

Transforming Higher Education with the EVOLVE Sustainability Framework

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Abstract

For universities to rapidly advance the integration of sustainability into higher education, new frameworks are needed to increase the speed of adaptation. The EVOLVE Sustainability Framework and supporting strategy tools offer a process that is highly relatable and actionable, serving university leadership and operations as well as supporting academic curriculum. For many universities, education for social and environmental sustainability exists in certain courses and degree programs, yet to achieve the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, sustainability needs to be embedded into the university's purpose, vision, and culture, and across all degree programs.

The new EVOLVE Sustainability Framework is a universal tool for organizations and universities to spark imagination and action for a better world. The four steps of evaluation, imagination, innovation, and implementation take participants through a cycle of continuous improvement and problem solving. The framework presents a simple yet robust process that is engaging, and impactful. The framework aligns to global goals and is supported by additional new tools including the:

EVOLVE Sustainability Innovation Sprint

Compassion-Centered Stakeholder Approach

Compassion-Centered Stakeholder Analysis

Sustainability Stakeholder Matrix

The Five Essential Mindsets that Evolve Us and Our World: global, compassion, abundance, growth, and changemaker

The EVOLVE Sustainability Journey - Online Course

The EVOLVE Sustainability Journey - eBook for Higher Education

The EVOLVE Sustainability Framework Highlights for Everyone

Empathy and compassion are foundational to the EVOLVE Sustainability Framework. Empathy is connecting to the experiences of another, and compassion is taking action to improve conditions and experiences. At the core of the Compassion-Centered Stakeholder Approach is asking: "does this action create a better world?" helping us to make better decisions that lead to sustainable outcomes. The EVOLVE Sustainability Innovation Sprint is similar to design thinking yet takes it further by integrating sustainability concepts in design and development as well as adding evaluation and implementation for impact.

Some of the challenges in higher education stem from colleges and degree programs operating in silos with few opportunities for cross-pollination of knowledge. The EVOLVE Sustainability Framework is universal and can be applied to every

degree program, creating a unified language and approach to learning. The framework is ideal for student-led problem-solving projects and innovation competitions, while inspiring interdisciplinary teams and university-wide engagement. It also supports an accelerated path for universities to achieve sustainability credentials and rankings. The promise of the EVOLVE Sustainability Framework is that it holds a key to help transform universities, and therefore our world.

Compassion as a Foundational Mindset for Education for Sustainable Development

For the past 50 years, economies have been built on driving consumerism without enough thought given to how products are made and who and what gets hurt in the process. The single-minded drive for profits has led us to where we are today-- facing global crises related to pollution and degradation of our air, land, water, forests, ecosystems, and societies. To successfully achieve sustainability, it is vital for higher education institutions to lead by example and empower students to solve today's grand challenges and create a world that is better for humanity and the planet.

As Albert Einstein is credited with saying, "The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them." A technique used in innovation processes is to take a common practice and invert it. With the normalized practice of placing the economy (driven by governments and citizens) and profits (driven by businesses and investors) at the center of decision-making, what would happen if the script was flipped, and compassion was placed at the center of decision-making? If a profit-driven approach has led to sustainability problems, can compassion be an antidote to unsustainability?

In exploring these questions, definitions for compassion and its attribute, empathy, were developed. Researchers define compassion as having three components: affective, cognitive, and motivational.¹ In other words—hearts, minds, and actions. For the EVOLVE Sustainability Framework, the definition of compassion created by the author, Joni Roberts, is "a way to increase connection by opening our hearts and minds with love and kindness and taking action to improve the conditions and experiences of ourselves, others, all life on the planet and beyond." To effectively improve conditions and experiences, empathy helps to increase understanding and identify needs. Empathy is defined by the author, Joni Roberts, as "the willingness and ability to connect with the experience of ourselves and another by openly listening and holding the space for deeper emotional and intellectual expression."

In the field of psychology, scientists like Elaine Aron have determined that the trait of sensitivity has a genetic basis and plays a role in a person's natural inclination for empathy.² According to Aron, highly sensitive persons make up 20% of the population and are believed to have more active mirror neurons and emotional centers in their brains, providing greater capacity for emotional responsiveness and the ability to connect

¹ Strauss et al., "What Is Compassion and How Can We Measure It? A Review of Definitions and Measures."

² Acevedo et al., "The Highly Sensitive Brain: An fMRI Study of Sensory Processing Sensitivity and Response to Others' Emotions."

empathetically.³ According to Professor Michael Pleuss and his team of researchers, 30% of people are highly sensitive, 40% are moderately sensitive, and 30% are low sensitive, with half of the traits explained by genetic factors and half environmental influences.⁴ What this suggests for activating empathy and compassion mindsets is that most people (70%) are biologically inclined for empathy and with the right environmental influences, empathy and compassion can be cultivated.

University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor and Founder of the Center for Healthy Minds, Richard Davidson, and his work with His Holiness the Dalai Lama has demonstrated that meditation can alter the structure and function of the brain by reducing activation of the amygdala and associated reactive behaviors while increasing focus, well-being, and emotional balance.⁵ In a study led by Jennifer Mascaro, compassion meditation was found to enhance empathetic accuracy and increase activity in the prefrontal cortex that regulates decision-making.⁶ Further, according to the *World Happiness Report 2023*, compassionate actions are shown to increase well-being and life satisfaction scores for the beneficiary, altruistic actor, and third-party observers, as well as generate more altruism and pro-social behaviors from each group, showing that increased well-being yields more compassionate actions.⁷

The Compassion-Centered Stakeholder Approach

Instead of placing profits as the driver of decision-making, the Compassion-Centered Stakeholder Approach (see fig.1) places compassion at the center and puts profits in balance with the needs of all stakeholders. The goal is to optimize value between the organization and its stakeholders by asking: does this action create a better world? Insights are gained by evaluating and empathizing with the conditions and experiences of stakeholders across people, products, and processes, then imagining, innovating, and implementing actions to improve conditions and experiences.

Stakeholders are defined as those that can either affect or be affected by the actions and outcomes of an organization. These are commonly represented as employees, customers, collaborators, suppliers, investors, communities, and government. The Compassion-Centered Stakeholder Approach takes it to an expanded level by giving society and the planet a seat at the table.

³ Acevedo et al., "The Highly Sensitive Brain: An fMRI Study of Sensory Processing Sensitivity and Response to Others' Emotions."

⁴ "About Sensitivity."

⁵ Davidson and Lutz, "Buddha's Brain: Neuroplasticity and Meditation [in the Spotlight]."

⁶ Mascaro et al., "Compassion Meditation Enhances Empathic Accuracy and Related Neural Activity."

⁷ Rhoads and Marsh, "Doing Good and Feeling Good: Relationships between Altruism and Well-Being for Altruists, Beneficiaries, and Observers."

The Compassion-Centered Stakeholder Approach

Core Question: Does this action create a better world?

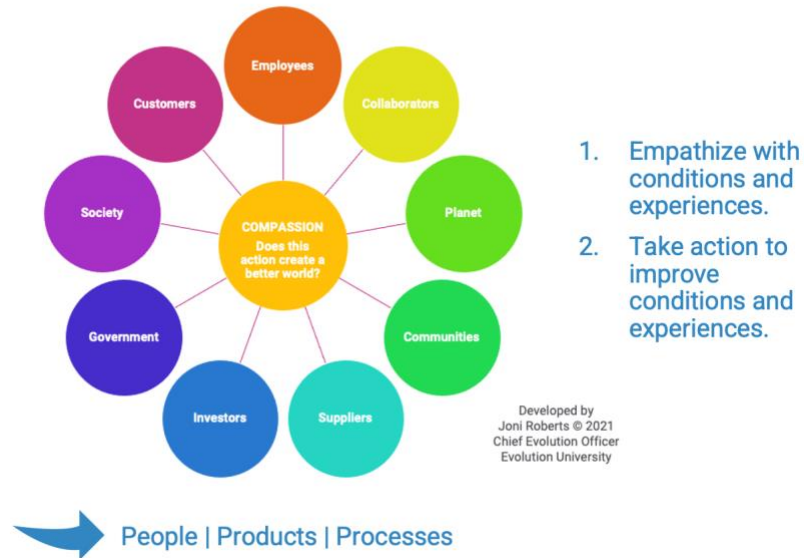


Figure 1

The Compassion-Centered Stakeholder Approach is supported with a process for stakeholder analysis and engagement to evaluate the current conditions and define material issues as well as a Sustainability Stakeholder Matrix (see fig. 2) to rank priorities.

Sustainability Stakeholder Matrix



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Figure 2

Stakeholders Aligned to Higher Education

When applying a stakeholder approach to a higher educational setting (see table 1), connections can be made between stakeholder groups and educational programs, courses, and professional roles. This exercise highlights the relevance of a stakeholder approach university wide as well as the importance of each university program and department in contributing to education and action for sustainable development.

Stakeholder	Description	Roles, Programs, and Courses
Employees	Experiences working with the organization including engagement, wellness, performance, compensation, benefits, diversity, equity, inclusion, safety, and training.	Human resources, leadership, organizational behavior, management.
Customers	Experiences using products and services and the impressions made.	Sales, marketing, advertising, new product design and development, innovation.
Collaborators	People and organizations that partner and/or help promote the success of the organization.	Leaders and organizations connected to the university.
Communities	Job creation, health, beauty, resilience, prosperity, and safety of the areas where the organization works.	Public policy, public administration, political science, nursing, medicine, engineering, science, technology.
Society	Social concerns as expressed by individuals, groups, the UN SDGs and similar agreements.	All roles plus social sciences, international relations, political science, journalism, arts.
Planet	Environmental concerns as expressed by individuals, groups, the UN SDGs and similar agreements.	All roles plus environmental science, biosciences, engineering, technology, journalism, arts.
Suppliers	Vendors and supply chain partners that contribute to the products and services offered.	Supply chain logistics, procurement, manufacturing, operations, management.
Investors	Those with a financial investment in the company such as owners, banks, and lending organizations.	Finance, accounting, economics.
Governments	Contributing taxes, abiding by laws, influencing policies, and partnering to achieve sustainability goals.	Law, accounting, public policy and administration, leadership.
All Stakeholders		Strategy, leadership, management, entrepreneurship, innovation, technology.

Table 1

The Five Essential Mindsets that Evolve Us and Our World

The EVOLVE Sustainability Framework is grounded in five essential mindsets representing the core attitudes, beliefs, and skills that enable imagination and action for sustainability: global, compassion, abundance, growth, and changemaker (see fig. 4).

1. A global mindset holds the view of oneself as a global citizen and sees the planet as one. People with global mindsets understand the interconnectivity of all people

- and the planet and how actions on the local level can affect the wellbeing of people and ecosystems around the world.
2. A compassion mindset takes action to improve conditions and experiences of people, the planet, and beyond. People with compassion mindsets embrace peace, diversity, equity, and inclusion.
 3. An abundance mindset believes in creating a world where prosperity is available to everyone. People with abundance mindsets tap into their generous natures and find ways for people and the planet to thrive.
 4. A growth mindset views challenges as opportunities for discovery. People with a growth mindset adapt, learn, and grow to better themselves and the world.
 5. A changemaker mindset challenges the status quo of unsustainability. People with changemaker mindsets make positive change by identifying problems, creating solutions, and leading collective action for the greater good.



Figure 3

The EVOLVE Sustainability Framework

“We are in the process of developing an evolving design of commerce where people and the planet thrive in the process of creating products and services.”

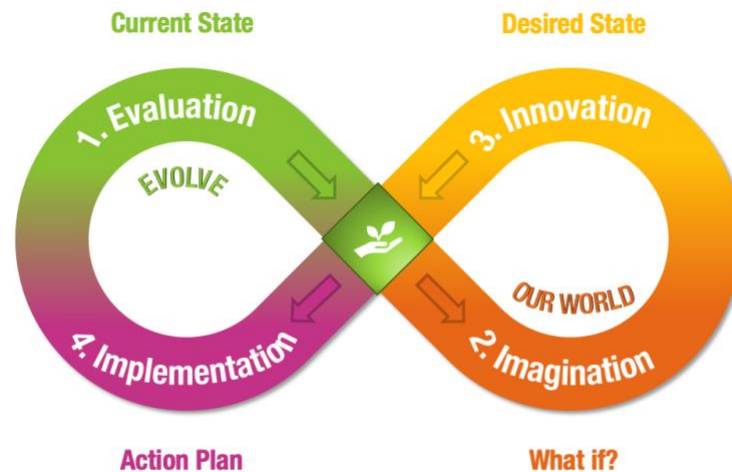
– Joni Roberts, Founder of Evolution University

The EVOLVE Sustainability Framework (see fig. 4) offers a new way of sparking imagination and action for a better world that is simple, engaging, impactful, and robust. It’s a comprehensive framework that is universal in its application across organizational structures and sectors. It takes people through a process of becoming purpose-driven changemakers that identify, evaluate, and solve problems for people and the planet while not creating new problems in the process.⁸ It centers on empathizing with stakeholders and engaging in a process of discovery, imagination, and innovation. It empowers people to make meaningful change by aligning to global

⁸ The British Academy, “Principles for Purposeful Business | the British Academy.”

goals like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and gathering metrics for Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting. It includes crafting action plans to implement and achieve success.

By prioritizing stakeholder needs, then moving through the four steps of evaluation, imagination, innovation, and implementation, the EVOLVE Sustainability Journey is a highly participatory process where new insights and ideas emerge for creating a better world. The integration and application of these teachings is a pathway to embedding social and environmental sustainability into higher education and organizational cultures by embedding it as a strategic driver of success.



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Figure 4

The four steps present a memorable and impactful way to begin and continuously improve sustainability initiatives. The following is a high-level view of applying the framework.

1. Evaluation | Current State:

- Investigate the current conditions and experiences of stakeholders.
- Determine areas of improvement for social and environmental sustainability across people, products, and processes. Align issues to the UN SDGs.
- Assess baseline measurements for impact and ESG (environmental, social, and governance) reporting.
- Rank priorities.

2. Imagination | What If:

- Spark imagination by asking "what if" questions such as "what would great look like?"
- Engage in ideation and decision-making tools.
- Explore sustainability design methods such as life cycle analysis, systems thinking, and the circular economy.
- Align to the organization's purpose, vision, and values.

3. Innovation | Desired State:

- Engage in innovation processes to achieve the desired state.

- Integrate sustainability methods for innovative thinking and design.
- Evaluate options such as make, buy, redesign, and collaborations.
- Determine the required investment of people, time, and money.
- Ensure alignment to global goals and standards for achieving social and environmental sustainability.

1. Implementation | Action Plan:

- Determine how success will be achieved and implemented.
- Craft an action plan, goals, and key performance indicators.
- Determine how impact will be measured, monitored, and improved.
- Collect data for ESG and impact reporting.
- Continuously EVOLVE sustainability initiatives by repeating the steps in the framework!

Alignment to Global Goals and Standards

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (see fig. 5), also known as the SDGs and the Global Goals, represent the most ambitious plan ever put forth to solve sustainability issues. Adopted in 2015 and signed by all 196 member states of the United Nations, the 17 goals offer a blueprint for what needs to be done to achieve social and environmental sustainability by the year 2030 and beyond.⁹ Importantly, the goals unite us in our efforts from the global level to the local level.

The EVOLVE Sustainability Framework engages participants to align actions to the SDGs that support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development themes of people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership.¹⁰ These teachings are largely missing from traditional university textbooks, especially in the fields of business, marketing, technology, engineering, architecture, agriculture, and healthcare, leaving many graduates to enter the workplace without the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to address today's global challenges. When individuals, organizations, and universities are unified in achieving the global goals, positive change is accelerated.



Figure 5

⁹ United Nations, "Home | Department of Economic and Social Affairs."

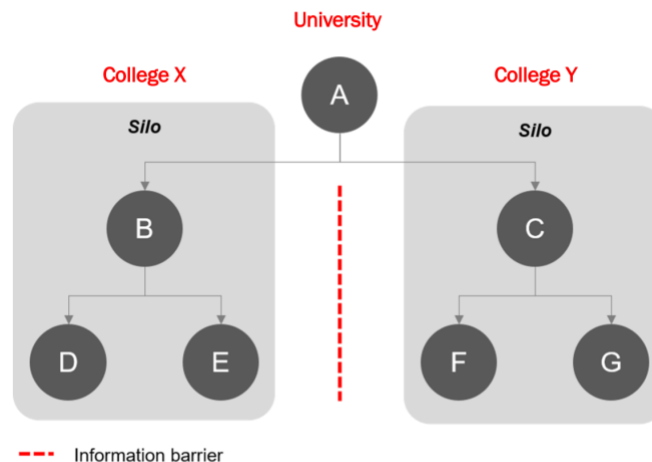
¹⁰United Nations, "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development."

Connecting University Programs for Innovation for the SDGs

The EVOLVE Sustainability Framework is a universal and interdisciplinary tool. It can be used by university administrators to transform university operations and culture, embedding sustainability into its purpose, vision, and values while setting an example for sustainability leadership. When implemented across university programs, the framework can bring together participants from diverse areas of expertise to share knowledge and propel innovation for sustainability.

Upon closer inspection of each SDG, an alignment can be made to university programs and courses, providing a blueprint for developing university-wide and program-specific learning outcomes. Combined with the stakeholder groups aligned to higher education programs and courses in Table 1, universities can identify areas of opportunities to integrate education for sustainable development, the Compassion-Centered Stakeholder Approach, and the EVOLVE Sustainability Framework.

How Most Universities are Structured Today



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Figure 6

Some of the challenges in higher education for sustainability stem from colleges and degree programs operating in silos with few opportunities for cross-pollination of knowledge (see fig. 6). The EVOLVE Sustainability Framework can be applied to every degree program, creating a unified language and approach to learning. The framework is ideal for student-led problem-solving projects and innovation sprints, while inspiring interdisciplinary teams and university-wide engagement. It also supports an accelerated path for universities to achieve sustainability credentials and rankings. The promise of the EVOLVE Sustainability Framework is that it holds a key to help transform universities, and therefore our world.

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