

The Institutionalization of Sustainability at Universities: Effects on Student Collective Action

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## Abstract

Mark Russell Nichols: The Institutionalization of Sustainability at Universities: Effects on Student Collective Action  
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This thesis addresses the questions of how the efforts of field-framing institutional actors affect the adoption of new discourses by environmental organizations and how the application of various cultural framing processes separately affect degree of adoption. In-depth interviews with student environmental organization leaders and university sustainability staff members are used to determine relative strengths of the forces at work during various stages of the institutionalization of sustainability within universities. The analysis highlights the contested nature of field framing, and shows how the initial level of framing by student environmental organizations plays a large role in their ultimate station in institutionalized university sustainability. This thesis concludes with an effort to illustrate the nested nature of framing within institutionalization, as multidirectional framing is used to create the institutions that then constrain the original framers.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The diffusion of innovative practices within both market organizations and social movements has been a frequent topic of research within sociology. Additionally, scholars have been combining the theoretical contributions of organizations research and social movements research for decades. Frame alignment processes (Snow et al. 1986), a contribution of social movement scholars, have primarily been used to explain how organizations use collective action frames to recruit individuals to collective action for the furtherance of their organizational goals. The use of frame alignment by larger bodies to recruit organizations has also started to be addressed more recently (Lounsbury, Ventresca, and Hirsch 2003, Vasi 2006, Bartley 2007), but this use has not been fully elaborated. A multitude of factors have been hypothesized as influencing decision-making when organizations of all types are determining form or the adoption of innovative practices either at the time of founding or at a later time. These factors include the resource relationships or environments studied with resource dependence and resource mobilization theories, the political and institutional environments studied with political process and neoinstitutional theories, interorganizational or population-level dynamics studied with organizational ecology and other theories, and other cognitive processes and organizational attributes that affect the decision to adopt a form or individual innovation. Studies that have been able to integrate these factors with frame alignment processes in a comparative way and at the level of organizational fields have been

lacking and represent a promising area for research into the effects of the diffusion of innovative practices.

This study contributes to the understanding of institutionalism and framing processes through the empirical case of the institutionalization of a sustainability discourse at universities, affecting both the universities' practices and the behaviors of student organizations within the universities. Sustainability or sustainable development is presently being treated as a primarily environmental, but also social and economic, discourse by a wide range of actors including environmental advocates, academics, and governmental figures. It is also apparent that university administrations are adopting the sustainability discourse at an extremely rapid rate over the past few years, passing it on faddishly while touting its enormous importance to the operation of the university system and to world economic systems overall. Sociologically, sustainability serves as a master frame that allows actors to interpret and organize their lives in a new way (Snow et al. 1986). In the university, once the school has adopted the sustainability discourse, the administration and their created sustainability offices are in a position of potentially-dominating framing influence over the behaviors and ideas of student organizations and individual students as they are exposed to this new master frame around which to organize. However, the framing influence of the university administration and their field-building efforts when it comes to sustainability have not yet been used as a case for the study of these topics or institutionalism overall. The aspects of the setting allow the study to address several research questions. First, will the adoption of a new environmental discourse by organizations be altered by the field-framing efforts of an institutional actor such as a sustainability office? Second, will the choice and application of certain framing processes by

the field-building institutional framer determine the degree of adoption by organizations in the setting? Third, how will other factors hypothesized as relevant to the diffusion of innovation by social movements and organization studies literature interact with framing processes to determine the degree of adoption?

The results of this study make several contributions to the existing body of sociological literature on these topics. Firstly, the study continues a trend of conducting research that is at the intersection of organizations and social movements theories. In particular, this study gives emphasis to specific frame alignment processes as they interact with other factors important to both organizations and social movements studies. Secondly, this encourages comparative study by including as settings universities with and without sustainability offices. Without this comparative approach, conclusions drawn from research on the importance of frame alignment are not as meaningful and the effects of the institutional environment are more difficult to discern. Thirdly, this study makes contributions to how field frames are conceived. Instead of viewing field frames as normative practices within industries (Lounsbury et al. 2003), this study incorporates a social movements view and shows how a new master frame can be used as a mobilizing structure, both for the activities of the corporate model of university and for the social movement organizations within them. Lastly, this study adds to the complexity of conceptualizing the directionality of collective action behavior on field frames. It supports both older studies that looked at how collective action behavior and social movements shaped the formation of industries and newer studies that look at how corporate or institutional actors will seek to influence or construct a social movement field for their benefit by showing that both occur during different stages of the



institutionalization process. Indeed, this study suggests that the field framing efforts of social movement organizations can create unintended consequences for their future mobilization opportunities.

I approach these research questions through the use of case studies of seven universities, involving interviews of the relevant actors in the adoption of sustainability among student organizations, including organizational leaders and staff from the universities' sustainability offices. By achieving near-saturation of interviews of the relevant organizations and offices within the setting, I am able to present a picture of the overall complex structure of framing and other influences on organizational decision-making. In-depth interviews are able to get at the indigenous understandings of the microprocesses of frame alignment. Since the diffusion of sustainability as a discourse is nascent and the actors are still in the midst of these processes, interviews with those making decisions on how to recruit or enroll student organizations and those making decisions on whether to adopt and how to organize their organizational activities will provide the clearest picture of how sustainability is becoming institutionalized. Asking processual questions related to identity formation of organizations provides a subjective but thorough picture of the importance of framing processes versus resources, interorganizational dynamics, and contradictory ideologies, among other factors, in a complex and interactive picture of the diffusion of a new discourse, the master frame of sustainability.

This article first discusses the meaning of sustainability or sustainable development as a discourse, and the growth of this discourse over the past decades, culminating in a recent

acceleration. The section on sustainability also articulates what makes sustainability distinctive from previous environmental discourses. The next section discusses the university setting and why it is suited for studying the influence of institutional field frames on innovative organizational behavior. I review the sociological literature on frame alignment processes, bringing in social movement and organizational studies theories as needed, in the results. After discussing the interview methods and the sample, I provide the narrative of the institutionalization of sustainability as it typically occurs in this setting, viewed also as a framing process for the mobilization of multiple parties. The recognition by some students and university of climate change as a defining problem of modern society leads these individuals to push for the signing of climate commitments by university administrations. Once these commitments are signed, the institutionalization of sustainability begins and staff are hired to connect the efforts of the university and guide them toward carbon neutrality. These staff also mobilize student energy to varying degrees through framing efforts. Finally, once the university setting has been altered to be more supportive of the sustainability discourse, some student organizations adopt collaborative and cooperative tactics in order to gain legitimacy, taking advantage of a new resource environment. I discuss the significance that this has for understanding the effect of master frames on organizational fields and for understanding institutionalism at the ground level.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **BACKGROUND AND THEORY**

#### *THE ACCELERATION OF THE ISSUE OF SUSTAINABILITY*

When the World Commission on Environment and Development, also known as the Brundtland Commission, was convened by the United Nations in 1983, its statement defining sustainable development effectively brought the phrase to an international audience for the first time (Yearley 2005: 176). According to the commission's report, “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987: 43). The UN Earth Summit in 1992, organized specifically around this issue, had the effect of further legitimating it to the world’s population (Johnson 2006: 150). The topic continues to intensify and gain credence due to the UN General Assembly's designation of 2005-2014 as the “Decade of Education for Sustainable Development” (Blackburn 2007: 477). Concurrently, sustainability has seen an increasing usage in newspapers and other print media (LexisNexis Academic), in dedicated trade and academic journals, in university rankings (Sustainable Endowments Institute 2009), and in “greenwashing” and sincerer forms of corporate marketing (EnviroMedia Social Marketing 2009).

Among sociologists and scholars of other academic disciplines, the definition of sustainable development is contested, being characterized either as an environmental discourse (Brulle 2000) or as a framework of issues that can be adopted by environmental movement organizations (Johnson 2006). Sustainability has been called similar to conservation (Brulle 2000, Evernden 1992a, Evernden 1992b), but with elements of reform environmentalism and political ecology also (Johnson 2006). Certainly there is a focus on the natural sciences and metrics when sustainable development is brought up (Blackburn 2007, Goerner et al. 2008). Sustainability also shares the strong focus on economic development embodied in “ecological modernization theory” (Mol and Spaargaren 2000, Torgerson 1999). Ultimately, the breadth of sustainability and the “triple bottom line” of environmental, economic, and social concerns (Blackburn 2007), is viewed as a strength (Goerner et al. 2008, Torgerson 1995, Torgerson 1999). The broad vision is viewed as avoiding the pitfalls of viewing problems through the narrow lenses of specific fields of expertise, instead offering flexibility and an integrative approach that encourages collaboration toward an environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable future.

#### *THE UNIVERSITY AS A SETTING FOR THE DIFFUSION AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SUSTAINABILITY*

As the discourse of sustainable development has been spreading through various facets of society, the university and college system has not been unaffected. There is the potential for sustainability terms, ideas, and practices to be adopted by students, faculty, the

administration, and staff, either on a personal level or as an organizational measure to benefit a student group or to benefit the entire university as a corporate entity. While the university could be viewed as a setting similar to any other social unit for the spread of a social movement discourse and the activities of social movements, there are attributes that suggest that a university is more appropriately viewed as a type of incubator or laboratory in which the birth or creation of social movements and their discourses is more likely.

Firstly, the students who make up the populations of universities have higher biographical availability than the general population, meaning that they have a greater ability to participate in protest and other social movement actions free from the time and other constraints of a job, a family, or another closely-knit social group such as a church (McAdam 1986, Schussman & Soule 2005, Biggs 2006). They have also been found to be more likely to have a certain social psychological orientation which predisposes them toward more positive feelings of political efficacy, agency, having good luck, and having chances of success (Sherkat and Blocker 1994), making them more likely to be involved with and perhaps even found social movement organizations.

Secondly, the relatively brief four-year time cycle at the university may lend a sense of urgency to students' desire to take part in activism, an idea supported by the finding that students in the final two years are more likely to be involved in activism (Biggs 2006, Lipset and Wolin 1965, Zhao 2001). The four year cycle itself, with students at different stages interacting within organizations, can serve as a politicizing process in which students enter, become politicized, have their peer-teachers graduate and leave, and then become teachers,

politicizing the younger students in turn (Crossley 2008), perhaps contributing to organizational founding as these politicized members try to have an impact through founding or activism. Tied to the urgency of activism is the high likelihood that students will focus their activism on the campus or locale, making universities useful units of analysis for the study of predictors of activism overall (Van Dyke 1998), and the diffusion or adoption of certain tactics or discourses (Soule 1997, Strang and Soule 1998, Andrews & Biggs 2006).

Lastly, founding requirements for student organizations are even lower than for for-profit firms, themselves having low startup costs (Aldrich and Ruef 2006: 62, 83), and newer organizations have been found to be more likely to adopt new frames or discourses (Johnson 2006: 149). When the collective availability and mentality of university students is coupled with the temporal attributes of the university and the low founding requirements and penchant for nascent organizational innovation, it is reasonable to expect that the university is an ideal setting to witness the manifestation of the diffusion of the sustainable development discourse through the founding of student organizations or its institutionalization within university administrations.

#### *A MODEL FOR THE DIFFUSION AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SUSTAINABILITY*

Sustainability has diffused through the university setting unevenly. It is found to different degrees both between and within universities. Currently, some of these colleges and universities have strong institutional support for sustainability, including the founding and operation of sustainability offices, while some have not taken up the issue. This reality of

varying institutional support leads to a research setting in which some universities may have administrations trying to build fields of sustainability organizations through framing (Snow et al. 1986) and some will not. These framing efforts will be coupled with varying levels of resource support, and other internal and environmental attributes that guide the actions of organizational actors. In a setting without framing efforts by the administration, the other stimuli will still act upon the population of student organizations. If the sustainability discourse is being institutionalized within a university, outcomes for student organizations that are vulnerable to the discourse range from opposition or no response, to endorsement of the frame through frame alignment, to transformation or founding of organizations as embodiments of the discourse.

#### *THE ROLE OF FRAME ALIGNMENT PROCESSES IN THE DIFFUSION OF SUSTAINABILITY*

Collective action or mobilization frames, building off of Goffman's definition of frames as “schemata of interpretation” (Goffman 1974: 21) with which an individual gives meaning to events in his or her life (Snow et al. 1986: 464), have been defined as “emergent action-oriented sets of beliefs that inspire meaning and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns” (Benford 1997: 416). These definitions conceive of frames as static objects or tools, which is how they have often been studied. On the other hand, the study of frame alignment looks at the processes by which a social movement organization's (SMO) frame becomes aligned with those of individuals (Snow et al. 1986). Benford (1997) has also called

for more studies of “the dynamic processes associated with [frames'] social construction, negotiation, contestation, and transformation,” as those processes are not always revealed even when looking at alignment. Frames have been divided into those that are “diagnostic,” “prognostic,” and “motivational” (Cress and Snow 2000). Diagnostic frames identify problems or injustices, prognostic frames provide strategies to address the problems and come to solutions, and motivational frames serve to convince individuals that collective action will lead to the desired outcome. Master frames, distinct from context-specific frames, are “signifier[s] that poin[t] to a general category of socially recognized instances” (Oliver and Johnston 2000: 50), sometimes linking distinct ideas together in a way that makes them seem inseparable (Taylor 2000: 566), giving the overall master frame “a theoretical power and importance that goes well beyond the case-specific frames unique to a given social movement” (Pedriana 2006: 1750). Master frames have also been seen as shaping and being representative of entire protest cycles, such as with civil rights (Diani 1996: 1055). The study of framing is viewed as being part of the social constructionist perspective in sociology that “pays closer attention to symbolic processes, nonmaterial resources, and the micromobilization processes through which organization and symbolic frame come together” (Capek 1993: 6, Koehn 2008). Frame analysis has also been described as providing the theoretical link between social movements and organizations research (Kim and Lippmann 2008). Goodwin and Jasper criticize framing theorists for “conceptual stretching” that brings in too many ideas and reduces the explanatory power of the concept (1999: 52), but the collection of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational aspects seem to function as a group, a bundle that can be foisted upon or delivered to individuals in a coherent way. To reduce the totality of this idea by narrowing framing would also reduce its explanatory power.



Some scholars have emphasized the linguistic aspects of frames and framing. Oliver and Johnston (2000) portray framing as marketing: language that resonates with an audience, but does not necessarily represent deeper beliefs. Kubal also sees framing as marketing, designed to resonate with culture, which he sees as not “deeply internalized or even deeply meaningful” (1998: 541). The frame is constructed as it moves from the interpersonal, intra-organizational region, being negotiated within the SMO or other organization, to its presentation to the wider public (Benford and Hunt 1992), again as a form of marketing. From her study of the environmental justice frame, Capek finds that frames are “fashioned simultaneously from the bottom up (local grass-roots groups discovering a pattern to their grievances) and from the top down (national organizations conveying the term to local groups).” (1993: 5). Citing Spector and Kitsuse (1987), she notes that this new terminology passed down by the national organizations “signals a transformation in public understandings of a social problem” (Capek 1993: 6). This idea should be extended beyond the local and national structures of SMOs to other influential institutions that local organizations seek to influence. In this study, university administrations play that role at the local level, while professional associations serve as the larger authority at the national level. The emergence of the language of sustainability at the student, administration, and professional level is a sign of the emergence of sustainability as a master frame.

The most important aspect of collective action frames for mobilization is that they provide a template for how grievances should be addressed with collective action (prognosis) and inspire individuals to become part of that collective action (motivation). In this way, framing

functions in a fashion similar to McAdam's earlier idea of “cognitive liberation” (1999), which linked political opportunity and indigenous organizational strength to mobilization through a growing awareness that an individual's involvement in collective action could correct an injustice, perhaps leading to the founding of social movement organizations. These processes add cultural and psychological factors back into overly-structural explanations of mobilization such as those focused only on political opportunity or resource mobilization (Snow et al. 1986: 464). In a study of the Palestinian Intifada, Alimi (2006) portrayed opportunity as socially constructed and “event driven” (Snow 2004) rather than as objective. Mobilization would not occur until there was an “attribution of opportunity to trigger contention” (Alimi 2006: 70), a framing process playing out over months and years largely in the media rather than during some instantaneous cognitive breakthrough. Individuals and organizations will be inspired by the tenets of sustainability to act collectively at different times based subjectively on the variety of framing influences to which they are exposed.

Organizational fields or populations, not just individual organizations, potentially “seek to enrol[l] actors into a collective project” (Bartley 2007: 233), leading to the idea of “field frames” (Lounsbury et al. 2003). Field frames seem to fall between master frames and context-specific, single organization frames in scale, but are not defined as extensively as either of those. Conceived for industrial firms, they represent the institutional context, determining what is normative and legitimate, within one field (Lounsbury et al. 2003). More exactly, as cited by Bartley (2007), they are “political constructions that provide order and meaning to fields of activity by creating a status ordering for practices that deem some practices as more appropriate than others” (Lounsbury et al. 2003: 76–77). While networks

are the relational side of field-building, field frames are the cultural side (Bartley 2007: 233). Ferguson writes that “a field constructs a social universe in which all participants are at once producers and consumers caught in a complex web of social, political, economic, and cultural relations that they themselves have in part woven and continue to weave” (1998: 598). This ongoing political and conflictual process of field construction has often been studied with attention given to how social movements or collective action behaviors found fields of for-profit firms (Kim and Lippmann 2008, Lounsbury 2001, Lounsbury et al. 2003, Rao et al. 2000). Bartley (2007) reversed the direction of this somewhat and studied how foundations recruited social movement organizations in order to build the field of forest certification, serving as a negotiation between environmentalist and market interests. While Bartley (ibid.) recognizes the importance of aligning field frames with those of the environmental organizations that the foundations are hoping to recruit into the field, these frame alignment processes could be further elaborated. Applied to sustainability, frame alignment processes undertaken by universities to recruit student groups into a field of sustainability organizations should be examined for their varying level of success: what combination of framing processes and other factors determine the level of adoption of sustainability by student organizations?

So far, field frame has been defined in a way that is almost synonymous with institutional context (Lounsbury et al. 2003), but in order to understand how an administrative body such as a university sustainability office would recruit or enroll SMOs into an emergent field, it will be helpful to link field frames to the four frame alignment processes conceived by Snow et al. (1986) for the recruitment of individuals into SMOs, examining whether the processes

change at this higher level of aggregation. Snow et al, while focusing on framing at the individual level, acknowledged that the first process, *frame bridging*, could “occur at the organizational level, as between two SMOs within the same movement industry” (1986: 467). Frame bridging presumes “the existence of ideologically congruent but untapped and unorganized sentiment pools” (1986: 468), so its goal in the context of this study is to publicize the university administration's field frame to the population of vulnerable organizations that may have similar interests. Given the sometimes adversarial relationship between students and administration, discovering that there is a section of the administration promoting goals of interest to them may be a welcome realization for the student organizations.

Beyond frame bridging, an organization may “extend the boundaries of its primary framework so as to encompass interests or points of view that are incidental to its primary objectives but of considerable salience to potential adherents” (ibid.: 472). *Frame extension* in the context of this study might include a sustainability office extending its frame beyond energy efficiency to provide funding to a student organization that is implementing a composting project. Koehn (2008) writes about frame extension as “issue-bundling” from the bottom up that provides “co-benefits,” generally related to health, for multiple parties. In his case of subnational efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, frame extension is linked to motivational frames because the extension of the global harm of global climate change to more distinct local concerns is critical for mobilizing support. Frame extension, if done gradually, with issues being added and removed from a field's or individual organization's agenda, could eventually lead to transformation of the organization or discourse (Johnson

2006) as all of the original aspects of the frame are replaced over time. Extension of frames too far, so that the frames become unclear, has been found to cause movement stagnation (Robinson 2009), an idea related to boundary coherence for organizations.

Refocusing the frame to the administration's core issues, *frame amplification* refers to “the clarification and invigoration of an interpretive frame that bears on a particular issue, problem or set of events” (Snow et al. 1986: 469). Field frame extension for a sustainability office could be the invigoration of the idea of reducing the carbon footprint to a sustainable level, potentially motivating student environmental organizations to focus on measures of sustainability instead of biological diversity, for example.

Whereas frame bridging assumes latent, congruent sentiments in the target individual or organization, the final process of *frame transformation* means that the ideas or values must be “planted and nurtured” (Snow et al. 1986: 473), attribution sometimes shifted. Pedriana (2006: 1752-3), citing Snow (2004) distinguishes between “agent driven” and “event driven” frame transformation, the first attributing transformation to the recruiting organization or field-building actor (ex. Sustainability office), the second to a major event that also focuses the grievance (ex. Climate change). While reframing can transform an environmental discourse, since discourse is essentially equivalent to frame, this does not imply the transformation of all organizations that were formerly within that discourse (Taylor 2000), as they may maintain their old values, becoming disconnected from the former frame. We would expect frame transformation to occur in the context of this study if a sustainability office nurtures the belief within an environmental organization that they are experts on how

to channel graduating students into “green” jobs, rather than just a group that nurtures the appreciation of nature within their members, for example.

Theories about frame resonance have been criticized as having tautological reasoning:

“frames are successful because they are resonant and they are resonant because they are successful” (Kubal 1998: 542). While frame resonance is simple congruence, this criticism ignores the greater complexity of frame alignment processes, which are “ongoing and interactional” (Snow et al. 1986: 464). Generally, the success of a frame alignment attempt depends on the response of the target that an institution is trying to recruit or enroll into its emerging organizational field. The application of this view in research answers Benford's (1997) call for more dynamic approaches to framing processes. The interaction between the framer and the target serves as the context in which frames such as sustainability and other shared meanings are constructed through negotiation or conflict. There will not just be an initial period of frame construction and then solidification; new events will prompt “reassess[ment] and renegotiat[ion]” (Snow et al. 1986: 476). Vasi (2006) supported this idea of interactional framing processes with his study of the diffusion of climate change policies to city governments. Showing the effects of frame extension, those cities that already had environmental initiatives were found to adopt climate change policies faster. Additionally, some cities had “innovation champions” working within the government that framed climate change in the same way as outsider “change agents” attempting frame alignment, and this was also found to facilitate diffusion. When interaction between field-building institution and the organization it is trying to recruit is positive, frame alignment will occur easily. Generally, the array of framing processes that need to be used by the field-building

institution will depend on the initial gap between their frame and that of the organization they wish to recruit. Student organizations can be expected to play some role in their recruitment by university administrators or sustainability staff. Framing processes do not always, or perhaps often at all, occur between parties with equal amounts of political or economic power (Pedriana 2006; Shriver, White, and Kebede 1998; Trumpy 2008), a situation of relevance when university sustainability offices may be framing to student organizations and vice versa.

The relationship between framing processes employed by the field-builder and final degree of alignment or adoption is further conditioned and mediated by various organization and population-level structural and cultural factors drawn from social movements and organizations theory. Cress and Snow (2000), in their paper that combines framing with organizational, tactical, and political variables, call for more interactive and combinatorial approaches to studying movement outcomes. This should also be extended to the study of field-building, the diffusion of a new organizational form. In the past, studies of framing processes have been combined with neoinstitutional theories (e.g., Bartley 2007), networks theory dealing with social contagion (e.g., Vasi 2006), resource mobilization (e.g., Balch 2006, Taylor 2000, Diani 1996), political opportunity (e.g. Taylor 2000, Diani 1996), and other political and economic constraints (Cornfield and Fletcher 1998). Most importantly, framing has been shown to *create* political opportunity and resource availability (Caniglia and Carmin 2005: 204), which is expected to occur bidirectionally between both student organizations and university administrators or staff.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **DATA AND METHODS**

To understand the institutionalization process of the sustainability discourse at universities and its impact as a master frame on student organization behaviors, I analyzed data from qualitative interviews with 29 individuals from seven universities in the United States, conducted during January and February 2010. I sought to draw my cases from the Mid and South-Atlantic region of the United States so that interviews could be done in person. The sample is purposive in that it is drawn for the purpose of making the study comparative of the diffusion of sustainability both in universities that are considered to incorporate sustainability to a large degree and those that are considered to neglect sustainability or in which sustainability is not present. In this respect, this study will follow the lead of Scheer-Irvine et al. (2008), who did a survey-based study of attitudes on climate change at eight universities, including those with high and low levels of sustainability. In order to evaluate universities on sustainability level for the purposes of sampling, this study again follows Scheer-Irvine et al. (2008) in using “The College Sustainability Report Card” (Sustainable Endowments Institute 2009), an online ranking of 332 universities in the United States and Canada on various objective and subjective measures of sustainability. These authors noted that too many studies on environmental opinions have only focused on the high end of the environmentalism distribution (Scheer-Irvine et al. 2008). In addition to sampling from both the high and low ends of the spectrum, I attempted to increase comparative power by over-



sampling universities with high rankings but without sustainability offices, given the theoretical importance of the influence of these offices. For this research, inclusion of high and low-ranking schools, and high-ranking schools with and without sustainability offices, is important because the literature generally predicts much more legitimating pressure and field-building, framing efforts to come from the students and administration at the high-ranking schools. Frame alignment attempts by the university should be particularly important at the high-ranking schools with sustainability offices. Following the literature, this means that diffusion of the discourse should occur differently for the different categories of universities, making the comparison vital to the research agenda.

The sampling of universities for the study will be explained in greater detail. As noted, sampling is done using the “College Sustainability Report Card,” run by a non-profit group called The Sustainable Endowments Institute (SEI), who predictably focus on universities’ endowment, investment, and shareholder characteristics as they are linked to its sustainability practices. However, perhaps seeking broader appeal, they also grade on administration, climate change and energy policies, food and recycling, green building, student involvement, and transportation (SEI 2009). The interviews reinforced my notion that the SEI ranking system is currently the most prominent in minds of sustainability staff and students. In sampling from the both the top and bottom approximately 20% of the sustainability grade distribution, I recalculated the grades provided on the Institute's website, removing the measures related to endowments, investments, and shareholders because I do not believe that these play as large of a role in the lives of the students, though there certainly have been exceptions to this in the past (e.g. Soule 1997). Also, I removed measures related to student

involvement since this had the potential to confound the degree of adoption by student organizations. Since the grades for the different grading categories (administration, climate change and energy, etc.) for any one school tend to be correlated, the removal of the endowment, investment, shareholder, and student involvement categories did not significantly change the sampling frame. Based on time constraints, I settled on a sample of seven universities. Although I initially examined a cluster of 10 states, in the end I simply expanded my geographical focus until I had acquired the desired heterogeneity, also excluding schools that had no relevant officially recognized student organizations. Due to the scarcity of schools with very low scores, this led to a distribution of individuals across three states with 14, 12, and 3 individuals coming from each.

Once I had selected a sample of universities, I reviewed the “student activities” sections of the universities' websites. These sections usually contain a list of officially recognized, chartered student organizations, though the information is not always current. Helpful in finding organizations that I would expect to have some alignment with the sustainability frame, some of the sustainability offices also maintain lists on their websites of student organizations that they consider allies. If a group did not exist on the internet in any form, either through university recognition, self-publication, or media attention, it will likely not have passed the criteria for founding established by Minkoff (1997). I selected groups that, either by name or by posted description of governing documents, fall into the universe of vulnerable organizations. It is important to define the universe of organizations relevant to this study: those organizations that I believe are most vulnerable to adopting a sustainability discourse, mobilizing according to a sustainability master frame, according to how

sustainability was described in the earlier literature review. In the definition of sustainable development, the breadth of “development” encompasses environmental, economic, and social concerns, but sustainability seems to most readily overlap with environmental concerns. The dominance of environmental organizations in the universe of vulnerable organizations is supported in the final composition of the interviewed student groups. In addition to environmental, vegetarian, and animal rights groups, other types of groups that would theoretically fall into the population of vulnerable organizations include social and economic justice groups, “green” entrepreneurship groups, engineering groups, and groups with a purpose of giving technical assistance to developing countries. In general, where there is a concern with “development” of any of the three types, there should be a chance of adoption, although this was not borne out by representation in the actual sample. When these groups did exist in the setting, I was unable to contact them. The individual characteristics of the cases and the organizations within them are discussed in greater detail below.

After obtaining the list of relevant organizations, I solicited interviews from organizational leaders via e-mail. I sought to interview a representative from each relevant organization in order to get the comprehensive picture of organizational characteristics and institutionalization in the setting. I did make use of snowball sampling methods (Cress and Snow 2000, Robinson 2009) while soliciting interviews by asking those that I successfully contacted to refer me to other relevant organization leaders. Some respondents emphasized that another person was the person who *really* knew what was going on in the setting, allow me to home in on the student leaders with greatest legitimacy among their peers. Referrals were also fruitful in that out of date contacts often were able to provide me with the current

leaders' e-mail addresses.

Traveling to the university settings, I conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews that enabled me to adapt my questioning to the unknown reality of how the institutionalization of sustainability was occurring, and of whether these student organizations had adopted it as a mobilizing master frame. As I conducted more interviews, my questions brought up themes that had emerged during other interviews at that or other schools, allow me to isolate the most critical mechanisms that are at work. This was particularly helpful for the comparison of the different sustainability offices. I attempted to set aside the theoretical framework at first during the interviews in order to get at the members' meanings within their specific contextual environments and inductively create theory (Emerson 1995: 139-141). Not only do I want to know their indigenous meanings of sustainability and their understanding of how it came to have whatever role it has in their lives and their organizations' identity, I also sought to uncover when they might invoke different meanings, especially when those meanings might come from the framing efforts of another actor. This method will allow the study to get at not only what "sustainability" means to these actors, but more importantly, how affected they actually are by the framing influence of the university administration or other field-building framers. Following the field-framing theorizing, I was especially looking at meaning for these terms that seemed to come from the university administration or sustainability office. The real picture of what is occurring turned out to be more complex than I had anticipated.

This study makes use of qualitative methods because it is my goal to begin to answer the

“how” questions of institutionalization and probe the multiple influences and minutia of the process of the diffusion of this newly relevant environmental discourse which serves as a master frame for mobilization. This study also enables me to look at adoption and diffusion as interactive and contested processes rather than treating them as binaries. The interviews are able to show how organizations shape the very discourse that they adopt.

During the duration of the field work, I often used the 2010 College Sustainability Report Card (SEI 2009) to give me direction in developing interview questions, since it contains the complete questionnaire responses submitted by actors at most of the universities that are ranked. Questionnaire responses are typically submitted by both university staff and students, so they serve as a rich source of data on the public sustainability efforts of each university. In the interviews, I was able to ask interviewees to interpret or account for survey results about student sustainability efforts. I used the university sustainability websites, when applicable, in a similar way to ask both students and staff about the accuracy or ground-level effect of the claims made. In trying to determine the degree to which these student organizations have adopted the sustainability as a master frame, and therefore the degree of frame alignment between the organizations and the sustainability offices, my interview questions centered on four broad indicators: (1) does the group use the frame's *language* (sustainable, green, renewable) in speech, regardless of whether or how they link it to ideas, or what do they think of others used of these terms; (2) does the group comprehend the *ideas* of sustainability, as shown by how they explain or define it; (3) does the group have behaviors or activities that are *applications* of the ideas of sustainability, such as coalition or collaborative activities centered on promoting renewable energy; and (4) does the group

*interact* and/or work with university staff whose ostensible purpose is to institutionalize sustainability.

To interview the 29 individuals, I utilized group interviews of two to four individuals often, with 11 people interviewed solo while the remaining 18 were interviewed in 6 groups. The interviews were digitally recorded, the recordings ranging in length from 50 to 97 minutes. I found that the group interviews encouraged a more relaxed atmosphere, with members of the same group able to remind each other of details of past events and present a vivid picture of the organization's activities as a whole. Roughly reflecting the gender ratio in American universities, 16 of the 29 individuals interviewed were women. Four of the interviewees were sustainability staff (representing every university with staff, except Northern), two were interns, and two of the organizational leaders who made up the remainder had previously been interns at the sustainability office. The bulk of the interviewees (25) did come from schools with higher rankings and with sustainability offices, both because of a correlation between university size and sustainability score, leading to the presence of more student organizations, and the fact that there were no sustainability staff to interview at the schools with low scores.

To analyze the interviews, I initially coded the transcripts using the Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software for the analysis of the interview transcripts. I both attempted to code the components of the environmental, social, and economic discourses to which the organizations and staff subscribed, and code the references to other actors that had influenced their thoughts and behaviors. Following the coding, which parsed each interview into the

smallest components, I sought to organize these components into the larger themes and patterns that were present within and across universities. With the original conception that sustainability offices would be field-framing to create populations of allied student organizations, I wanted to examine the microprocesses (Vasi 2006) that organizational actors perform when framing alignment processes are acting upon them to influence adoption. As the interviewees describe decision-making processes during the interview, patterns do emerge among those that adopt or reject sustainability as a master frame. When analyzing the interviews, I looked at each organization individually, but also grouped together all interviews for a school to try to get the entire sustainability picture for each case. I also compared the themes presented by staff with those presented by students. In the results and discussion, I divide the interview contents into the stages of the institutionalization narrative that they represent, but also separate out the different mobilization and frame alignment processes. Overall, this form of analysis helps identify “emergent patterns and themes” (Robinson 2009: 6) and identify the interviewees' sources of information on the topics of interest. As sustainability is emergent, its use in these interviews will give a better sense of how the discourse is currently being applied, perhaps improving upon how it is portrayed in the literature.

### *THE CASES*

The cases that serve as units of analysis are seven four-year colleges and universities located in three adjacent states in the Mid and South-Atlantic region of the United States. Some important characteristics of these colleges and universities are summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

All of the schools are engaged with the sustainability discourse at some level. Given the rapid increase in the adoption of sustainability practices, as described earlier, the attributes used to select the cases did not accurately reflect reality at the time of the interviews. However, these cases still provide a heterogeneous mix of public (n=4) and private (n=3), large and small, and more and less selective schools. It also provides a mixture of high and low sustainability ratings and old and new sustainability offices, which I have determined to be in existence once a full-time staff member devoted to sustainability is hired. I had originally included a category of schools that I characterized as having high sustainability scores, but not having offices. However, in the time between the SEI reporting and the time of the interviews, both of the schools selected to be in this category had hired full-time sustainability staff members (One of the schools was later excluded due to time constraints). It appears that there is only a brief window in which a school has achieved a high rating before it also adds sustainability staff. The reason for this will be made clear in the results section.



**Table 1: General Characteristics of the Universities\***

School Name	Ownership	Population (approximate)	Classification	Location	Selectivity (% Admitted)	Applicable Programs
<i>Southeastern</i>	Public	30000	Research (very high)	Suburb: Large	31-40	A, B, C
<i>Southern Regional</i>	Public	20000	Research (high)	City: Midsize	71-80	
<i>Lakeside</i>	Private	2000	Baccalaureate	Suburb: Large	21-30	**
<i>Bough</i>	Private	15000	Research (very high)	City: Midsize	21-30	D, E
<i>Metropolitan</i>	Private	7000	Research (high)	City: Large	81-90	A, F
<i>Northern</i>	Private	4000	Baccalaureate	City: Midsize	31-40	C
<i>City-Integrated</i>	Public	32000	Research (high)	City: Midsize	61-70	C

\* Some results are approximated to avoid disclosure.

\*\* This school was in the process of developing an environmental studies major.

A: City/Urban, Community, and Regional Planning.

B: Environmental Science.

C: Environmental Studies.

D: Forestry

E: Natural Resources Management and Policy, Natural Resources/Conservation

F: Architecture

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/COLLEGENAVIGATOR/>

**Table 2: Sustainability Characteristics of the Universities**

School Name	Sustainability Rating	Commitments	Sustainability Office Founding	Number of Sustainability Staff	Type of Sustainability Staff
<i>Southeastern</i>	A	PCC + Talloires	2001	2	Full-time
<i>Southern Regional</i>	D+		2010	1 <sup>A</sup>	Part-time <sup>C</sup>
<i>Lakeside</i>	B+	PCC	2008	1	Fellowship
<i>Bough</i>	A	PCC	2004	2	Full-time
<i>Metropolitan</i>	D-		NA	0 <sup>B</sup>	NA
<i>Northern</i>	A-	PCC	2009	1 <sup>A</sup>	Full-time
<i>City-Integrated</i>	A-	PCC + Talloires	2008	2	Full-time <sup>D</sup>

A: Movement of Staff Member from Northern to Southern Regional.

B: An energy management staff member supported sustainability initiatives.

C: presumably becoming full-time with hire of staff member from Northern.

D: One staff member splits time between the sustainability office and another office in facilities dept.

Sources: <http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org/signatories>, [http://www.ulsf.org/programs\\_talloires.html](http://www.ulsf.org/programs_talloires.html), Sustainable Endowments Institute (2009)

There were some unanticipated connections between the cases in the form of movement of

sustainability staff from one university or college to another. Given the geographic proximity of the schools, this movement is easier to understand, but the transfer of knowledge through the transfer of individuals and its implications for isomorphism is interesting nonetheless. Notably, the current sustainability director of Bough University had written the first sustainability assessment document at Southern Regional before taking the job at Bough. This transfer left Southern Regional with a vacancy that was only filled with a part-time role for the next several years. Northern University was described by SEI as not having a sustainability office or staff, but they in fact did hire someone at the end of the 2008-2009 year and this person served in a full-time capacity for the 2009-2010 year. At the end of the 2009-2010 year, the staff member at Northern left to take a similar job at Southern Regional (This movement is indicated by asterisks in Table 2). Other than these direct transfers, there was also interaction between the offices and the student organizations at the separate colleges and universities, examples of which appear in the results section. In the appendix, I offer a brief description of each case to illustrate their overall culture and structure in the context of the study.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

The interviews in this study provide the narratives of change at seven universities, combinations of student and administrative efforts to advocate for environmental causes or establish and implement sustainability initiatives. On a trajectory of sustainability implementation, the end point for a university is complete carbon neutrality. As very few, if any, universities have already reached this goal, these narratives of change are incomplete. The shape of the universities' sustainability efforts and the student organizations' role in the environmental advocacy landscape is still being contested, and there is currently significant variation in the solidity of planning between schools. While trying to avoid the idea that there is a set path to be taken by all universities toward sustainability implementation, the interviews suggest that there are some interesting commonalities in the paths that these universities are taking. Therefore, the findings will follow the course of the narrative, rather than analyzing each case separately, but I will highlight differences within each phase of the narrative. I will analyze the narrative by (a) looking at the diagnostic framing that elevates climate change to a status requiring an institutional response, (b) looking at the prognostic framing that determines that a climate commitment and its institutionalization are the best approach to climate change threats, (c ) looking at how sustainability staff and students characterize the roles of sustainability staff in the universities, and (d) looking at the various ways that student and sustainability staff practice frame alignment to satisfy the demands of

all audiences and structure their activities for greatest efficacy. Each section of the findings will be followed by a brief discussion linking it to the theoretical issues that it addressed. Through the telling of this process, we will see that (1) climate change is able to unify efforts because of its perceived breadth of impacts, serving both diagnostic and motivational purposes; (2) while students may set the institutionalization of sustainability in motion through contestation, the university's adoption and implementation of the discourse leads to student organizations moving toward cooperation and consensus-building with the administration and staff; (3) sustainability staff see themselves in the role of “connectors” who coordinate the efforts of various parties; (4) environmental framing is usually used in the recruitment of students and economic framing is usually used in the recruitment of staff and administration; (5) having one, or one dominant, environmental organization leads to closer cooperation between staff and students on sustainability implementation; and, (6) student organizations embrace social activities and eschew political ones.

### *CLIMATE CHANGE AS A UNIFYING AND MOBILIZING ISSUE*

Students and sustainability staff draw connections between climate change, or global warming caused by greenhouse gases, and sustainability efforts. This occurs with climate change serving as an external shock that has heightened awareness of overall environmental degradation and brought together individuals with various interests spanning the environmental, economic, and social. The human behaviors that lead to climate change and other broad impacts serve as the diagnostic frame, while the implementation of sustainability measures serve as the prognostic frame. Barry, a veganism and animal rights advocate that

had graduated from Southeastern University and continued to do advocacy there, identified climate change as the major challenge and sustainability as all the things we must do to maintain our society:

To me, I guess in a nutshell sustainability is like: it's sustainability or it's (sound and hand gesture as if to snuff out a candle)... you know, death for our species. It's like, we have to learn how to live sustainably or... we're not going to be sustained. And, uh, I think this is a... given the various challenges facing the world to just- you know, climate change- people understand what we're up against, and there is, my impression is that there is more... there is more commitment and intelligence and resources and people and money working for sustainability now in America than ever before.

More pragmatically, the interviewees suggest that sustainability is tied to energy issues. The burning of fossil fuels is a major contributor to climate change, and since fossil fuels are a non-renewable resource, they are unsustainable by any definition. The sustainability staff member from City-Integrated University ties fossil fuels and sustainability together when he says that in order to achieve sustainability with a larger population you need: “a different kind of growth, sustainable growth, and you probably need non-fossil fuel growth.”

Alternately, at Lakeside College, the President's decision to sign the PCC was tied more to environmental degradation related to nonrenewable energy production than to the potential effects of climate change. Members of the environmental organization said that it was the President's personal experience that led him to adopt the PCC.

Food production was another area in which non-renewable energy and unsustainability were relevant to interviewees. When giving an example of how the contemporary food system is non-sustainable, Ryan, a member of an organization promoting local, organic, and socially equitable food at Southeastern University, pointed out that it is “based on fossil fuels.”

Helen, one of the leaders of the student committee at Southeastern University that administers funds for renewable energy projects, when discussing the inclusion of industrial agricultural practices within the concerns of sustainability, called the impacts of industrial agriculture part of the “larger issues we're looking at with energy. You know, global warming kind of stuff, climate change.” This tie could also be seen through the ultimate goal of the sustainability offices of making their campuses climate neutral, as required by the PCC. Energy efficiency and climate change were frequently used in the same sentence by sustainability staff members.

When I asked a student leader at Bough about the appeal of sustainability over other reasons that people might get involved in environmentalism, he immediately drew a link between sustainability and climate change:

It's more accessible because it applies to everybody because, you know, climate change is something that is *gonna* impact everybody, you know, it's going to affect everybody in some capacity... that something everybody is more interested in getting involved in. [...] When you get this problem with global climate change, um, I feel like it applies to everybody so much, that everybody realizes that they have to have more of a say in it. More of an effect, trying to change that.

This leader of an environmental organization, Greg, also had an opinion on why it was easy for sustainability to be dealt with at the institutional level that was related to the appeal of climate change:

Climate change is very mainstream. It helps make [environmentalism] more mainstream. Because the people who are just sort of doing those conservation things: save the forests, save the whales, um, didn't always tend to be the mainstream people who were running the universities, running corporations... but another place (sic) the issue of climate change, you're more likely to get, you're more likely to find the

CEO-type or the more political types or, and just people who are more mainstream, focusing on those issues, which is why suddenly you have a sustainability office instead of just, you know, instead of students protesting... about some sort of, about an environmental issue. You have a sustainability office run by the university that they can work with in a more administrative way.

For the environmental student organization at City-Integrated University, addressing climate change had served as a motivating issue even during a period of extreme organizational turmoil, when the membership was divided over the direction that the organization would take:

Around that time, we had the PCC (American College & University Presidents' Climate Commitment). That was, like, our motivating thing. People that were in the club that were willing to work on things that were around campus were, like, "The Presidents' Climate Commitment is the most important thing we can do right now." And so that's what we worked towards, but we were also, like trying to work towards transitioning from... to having a new group.

Similarly, at Northern University, when two environmental groups were competing for relevance in the year before they merged, one of the groups pushed for the PCC to be signed while other goals fell by the wayside. Later, when describing their attempts to get a leading climate scientist to give a talk at the university, the organization from City-Integrated presented climate science as a unifying issue that is safe for an academic venue because it is not, in their opinions, political: "We want him to just talk about the science behind climate change. And that's, that's mainly because...we're an academic institution. [...] We really have to make sure that he's not doing anything political. So, it fits perfectly with what our group does." While acknowledging the possibility of "climate change denial", both the sustainability staff and the student organization at City-Integrated thought that, as long as they stuck to the scientific arguments around climate change, they would be able to remain

mainstream and draw a lot of support.

The broad impacts attributed to climate change, impacting many groups, and the linking of climate change with unsustainability spur these students to get involved in environmental organizations and spur universities to change their institutional practices. A focus on greenhouse gas and other pollutant output and the consumption on nonrenewable resources provides a diagnosis that can concretely be remedied.

*The Diagnostic Framing of Climate Change, Amplification of Energy Issues, and Creation of Elite Support*

In this phase of diagnostic framing (Cress and Snow 2000), both students and administrators are clearly identifying climate change and nonrenewable energy production as problems that must be remedied. They present climate change as a life or death problem that must be addressed immediately, and by a broad coalition of actors. More concretely, they diagnose nonrenewable energy consumption as the problem that is the primary cause of climate change and amplify this frame repeatedly, linking other topics such as agriculture or social sustainability to it. Students also present climate change as being able to produce political opportunity (McAdam 1999, Minkoff 1994), essential to mobilization, through the support of elites. Business elites and university administrators are both presented as being vulnerable to the overwhelming importance of the threat of climate change. Even though climate change has a political nature on the national bipartisan scene, it is portrayed as having a symbolic association (Polletta 2005) with being apolitical in this academic setting. The broad support



appeal of sustainability mirrors the breadth, ambiguity, or integrative nature of the issue itself (Goerner et al. 2008, Torgerson 1995, Torgerson 1999). While this will be addressed in greater detail in the following section, the diagnosis of climate change as an important issue even seems able to motivate organizational founding or transformation upon the basis of getting the Presidents' Climate Commitment signed, a shift in the direction of collaborative tactics for organizations that were previously more political and protest-oriented.

#### *THE SIGNING OF THE PRESIDENTS' CLIMATE COMMITMENT AS THE FIRST STEP IN INSTITUTIONALIZATION*

While climate change and other environmentally degrading actions provide the bulk of the external shocks and targets for the actions of the student organizations and their universities, the identification of the problem does not itself explain the founding process of sustainability offices or the hiring of sustainability staff members. In the cases examined for this study, the drafting of “climate action plans” (CAPs) for the achievement of carbon neutrality and the founding of sustainability offices is directly attributed to the signing of the American College & University Presidents' Climate Commitment. After signing this commitment, universities must stick to a series of steps outlining the institutionalization of sustainability toward carbon neutrality or risk losing their status as signatories.

In telling of his hiring as sustainability director, the staff member from City-Integrated gives an example of the level of ambiguity that still surrounds the institutionalization process:

They signed it without maybe really understanding all what this meant in terms of what climate commitment meant. [...] So, that's when they came to me, and they said, "Are you interested in this job?" And I said, "Well, what does it all mean?" And, then, they went, "Well..." And I said, "Okay, that's my kind of job because that's what I've been doing for thirty years," so... that's fine. I said, "I can go figure it out and read it out," and that's how it started. Um, and then we created a committee, which was the City-Integrated University sustainability committee, to look at whatever it was that we understood, or interpolated, was the President's Climate Commitment. So, that was my job, and I sort of staffed that committee. And so, *that's* how we started. The President's Climate Commitment, which *became*, for want of a better word, the parameters of the rubric for what we did, because it wasn't that we were- we *did*, as a university, bits and pieces of things that you could call sustainable. I mean, sustainable is a big word. Sustainable research, sustainable curriculum, you name it. I mean, anybody can interpret it whatever they want.

This brings together the ideas that schools may sign the commitment at the urging of students or other parties without realizing the entirety of what they're committing to, that there is scant knowledge about how a sustainability director is supposed to go about his or her job, and that the ambiguity around job duties stems from the still-undefined breadth of sustainability.

The sustainability staff member at Lakeside College gave a clear statement of how the signing of the PCC led the school to create the position that she now occupies:

In the Fall of 2007, we signed the Presidents' Climate Commitment. Um, so my senior year. And... they sort of started talking after that and realized they needed somebody to implement that. Um, and then they also wanted to... sort of coordinate sustainability initiatives across campus. There was a lot going on and, um, sustainability at Lakeside's been very grassroots. And, so, there's a lot going on in different places and they wanted someone to sort of bring those efforts together and so they created my position in, which is known as the "*sustainability fellow*."

Additionally, members of Lakeside's one environmental organization were aware that the President had set up committees, of which they were members, for the purpose of drafting the CAP. If staff are hired to administer the PCC, then their agenda and priorities for the first

two to three years are essentially set by the benchmarks outlined in the document. Using the example of Lakeside's staff member again, she spent her first year focusing on completing the greenhouse gas inventory and her second year overseeing a committee of thirty-five people that helped her draft the CAP. Additionally, some schools make use of consultants for writing their CAPs, but the staff member at City-Integrated made it clear that the field of university environmental consulting is itself still nascent.

For those student organizations willing to take a collaborative approach with the administration, the institutionalization of sustainability can also provide opportunities for them to more closely integrate themselves into the university's efforts. Helen, a student leader from Southeastern University, portrayed the benefit of the publication of the CAP this way:

I think that is a way that sustainability office has really, has triggered student involvement, is that they, you know, publish stuff like the climate action plan, that kind of stuff. So... when students read it and, you know, figure out what they're trying to do, then they think, "Hey, my organization could really help do this," and, you know, they mention a lot of student organizations in it and they have articles, so... That, just kind of making us aware of where... organizations can be effective.

As we will see later, this dovetails with what the sustainability staff member of Southeastern has to say about not needing to "preach to the choir" in recruitment efforts because those organizations with similar interests will make the effort to seek out collaboration opportunities anyway. The student leaders saw the CAP as not only making the school more effective in addressing climate change, but as also making their organizational initiatives easier to complete, or giving them more opportunities to have an impact.

Once the climate action plan has been written and approved, the path of the university toward

sustainability becomes entrenched, and challengers find it harder to get their suggestions incorporated. This can be seen in the case of Southeastern University, where a campaign run by the Sierra Club sought to have the university stop burning coal at their co-generation plant. A staff member suggested that the activists might be misinformed about the goals of the Climate Action Plan (CAP) and not understand “how comprehensive it is.” While agreeing with the ultimate goal of eliminating coal as a means of reaching carbon neutrality, the staff member emphasized that the CAP was created with a “democratic consensus approach,” incorporating input from the whole university. Effectively, the staff member seeks to extend the frame of the university's sustainability efforts to satisfy outside challenges while rejecting any change to the pace at which they achieve carbon neutrality.

If signing the commitment sets in motion the institutionalization of sustainability practices, as its authors intended it to do, the third-party ratings also appear to be supporting and reinforcing this logic. While the ratings reward a lot of behavioral measures, such as percentage of food purchased within a certain radius, some points are directly rewarded for these commitments and for the presence of institutions such as environmental organizations, even without evidence of action or efficacy. Even if the ratings reward schools purely based on concrete behaviors, this will encourage the creation of staff positions that have the power to coordinate efforts across the campus, a role that I will illustrate later on.

Sustainability ratings lead not only to institutionalization within schools, but isomorphism across them. A common topic relating to the various sustainability ratings was how cumbersome and unstandardized they all were, with staff devoting too much time to filling

out various surveys. A proposed solution to this is the Sustainability Tracking and Rating System (STARS), which is created by the sustainability professional organization, the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). Allen, the sustainability staff member from Southeastern University, suggests that the standardization of the STARS system will allow schools to publicly provide these various measures and for the various independent sustainability rating systems to use the measures in whatever weighting scheme or proportion that they wish. However, Allen's statements also suggest that this further standardization and institutionalization could impede innovation within sustainability behaviors and practices:

We committed that we will base our measure of sustainability on AASHE STARS. So, it's no longer just me putting together an biannual report, going: "Oh yeah, I think I'll write a chapter about animal rights." Now it's... that's not really on my radar now professionally because... it hasn't risen into the national level. Um, I think if that becomes an issue to sustainability really on the national level, then it will be incorporated and then we'll think about it, but right now I think that's just sort of a niche... a niche interest.

This suggests that sustainability staff may use standardization to resist student pressure to adopt certain practices. However, staff members from other universities maintained that the students are the drivers of sustainability, and innovations would follow the will of the students. This ties into the role of the sustainability staff members as connectors and facilitators, which I elaborate later.

As universities seek to institutionalize sustainability initiatives using this rubric laid out by the PCC, isomorphism occurs as universities copy the approaches and interpretations used by other schools. For instance, the greenhouse gas inventories and CAPs are areas in which

sustainability staff might look to the examples set by similar schools to see what they should measure and how they should measure it. For example, the universities with medical schools and hospitals had decided to include hospitals in their greenhouse gas inventories, but not in their CAPs. One of the areas that seems to be universally excluded even from greenhouse gas emissions inventories is the amount of greenhouse gases produced during the production and transport of farm animals that will be consumed on campus. The quotation in the previous paragraph reveals that the adoption of the STARS system may make it even more difficult for the impact of animal agriculture to be measured in this way. Barry, the veganism and animal rights activist at Southeastern University saw this as a glaring omission, but highlighted some of the difficulties of its inclusion:

I've spoken with both [the director of sustainability] and [the] chancellor [...] about this issue specifically, and, and the sustainability report, um, does not factor in the greenhouse gas emissions, and, and resource use and environmental footprint *of* the food that is served on campus. And there are some practical challenges, which I understand. I think maybe the chief one is that it's hard to know... how much fossil fuel is used or how many greenhouse gases were emitted at, um, animals that were raised, you know, somewhere else, processed somewhere else, and *then* brought into the university. It's not the same as, um, we don't have a *meter* on that in the same way that we have a meter on how much energy we're using in the buildings or, you know, what our heating bills are, how much gas we're using in the motor fleet. So, so that's a... I would say that that is an *enormous* oversight and one that's commonly made and it's, I, I say enormous because, if you think about, I mean, because of the, because of how serious we know the environmental implications are of animal agriculture, such as the UN study, "Livestock's Long Shadow."

Despite issues such as this being left out of official measurements because of the difficulty of quantifying them, student organizations showed their innovativeness in being able to still bring attention to the unsustainability of some food practices, for example. Specifically, the group at Southeastern that focused on local and organic food was planning a food inventory that would track the sources of the food served in the dining halls, giving some transparency

to the process qualitatively even if not measuring the impact in terms of greenhouse gases. Student organizations may fill the gaps in a campus's sustainability efforts by addressing those issues which staff are not able to. Isomorphism occurs among student groups also, as they share effective tactics at conferences and summits such as Powershift. One influential area in which this occurred was the sharing of strategies to implement “green fees,” student fees that would provide a yearly source of funds for renewable energy projects.

While some aspects of the institutionalization of sustainability at these universities are still being contested, the Presidents' Climate Commitment has lent a great deal of structure to the initiatives, especially at those schools that did not have histories of sustainability efforts prior to the chartering of the PCC. There appear to be several models emerging concerning sustainability staff members, with some schools hiring staff “permanently,” and others rotating in just-graduated alumni for one or two year fellowships. Even at those schools that had sustainability staff before the chartering of the PCC, additional staff positions have been added in the years since, perhaps reflecting a growing mandate and greater responsibility. The development of ratings systems warrants further attention, as the professional association develops their own STARS system, and as schools may alter their efforts based on any dominant parameters.

*The Presidents' Climate Commitment as Prognostic Framing, a Cause of Isomorphism, and an Opportunity for Collaboration Between Student Organizations and University Administrations*

In this phase of prognostic framing (Cress and Snow 2000), it is generally the students that are presenting the signing of the Presidents' Climate Commitment as the first step in the “solution” to the problem of climate change and non-renewable energy production. The PCC begins the institutionalization of sustainability within the university by setting out some steps that universities must conform to. The steps of the PCC requiring the establishment of “structures” have been interpreted to mean that the university needs to hire or assign staff to work full time on drafting a “Climate Action Plan,” and then implementing it. While the role of the sustainability staff member is still ambiguous, its definition for the first few years is largely determined by the language of the PCC. If the university does not already have a sustainability committee at the time of the signing, the staff member constructs one. The composition of the committee can be a critical point for determining the degree of relational density (Baum and Oliver 1992, 1996) between staff and students, as the staff or administrators determine whether to include students on the committee, and, if so, whether these students come from existing environmental organizations or from another source. For those organizations that did seem to have a high degree of “institutional embeddedness” (Meyer and Rowan 1977), such as at Lakeside and Northern, the organizational members were being exposed to the ideas of the sustainability staffers on a near-daily basis.

Normative isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) begins to play a strong role in this phase of institutionalization as university administrators, once the institutionalization of sustainability has begun, seek to do it in a professionally normative way, sometimes following guidelines put in place by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The independent sustainability ratings, such as those by the Sustainable Endowments



Institute, also serve a coercive role in promoting isomorphism, since those schools that do not approach sustainability through a long-term approach suffer a negative public perception shift. As planning and, specifically, the transparency of climate efforts become normative, student organizations can choose to collaborate to varying degrees, moving toward lesser institutional challenge (Minkoff 1999). They have, in essence, created political opportunities (McAdam 1999, Minkoff 1994) and resources (McCarthy and Zald 1977) for themselves, especially once green fees are adopted by the student body as a prognosis to climate change, simultaneously serving as a prognosis for previous organizational ineffectiveness. Mimetic isomorphism also begins to occur between student groups as they attend conferences and environmental summits and share those tactics that were most successful in establishing sustainability on their respective campuses.

#### *SUSTAINABILITY STAFF AS “CONNECTORS”*

Given the role that students have played in the signing of the PCC at some universities, it is unsurprising that sustainability staff portray themselves as “connectors” of student and staff efforts. This role of “connector” meant that staff members were connecting student organizations and the larger student body to resources, other individuals, or to paths of action that the staff believed would be particularly effective.

The sustainability director from City-Integrated University saw his job, when he was hired, as integrating some existing sustainability initiatives, plus following the steps of the PCC, as outlined earlier. He described the integration of initiatives, energy, and interest as connecting

the dots:

Part of my job is to either: create the dots and connect them, or find the dots that are kind of sustainability, and I do a lot of that just by going around and figuring out where all these little pockets of things are. So, when we were sort of talking to some of the [student organization] folks about the sustainable garden project that they, basically, wanted to do, you know, native species. I was actually talking to some folks here on the [medical school] campus- because this is our Year of the Environment, and it was a general call to all units and departments to do something- so the five professional schools wanted to do something for Earth Day, and do something for Year of the Environment, and they created, basically, a building, and energy competition: could they bring down the cost of energy and recycling. So, we helped them with that. Well, I'm talking to the, um, the head of graduate studies for the school of pharmacy, and she says, "Oh, my son's an eagle scout and they're looking for a project." And I go, "Oh, I got a project for you." So then, all of a sudden, Katherine now has forty scouts to help with the garden, and so now all of a sudden... But it's actually... It's Mary's son, who I'm helping with their [eagle scout project]... So, like, the dots *are* connected, and that's part... So, it's, so we do a lot. I think we've got a good relationship with the students. I mean, I respect them, and I think they respect us.

He emphasizes that connecting the dots allows him to help multiple parties accomplish their goals. He characterizes his role as "community organizing," helping others begin projects and then watching the ideas "percolate." Also, an idea that he shares with the sustainability staff member from Lakeside College is that they try to avoid sponsoring activities that are one-time events, like speakers. Instead, Robert, the staff member from City-Integrated, was pushing for a "green fees" program, which would operate as long as students supported it with referendums voted on every few years.

The sustainability staff member from Southeastern University said that he is involved in "informal education," "trying to engage them (students) outside the classroom." Later on, he explained the two parts of his job title, "research and outreach manager:"

When we say research, I'm not in a lab, I'm not doing studies to see what's more sustainable. When we say research, it's figuring out institutionally, doing institutional research: what is the university doing? So, I'm the one, me and my team of interns and campus partners. We're the ones who are really making calls, knocking on doors, going to events, just to *document* what people are doing... so that, you know, when someone comes to us and says "What is the university doing about climate change?", I can be like, "Hey, let me tell you about the events, the courses, the community outreach we do, etc., etc. So one part is research, and that is sort of challenging, because you sort of have to know what everyone is doing, which is physically impossible, so... The second part is outreach manager, and as outreach manager, there is just as hard a challenge, because my goal is to get people to engage in sustainability: to get them to ca... to get them to be aware of it, to care about it, and to practice it, and there are so many different groups and divisions. This campus is *so* diverse.

So, research is about publicizing the sustainability efforts to the larger community while outreach is about framing their efforts to involve more members of the university. With the exception of their role working with the student committee that handles green fees and plans renewable energy projects, the staff at Southeastern are less directly involved with the student organizations than at the other schools, perhaps due to a much larger number of environmental organizations at Southeastern with longer histories of autonomy.

Jennifer, a Southeastern student who had been a member and leader of multiple environmental organizations and campaigns, and who had served as a summer intern for the sustainability office, characterized the role of the office as being able to push things in a direction that took sustainability into account: "They kind of sit in a role where they can, they can direct certain university activities towards, like, more sustainable *methods*. So, like, they were gonna build [a parking deck, gymnasium, and dining hall complex], but their involvement made it so that it was more... green. That's my *understanding* of what their primary role is." Agreeing with this, Ryan, a member of an organization focused on local, organic, sustainable food believed that the sustainability office mainly had an advisory role,

with the ability to “influence policy,” but not to “legislate.”

Bough University, one of the three schools that had two sustainability staff members, along with Southeastern and City-Integrated, had a sustainability director and a sustainability outreach and education coordinator. This set-up was generally the same at the other two schools. The staff member who I spoke with, who was the outreach and education coordinator, the junior position, said that her job involved publicizing the initiatives of the university, but also doing greenhouse gas research, creating an “individualized carbon calculator” and coordinating the student interns. In addition to these tasks, this staff member was responsible for some of the reporting to independent sustainability rating services, shaping the outside perception of the university. In relation to her job, she says that the sustainability director is responsible for the “higher level stuff,” such as coordinating with other universities and applying for large grants, serving the connector role between universities, instead of within only one. The leader of an environmental organization at Bough, Greg, said that the sustainability office was not always the origin of initiatives, and did not always play such a large role, but that when an initiative gained traction, it “always sort of has a hand in it, a word in it.” He saw them as providing a “human capital sort of resource,” and providing them with contacts, elaborating: “They’ll give backing to our ideas on campus to other people who might be interested in implementing them. Um, like, it’s always for, for different campaigns that we’ve had, it’s always been a good step to meet with them, to hear what they have to say about it, and see what they can do to help us with it.” He still saw their main role as authoring the climate action plan, however.

Lilly, the staff member from Lakeside College, in reference to the student organizations that she informally advises, said: “The biggest thing I do there, actually, is connecting them with physical plant.” As detailed earlier, this is in addition to creating a committee to author the campus's climate action plan, and after completing the greenhouse gas inventory the previous year. Later, when elaborating on her role as a connector, Lilly said that it requires her to be very aware of what is going on across campus and to have a broad view of all the different academic and staff departments. If she knows what is going on around campus, she can fulfill her role of “plugging people in” when opportunities arise.

Additionally, the members of the environmental organization at Lakeside saw Lilly as bringing a great deal of energy to their efforts: “She comes to every single [organization] meeting, she's always coming up with ideas, she's super-organized, she's always super-pumped about everything, and her motivation and... just some really cool ideas.” While the staffer is providing a lot of energy, she is also providing ideas that can harness the energy of the students. Later, they more explicitly described her as a connector, as a “link” to resources and human contacts. At Lakeside, the students described the sustainability office as having “a pretty big budget.” The staff member later explained that she cannot directly fund things, but can “co-sponsor” events with student organizations, so that they split the cost and can hold larger events.

When I asked the members of the environmental organization at Northern University about whether they interacted at all with the new sustainability director, who had only started his job a year earlier, they gave a response similar to the students at Lakeside, mentioning almost

daily contact at meetings or by e-mail. They portray the sustainability staff member at Northern as a source of knowledge, as a connector, and as someone who is taken seriously by the administration and other departments, a source of legitimacy. At a different time, these students contrasted their expectations with the role of the staff member as a connector and aid to them before he arrived with pessimism when they learned more about his duties concerning the PCC, eventually culminating in their understanding that he was able to perform both roles and be of great service to them. Northern also served as an example of a disconnect between the tactics of the sustainability staff and the university administrators. The student organization leaders describe how they have been left off of the sustainability committee:

Isabelle: It's hard to connect with our... Like, as much as our administration is involved with environmental stuff, they're not involved with *us* [Thomas: Yeah.], which just confuses us, and we, like, try to talk to them about it. Like, we talked with the president last Spring and they weren't, like...

Thomas: They *want* to address all these issues, or definitely, recently shown, like, they've been paying more attention to it, but [Isabelle: ...they don't want to work with us.] they're not working through the student groups that are, like, already paying attention to some of these issues [Isabelle: Yeah, really weird.], which just puts us in an awkward spot.

While the sustainability staff member seems to devote plenty of effort to working with this student organization, the “sustainability working group” or committee did not draw members from the organization, as happened at other universities. To be clear, the involvement of the students on these committees is by no means nominal or insignificant. For example, a student committee-member at City-Integrated claimed to spend more time on committee work than on either the work for his student organization *or* his coursework. Exclusion from the committee at certain universities represents exclusion from the more significant long-term

planning stages of the university's move toward sustainability. It may also represent a desire by university administrators to preempt the normal role of the environmental student organizations.

Occupying a middle status between sustainability staff and students, interns had varying amounts of autonomy at the different universities. The two sustainability interns that I interviewed from City-Integrated were basically operating as research assistants, looking up approaches taken by other universities for certain sustainability implementation topics, and reporting back to the sustainability coordinator. At Southeastern, a woman who had worked as a summer intern said that she had helped with media projects, using her skills as a journalism and advertising major. At Bough University, the sustainability staff member described the internship program as shifting from less to more autonomy, with the students originally being given daily or weekly assignments, and now devising their own semester projects with the approval of the staff. At Southeastern and Bough, the interns were supervised by the junior staffer, the outreach and research or outreach and education coordinator. At City-Integrated, interns were supervised and given assignments by the senior staffer, the sustainability director. Also, both interns from City-Integrated served on the sustainability committee that was helping author the climate action plan, and interacted with members of student organizations in that capacity. Even though these interns had less autonomy, they still had very positive views of the internship and saw it as having educational value for their own interests.

*The Isomorphic Institutionalization of Sustainability Through the Creation of Offices as Prognostic Framing, Political Opportunity Creation, and Resource Mobilization*

Once the PCC has been signed, the next step in prognosis (Cress and Snow 2000) and the institutionalization is the establishment of sustainability committees and offices. Originally the students, and then the administrators that have signed on to the commitment, frame sustainability staffers and other permanent structures as solutions to the campus's unsustainability. As embodiments of the integrative nature of sustainability (Goerner et al. 2008, Torgerson 1995, Torgerson 1999), these staff members are portrayed, and portray themselves, as connectors that link latent energies and coordinate previously uncoordinated efforts. With some funding of their own, and expertise in obtaining other funding, such as through “green fees,” these staffers initiate resource mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 1977) for student organizations. They also either serve as elite allies (McAdam 1999, Minkoff 1994) themselves or lend legitimacy to student organizations that seek to petition political elites, gently pushing the university's operations in a “greener” direction. These staffers become familiar with outside sustainability rating systems and complete the questionnaires upon which they are based, aligning their institution normatively and willingly contributing to isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

*MOBILIZING INTEREST AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LEVELS*

Once the institutionalization of sustainability has begun, students and sustainability staff make various frame alignment efforts in order to secure the cooperation and energy of the



university audiences, including other students, staff from other departments, administrators, and interested parties from the surrounding community. As some student organizations operate with ideals congruent with sustainability without actually joining the university's official efforts, I will look at these organizations' framing efforts also. First in this section, I will present how the sustainability staff members view their framing tasks, then how students view these framing efforts, and last how student organizations frame sustainability to various audiences.

Allen, the sustainability staff member at Southeastern University, talked about having to use a variety of approaches because of needing to appeal to various groups such as the Greek community, minority students, environmentalists, faculty, and staff. One tactic that the staff used to engage the students was to table at events and have students who passed by sign a pledge card to be more sustainable. On this card, they would fill in blanks outlining concrete steps of how to reduce waste, reduce energy use, and spread the ideas to others. The pledge, in the form of a post card, was mailed back to the students at the end of the semester in order to remind them of their commitment. The staff also gave the students a reusable water bottle with a symbol of the sustainability commitment on it as an incentive, after they had signed the pledge, although the staff member characterized this as “get[ting] them started on the right foot” rather than as an incentive. Later, Allen outlines how he specifically has started targeting those who are in the middle ground of frame resonance:

You know, I could spend all my time trying to either A: preach to the choir or B: try to preach to the non-choir, but what I've tried to do is sort of identify the people who are in-between. Like they're not the people who are *super-involved*, because those people are already going to do good things, and they're already informed. And they have the impetus to, you know, find out information if they want. [...] They'll reach

out to *us*. They'll come to our website, they'll read our report. Those people I think are going to- we want to support what they do, but I don't need to convince them. They're already in... At the same time, I've tried, unsuccessfully, at certain points, to engage audiences that just had... like I was walking into a room that was totally cold. They had no idea what sustainability was, and very little interest. And, somewhere between those two, there's, there are people who have heard of it, who it's on their mind, and those are the people we want to give them more information. So, for example, green jobs is a really big issue the last year. So, with the economy in the tank, um, and the interesting thing is that green jobs is more than just environment. That has the opportunity economically, socially, um, *specifically* within lower income and minority communities, um, to provide completely new job opportunities. Um, and so, what we've tried to do is... reach out and *hopefully* create a conversation, so that they realize, "Wow, this is an issue that could impact *us*, and be beneficial and we'd like to learn more," and that's where we can hopefully come in.

Similarly, the sustainability fellow from Lakeside College credits the president of the university with making the institutional commitment to match the ongoing grassroots efforts of the students, with the effect of bringing people off the fence to a more active involvement with sustainability.

Martha, the sustainability staff member from Bough University, similarly talked about the challenge of trying to do outreach and frame the issues so that it would reach the entire student body. Additionally, Martha portrayed the office as an avenue for environmental student organizations to publicize their activities, an "automatic outreach channel." As with Southeastern, Bough University also had a sustainability pledge that students could sign, with an incentive for signing in the form of a tote bag. Whenever someone signs the pledge at Bough, their e-mail address is added to the sustainability listserv, which Martha estimated as having six thousand recipients, as compared to the twelve hundred on the listserv at Southeastern.

Robert, the staff member from City-Integrated, talked about the challenge of using mandates,

both conceptually and in practice:

We have a state mandate that says we're supposed to buy thirty percent [recycled paper]. Nobody does it (as if revealing a magic trick). I asked procurement, "How come we got a state mandate, and we're a state institution, and we don't listen to it?" And, I'm probably being naïve when I ask that question, because there are probably a lot of state regulations we don't listen to, right? "Because-" he looked at me and said, "Because there is not recycling paper police..." to enforce it. The question is, how do you reconcile that whole mandate versus freedom. But, if you want to say, how do you, how do you get a university, say, to buy a hundred percent recycled paper? One item, we're just talking one item out of all of that stuff, which is a very small piece of this. (long pause) Can't get there yet. So, um, you start looking at the multitude of interacting components of the operations of a university, in terms of mandates, and what you're going to do. Or not, I mean, so, if you don't mandate it, because mandating is "un-American", then how do you get America to care about this stuff, to self-police and self-regulate, and do the behavior change? Is it the economy? Is it environmental impact? Is it a new generation coming up? Is it a new political party? I don't know.

Robert expands the discussion to the larger political climate, generational trends, and economic imperatives. He does see it as his job to frame the issue in a way that resonates with the departments, usually economically, but claims that without punishments for non-compliance, "teeth," the mandates are ineffective. Robert reinforced the idea of the supremacy of economic incentives during an earlier conversation about different speeds of the adoption of sustainability at different universities. At that time, he had voiced the idea schools in certain parts of the country had been forced to adopt energy conservation earlier because of much higher fuel costs. In his view, it seems that the external motivations for sustainability have to exist before the sustainability staff can fulfill their role as connectors, providing motivated parties with the means to make change.

Another tool that university administrations or sustainability offices use to raise awareness of

these issues is to have a Year of the Environment, Year of Sustainability, or shorter period of emphasis during which they would increase their level of activity and involvement in the larger university community. People interviewed from both Lakeside and City-Integrated mentioned Year of the Environment periods that had just ended or were ongoing.

Southeastern had been holding a “Sustainability Day” for three years and also observed a Sustainable Food Week. These events are in addition to the more venerable Earth Day celebrations, although Earth Day is also being used as a venue to publicize sustainability.

The statements made by Geralyn, the cochair of an environmental organization at Southeastern, were representative of a disconnect that organizations at her university felt in relation to the sustainability office, an example of negative reactions to an office's framing efforts. It was her impression that the sustainability office had not actively tried to collaborate with them. She also characterized her group's environmentalism as “very grassroots,” suggesting that they just need the university to provide a meeting space, and then they can handle the rest. When commenting on the school's sustainability pledge, and the water bottle that Allen had told me was used to get students started off on the right foot, Geralyn said, “I think that everyone should just take classes about it and learn about it and actually care about it. How many people do you think do that for the water bottle?” Here, she is also suggesting that requiring a class is the best way to educate individuals about sustainability issues. Later on, she is adamant that making a pledge will not change the behavior of those that are not receiving a more extensive education on the subject.

The ambivalent disconnectedness that the organizations at Southeastern felt toward their

sustainability office was more similar to the attitude at those schools without true sustainability offices than to the attitude at the schools with full-time sustainability staff: Lakeside, Bough, City-Integrated, and Northern. As expected, the organizational leader at Southern Regional, where there was only an intermittently-active sustainability committee, was unaware of any of the committee's behaviors and only noticed the sustainability outreach efforts of the dining services, which were of special interest to him as a vegetarian. Metropolitan University, missing a sustainability office, did have a “sustainability champion” within the facilities department, and the students were well-aware of his efforts, while having a generally negative attitude about student and administrative interest in the topic.

Barry, the veganism and animal rights activist at Southeastern, talked about how he sees his role in the university, in response to those actions already taken by the administration:

I think we should have been living in sustainable ways a long time ago, and we haven't reached there, so I'm, I'm, so of course I want, I want more progress and I want it, you know, I want it *yesterday*. I think a... most of us who are working for this *do*... Um, it seems ridiculous that things are moving as slow as they are, but that is the way of the world, that is the reality, so... what I choose to do instead of being apathetic, or depressed, or angry, is to look at the bright spots, and look at what good is happening and then try to speed that up if I can. [...] I think students can play, and other members of the university community, and even community members such as myself, um, can have a large impact in, sort of, like I said, bringing them solutions or helping them to dream good dreams like by letting [the chancellor] and others know about the University of Wisconsin at Madison's positive gains. Um, and by keeping the issue alive by, I mean, by, by sort of, um... (pauses for 4 seconds) by making the people who have their hands on the levers of power, who make the decisions, to let them know, to help them feel the urgency of the situation, and also to help them in practical ways, by providing solutions or ideas, and it's just like many decision-makers have said, including, um, you know, Obama, I think, when he took office, he said, like, you know, “The work is not done. I need the people to, um, I need you all to *push me* to do what I should do.” And I think, you know, with [the chancellor] and [the sustainability director] and the sustainability office, it's the same thing, and for me the idea behind my activism is, um, is to be positive and appreciative of all the good work that they do do and, and, and push gently, but, um... with persistence.

Indeed, Barry, as an outside activist, sees himself as a connector too. He sees himself as having a broader outlook and being able to provide solutions to the university administration. Just as the sustainability office, within the university, can push other departments to make projects more sustainable, Barry sees himself as being able to push the sustainability office, and the administration as a whole, in a more socially equitable direction. While Allen and other staff and administrators at Southeastern frame their sustainability efforts as adequate, students and outside activists like Barry reject the framing and assert their own framing. Helen, the leader of the student committee that distributes green fees for renewable energy projects at the same school, described how the control by the students of this financial windfall made them “part of the conversatio[n],” saying: “It’s literally the fact that we have money that makes us legitimate.” Control of this resource was one student solution to the framing influence of the offices and administration.

Turning to how the student organizations frame their own sustainability efforts to various audiences, there are several themes that students embrace and a couple that they actively avoid. For what students embrace, there is a focus on the importance of doing activism tied to their location, partly due to practical considerations related to class schedules. The emphasis on the local is also related to a “disconnect” that some students see between what they consume and how it is produced, especially focusing on food production. Student leaders also emphasize making their organizational activities “fun,” which leads them to reject activities that might be too somber or intense due to their radical nature. The groups seen as the most fun were also considered the most effective. Economic, environmental, and climate change arguments are all considered safe when trying to gather support, with economic

arguments resonating more with the university administration while environmental or climate-based arguments resonating more with fellow students. Tied to the emphasis on local issues, environmental and economic facts, and having a “fun” image, student leaders try to avoid political methods, especially those focusing on the national political scene, and emotional appeals that create stark differences of opinion. They see this as enabling greater collaboration and broader appeal, avoiding contentiousness. While there is an emphasis on how climate change is a global problem that resonates with a broad swath of the population, these groups do not see a conflict between that and trying to focus on making changes at the local level, rather than trying to have broader policy impact.

To look more in-depth at emotion, the statements of the sustainability staff member at Lakeside on the use of this type of appeal are representative of the opinions expressed by many of the student organizational leaders:

I think, as of late, the sustainability push, nationwide, has taken the emotion out of it. And you're right, it's metrics, it's logical, it's saving money... blah, blah, blah. And less, like, “You're a bad person if you throw that plastic cup, or, plastic bottle in the trash.” [...] I mean, I think the people that really care about environmental issues are always going to have a personal, emotional, moral connection. Um, and I think that we foster that in small groups. You know what I mean? And, it's this taking it to the larger population where we take the emotion out of it. So, I think there is a place for the emotional and moral side of the argument. You just have to use it carefully.

In general, it seems that the more emotional an issue might potentially become, the greater emphasis is placed on avoiding emotion within the arguments. For example, both vegetarian organizations interviewed made a much greater use of statistics and other facts than the other types of organizations.

While emotional appeals are mostly avoided by the staff members and student organizations, the overly-emotional appeals of other activist groups could have a beneficial effect on their more moderate, more rational appeals. Jennifer, a former sustainability office intern and member of multiple environmental organizations at Southeastern, seemed to suggest positive radical flank effects (Haines 1984) for an organization advocating sustainable agriculture, including meat production, because of the presence of animal rights organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). Essentially, if groups such as PETA were saying “meat is murder,” then those promoting the sustainable consumption of meat would benefit. Jennifer tempered her positive view of this radical flank effect with the idea that global warming may be so urgent that, by meeting climate science deniers half way, environmentalists may not be able to progress with their goals quickly enough to avoid catastrophe.

The idea of making sustainability apolitical is related to the emphasis on the local and the idea that climate change affects everyone. Political tactics such as writing form-letters to senators are viewed as ineffective and disconnected from what is going on in the immediate vicinity of the organizations. While students want to make change on their own campus and in the surrounding community, they sometimes resent being called upon to present themselves as “concerned citizens” of their state by outside activists and politicians, especially since many of the student at the private schools had in fact come from out of state. At City-Integrated, where an organization with more political and more radical tactics had disbanded, with many of the former members founding the current organization with a more local and more collaborative focus, the students claimed that the focus on larger political



goals had proven to be demoralizing since success was much more difficult. This group, seeking to have administrative support, had been explicitly told by their faculty advisor, who also served as a representative of the university's environmental institute, that they would need to avoid the “political stuff” in order to get administrative support. This theme was also seen during the interview with the student committee at Southeastern that oversaw renewable energy projects. They chose not to get involved with a campaign run by the Sierra Club at the school that had a goal of shutting down the coal-burning co-generation plant because it was too confrontational and political, in the sense of pitting them against the university administration, with whom they were tightly integrated. Political tactics and goals are thus avoided for reasons of efficacy, morale, and a desire to collaborate with the university administrations.

### *The Frame Alignment Processes of Motivational Framing for Recruitment of Student and Staff Effort*

After the phases of diagnostic and prognostic framing (Cress and Snow 2000), at the end of which sustainability has begun to be institutionalized through the creation of a sustainability office, the student and staff actors within the setting having a continuing need to recruit effort for continuing organizational effectiveness. This phase of recruitment is a phase of motivational framing (ibid.), convincing others of the need for cooperative and collaborative collective action (Melucci 1996, Fitzgerald 2009). Sustainability staffers publicize their own efforts through the creation of websites or reports in order to do frame bridging (Snow et al. 1986) to existing sentiments in the student body, relying on the flexible ambiguity of the

discourse to have a broad appeal. The case of the organizations at Southeastern University show that students can frame themselves in an oppositional or reactionary way (Marquis and Lounsbury 2007) when they do not feel that the offices are doing enough outreach to them. When frame bridging to student organizations does not occur, those organizations continue on with previous tactics and associations. The students also have an interest in doing frame bridging, publicizing that there is sentiment toward certain conceptions of sustainability in order to guide the offices in that direction, as seen with the case of animal rights and veganism activists. Frame extension (Snow et al. 1986) is likely to occur when staffers seek to enroll a larger portion of the student population in their efforts, extending sustainability to job creation, environmental concerns, or economic efficiency. While frame extension is often a fluid recruitment tactic, it can become institutionalized when the staffers add it their list of metrics by which they measure the university's sustainability, or in cases such as the student-approved mandate expansion of the “green fees” program at Southeastern. Students and staff practice frame amplification (ibid.) as they attempt to invigorate interest in one aspect of the master frame, usually amplifying climate issues in the recruitment of students and economic issues in the recruitment of staff. Special periods, such as a “Year of the Environment” or “Sustainability Day,” temporally amplify sustainability as a whole with the effect of performing frame bridging to a wider population. Periods such as “Sustainable Food Week,” also amplify in a more traditional way, recruiting students to sustainability through their interest in food. When staffers identify that for some students, sustainability “just... isn't their issue” (Martha, interview), they identify the need for frame transformation (ibid.). While there were certainly cases of this transformation among the organizational leaders that I spoke to, it did not become a recruitment tactic, as with the other frame alignment processes.

These frame alignment processes are further influenced by symbolic associations (Polletta 2005) with other environmental discourses and by the temporal aspects of the university career (Crossley 2008). Environmentalism overall was invoked as having overly political and confrontational associations by some student leaders. This association was formed in previous environmentalism experiences in which tactics such as writing letters to politicians or petitioning had been ineffective. This experience with other tactics led students to emphasize cooperative, collaborative aspects of sustainability (Melucci 1996, Fitzgerald 2009). The national political nature also led them to amplify the local nature of the discourse. A local focus was also beneficial to students because of their limited time as students, both in the sense of only being in the community for four years, and in the sense that they were devoting large amounts of time to coursework. Additionally, some environmentalism and animal rights discourses were viewed as having the negative association of being overly emotion-based. The amplification of the scientific aspects of sustainability, similar to reform environmentalism in emphasizing metrics (Blackburn 2007, Goerner et al. 2008, Johnson 2006), was a reaction to this symbolic association. Emotional appeal was acceptable as an individual motivation for becoming involved, or used in the mobilization of those whose frames were already aligned, but not in general recruitment. Though organizational leaders and staffers tried to distance themselves from these other environmental and animal rights discourses which have negative symbolic associations, the discourses could be viewed as providing positive radical flank effects (Haines 1984), with sustainability as a middle ground in which multiple parties could collaborate. The access that these student activists obtain through their involvement in sustainability is not always viewed as satisfying to them; there

is a fundamental contradiction between diagnosis of climate change as an urgent peril and the negotiation needed to secure broad support.

The institutionalization of sustainability through the creation of offices is also the institutionalization of political opportunity (McAdam 1999, Minkoff 1994) and resource mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 1977), providing greater mobilization opportunities for students and staffers. Just as elite support from administrators was needed for the establishment of the offices, these offices serve as elite allies to students, providing legitimacy for their efforts. Once funded offices are established, the resources also provide new opportunities for recruitment. Office staffers offer incentives as part of their recruitment efforts. While this could be viewed as frame extension to students' financial interests or affinity for tote bags and water bottles, it is also a result of this resource mobilization. In the case of the establishment of “green fees,” students could use their own institutionalized resource flow to better align frames with the staffers, reversing the presumed power relationship (Pedriana 2006) in their recruitment of staff effort and expertise.

While student organizations aligned frames with sustainability offices and social entrepreneurs founded organizations (Kirzner 1997, Lounsbury 2001) with more collaborative tactics, with evidence that the framing efforts of sustainability staff played some role, there is no evidence of frame transformation or organizational transformation among the student organizations in this study. This is supportive of the overall rarity of organizational transformation in the literature (Minkoff 1999). None of these groups identified as “sustainability organizations;” they saw themselves as environmentalist or

“environmentally-minded.” Even at Southeastern, the university with the most crowded organizational picture, the site of the “cannibalization of environmental people,” (interview) no existing organization had transformed itself to occupy a sustainability niche (Dobrev et al. 2001). The inertia of these organizations seems to be significant (Stinchcombe 1965, Hannan and Freeman 1984, Carroll and Hannan 2000). The oldest organizations in the study are the most distanced from the sustainability offices. In the cases of Northern, City-Integrated, and Bough Universities, if an environmental organization was founded around the same time the sustainability office was founded, there is a greater level of interaction between the two. At Lakeside, the first sustainability staff member employed by the university was a former member of the college's only environmental organization, ensuring a high level of interaction between the office and the organization. In general, at schools with only one environmental organization, greater framing efforts can be focused in one place, making alignment more likely (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Baum and Oliver 1992, 1996). Both Northern and City-Integrated serve as examples of how it is easier in the university setting, with its low founding requirements, to simply form a new organization to fit the changing institutional environment than to transform an old one. The influence of an organizational founder can be great, and if that founder is steadfast in maintaining radical or political tactics, dissenting members can simply found another organization, which is what occurred at City-Integrated.

In sum, do the results suggest that university sustainability offices are performing frame alignment with student organizations to create a new organizational field (Lounsbury et al. 2003, Bartley 2007) of sustainability organizations? Briefly, the answer is no. The reality is

more complex and interactional. It appears that students provide the initial pressure for the adoption of sustainability practices at universities, though often having internal allies in the administration, framing sustainability in a way that will convince the administration that it is aligned with their preexisting interests. This pressure then causes the university to make commitments that set in motion the institutionalization of the discourse. The path of this institutionalization is where different universities diverge, using different degrees of student and professional input in drafting climate action plans and other documents. With the establishment of sustainability offices, staff members begin processes of frame alignment (Snow et al. 1986) to harness the cooperation and energy of various audiences within the university, with student organizations performing similar alignment processes in the recruitment of members. If student organizations were already involved in the planning of institutionalization, there will be less distance that needs to be bridged through frame alignment. With this new institutional environment solidifying, student organizations are founded with a more collaborative, rather than contentious (Melucci 1996, Fitzgerald 2009), mode of operation, in order to take advantage of the heightened legitimacy of this discourse. The overall process, rather than the organizations, should be highlighted here: contentious tactics creating new institutional structures creating new opportunities for more collaborative tactics. The generalized conceptual model of how sustainability has been institutionalized at the universities can be found in Figure 1, while the critical events of the objective institutionalization of sustainability at the seven universities is summarized in Table 3.

<b>Table 3: Histories of Institutionalization</b>			
<b>School</b>	<b>Staff Member Hired/ Office Founded</b>	<b>Greenhouse Gas Inventory First Submitted</b>	<b>CAP Submitted</b>
<i>Southeastern</i>	2001	2000	2009
<i>Southern Regional</i>	2010		
<i>Lakeside</i>	2008	2008	2010
<i>Bough</i>	2004	2007	2009
<i>Metropolitan</i>	NA		
<i>Northern</i>	2009	2008	2010
<i>City-Integrated</i>	2008	2008	2010

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The responses of student organizations and administrations at universities during the adoption and institutionalization of the new master frame of sustainability says something about the opportunity for the creation of new institutional structures that is provided by the introduction of a master frame, and about the interactive nature of ground-level institutionalization itself.

Sustainability is a master frame that its specific manifestations will be determined by those who are grounded by its tenets. Within the university setting, this master frame is employed as a field frame, guiding the tactics of, and the interactions between, both university staff and student organization members. The master frame of sustainability contains within it the ideas that many parties must work together to overcome the challenges of climate change, altering how American and global society works at a fundamental level. Rather than viewing a field frame as the normative assumptions within an industry (Lounsbury et al 2003), we can see it as a mobilizing structure, able to construct a new organizational field (Bartley 2007). In this setting, while the field frame is not constructing a true organizational field, it instead guides student organizations to push for new structures within the universities: sustainability offices. The fact that the organizations introduce these new institutional structures allows existing organizations, and, because of the fluid nature of the university, newly founded



organizations, to switch to using more collaborative tactics to effect change. Once the university has signed on, these organizations are naturally moving out of the conflict stage and moving into cooperation because they have attained the status of insiders. Indeed, the organizations that are founded with an emphasis on collaborating with the sustainability offices serve as another example of cooperative collective action organizations (Melucci 1996, Fitzgerald 2009), wholly abandoning contentious tactics, politics, and emotion at the organizational level in the search for efficacy. While goal-oriented, efficacious organizations were viewed as the most legitimate by both students and staff, these organizations were also the ones viewed as non-threatening because of their tactics of working through institutionally-approved channels such as food advisory councils, sustainability committees, and facilities departments. When contentious organizations do achieve victory through protest tactics, they are still viewed unfavorably by the administration and staff, having their gains co-opted by more legitimate organizations or the sustainability offices themselves.

This setting is strongly supportive of institutional theory, while showing its contentious or interactive nature. The setting shows organizational populations at two nested levels: the population of universities within one country and the population of student environmental organizations within each university. At the fluid level of the university, the year-to-year activities of student organizations are shaped by the wills of the elected or appointed leaders, so the fit or conformity to the environment conditions will be even stronger than in a situation with greater continuity of organizational goals and tactics. Instead of simply showing how isomorphism occurs or how universities or student organizations have changed to fit their environment through the adoption of the sustainability discourse, this study shows

how the student organizations within each university create embodiments, manifestations, or institutionalizations of the discourse, the sustainability offices. Student organizations and other actors within the university alter their institutional environment and then conform to the new conditions. One need only compare Metropolitan University, where an organization was founded with very little administrative support, to City-Integrated University or Lakeside College, where organizations were founded or operated in environments of active sustainability staff and supportive administrations, to see the power of the institutional environment to bolster or constrain organizations that inhabit it. Without a staff member occupying a connector role to link the student organization to projects where their energy can best be spent, and to link all of the environmental initiatives of the entire university together, the environment for making change is much less rich, the vision of each party limited. While the institutionalization of sustainability is progressing quickly, it is still in its nascent stages, with the climate action plans of the earliest signatories only coming into effect in the past year. As sustainability offices and administrative sustainability become more embedded at universities, will some student organizations begin to frame themselves to emphasize their differences from the university's own environmentalism, as Marquis and Lounsbury's (2007) findings suggest? More broadly, what variations will emerge and solidify in interactions between students and sustainability offices? That is, will the master frame of sustainability, offering the opportunity for more collaborative approaches, have a lasting effect on environmental activism?

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