutions. You may be the force driving the development of solutions, which requires effort and patience but can also be an empowering experience.

TRACKING SUCCESS: Tracking success is critical to ensuring the longevity of your academic advocacy. How can you track the impact on student learning through the changes you initiated? Tracking the number of students exposed to that curriculum and the use of voluntary surveys are common methods.

Case Example

SETTING
Vancouver School of Economics, Bachelor of International Economics

STATE OF CLIMATE TEACHING AND LEARNING PRE-ASK
No climate content in the degree program.

THE STORY
This effort began as an informal ask to an upper-year professor for the inclusion of climate content in a class. The request was well received and laid the groundwork for a larger ask. This took the form of a letter to the program director co-written by the students involved and the initial professor that included signatures of support from half (150) of the program's students. That letter made three asks: (1) to improve climate content in introductory courses; (2) to recognize an existing upper-level course with climate content for credit in the program; and (3) to create an environmental economics thesis option.

The letter initiated meetings with the department and program directors, a consultation event, and an opportunity to present to an external review committee working as part of an Arts faculty review, something that occurs only once every 5-10 years. The synchronous alignment with the Arts faculty review highlights the importance of learning the academic unit you are working in; identifying pressure points, platforms to make asks, and relevant dates and deadlines is essential. The culmination of this work proved successful - the upper-level course with climate content was recognized for credit in the program and the undergraduate thesis option was approved. The creation of a course or incorporation of climate content into introductory courses is a remaining advocacy issue that the undergraduate student association continues to work on.

KEY COMPONENTS OF APPROACH

- Well defined ask that mostly worked within existing academic structures

- Supported by faculty champions and a large part of the student body

- Well-aligned (even if by chance) with existing opportunities for curriculum change

- Formal approach legitimized student's voice and provided access to formal platforms

References

[1] UBC. (2014). 20 Year Sustainability Strategy. http://sustain.ubc.ca/about/plans-policies-and-reports [accessed 26 November, 2019]

[2] IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers. In: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, H.-O. Pörtner, D. Roberts, J. Skea, P.R. Shukla, A. Pirani, W. Moufouma-Okia, C. Péan, R. Pidcock, S. Connors, J.B.R. Matthews, Y. Chen, X. Zhou, M.I. Gomis, E. Lonnoy, T. Maycock, M. Tignor, and T. Waterfield (eds.)]. World Meteorological Organization, Geneva, Switzerland, 32 pp.

[3] UBC. (2017). Sustainability Academic Strategy Evaluation Report.

[4] UBC. (2009). Sustainability Academic Strategy. http://sustain.ubc.ca/about/plans-policies-and-reports [accessed 26 November, 2019]

[5] https://sustain.ubc.ca/teaching-applied-learning/courses