



Implementing the UO Environment Initiative
~Working to Build and Realize a Just and Livable Future~

Report on Campus Engagement Process and Recommendations for Implementation

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The University of Oregon seeks to make major progress on “[c]reating an interdisciplinary environmental initiative that embraces all parts of the university. Climate change presents an existential threat to our civilization one which all of our students will need to understand and one which our research should strive to solve. I have long thought that the sum of our strengths in sustainability efforts across campus is greater than its parts. I am excited to see the impact our students and faculty can make together as we build our strength and reputation in environmental teaching and research.” – President Michael Schill, October 2019

INTRODUCTION

Building on a Legacy of Relevance

The University of Oregon is known for its longstanding tradition of environmental teaching, research, service, and activism. This legacy of leadership has resulted in a deep and substantive history of engaging in environmental issues as a comprehensive public research university with an integrated mission to generate new knowledge and insight, explore, teach, and serve.

Individual students and scholars, teams of researchers and educators, in nearly every discipline and corner of the University of Oregon, engage in impactful work geared to addressing important questions about the environment and the communities that depend on it. Our programs sit near the top of rankings that stretch across numerous disciplines and fields of study.

UO faculty, staff, and students bring a broad range of expertise – from the humanities and social sciences to the natural sciences, law, journalism, business, design, and education – and, our engagement is critical to our public leadership in the state and the ecoregion.

Responding to the Urgency of Now

At Oregon, we know that we are in the midst of unprecedented and transformative environmental change. In Fall 2019, Provost Patrick Phillips announced the UO’s commitment to connect and strengthen our collective work on the environment declaring his intention to focus in this area through an initiative in the Provost’s Office. He convened a campus-wide steering committee, named Adell Amos, Clayton R. Hess Professor of Law, as the inaugural director of the Environment Initiative, and launched an engagement process to gather ideas and energy.

The UO is well-positioned to amplify our work and claim our place among the best universities in environmental-focused teaching and research in ways that will improve the world we inhabit. – Provost Patrick Phillips, October 2019

CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Steering Committee – Fall 2019-Spring 2020

The steering committee included faculty experts from across the UO’s schools and colleges and was charged by the Provost to develop a set of guiding principles to advance the impact and growth of the UO’s existing strength in the area of the environment. The steering committee approached this work with a deep understanding and recognition of the long-standing and well-respected reputation of UO in this area and a desire to imagine an even greater effort to harness and leverage our expertise, energy, and experience to respond to the urgency of this moment in time. The committee recognized that, despite a history of leadership in this area, the previous efforts of the University were often diffuse and that more could be done to build a foundation for institutional strength and impact across all schools, departments, centers, and programs at the UO. To begin to bring together our depth and breadth, the committee offered an **open invitation to join** and **call to action** to the campus community.

EI Steering Committee

Adell Amos, LAW
Jon Bellona, SOMD
Heather Brinton, LAW
Mark Carey, ENVS
Laura Jacek, CAS
Erin Moore, COD
Cass Moseley, OVPRI
Deb Morrison, SOJC
Laura Pulido, CAS
Lucas Silva, CAS
Josh Skov, LCB
Kevin Van den Wymelenberg, COD

We are amid unprecedented and transformative environmental change. All of us, and especially our students, are facing dramatic ecological shifts to all our natural systems because of climate change and other forces.

This change highlights social justice dynamics and environmental inequities that shape our world. As a result, we see societal paradigm shifts in systems that govern our economy, our natural world, the built environment, democracy, and fundamental relationships among people.

Facing this challenge requires us to generate new approaches, find proactive problem-solving pathways, engage in collaboration with multiple constituencies and social groups, participate in diverse ideas and forms of knowledge, and exert the full measure of our creative energy.

This moment requires the amplification of voices that have often gone unheard bringing environmental and social justice to the forefront of the path that lies ahead.

Every single discipline can contribute. The UO is well-positioned to bring a broad range of expertise to this moment – from the humanities and social sciences to the natural sciences, law, journalism, business, design, and education.

As a public research university with the integrated mission to explore, teach, and serve, our engagement is critical to our leadership in the state, the ecoregion, the nation and the world.

From this call to action, the steering committee crafted a set of **key questions** which, as a community of researchers and scholars, we are determined to answer.

How will our environmental teaching and research define and contribute to a livable and just future?

How can we produce insights and knowledge that can be used and serve communities, their leaders, and larger components of civil society?

What must our students understand to live in this emerging world, and forge a better one?

In asking the campus community to participate in answering these questions, the steering committee set forth **guiding principles** to help frame the conversation. These guiding principles also provided grounded premises for a broad campus engagement process.

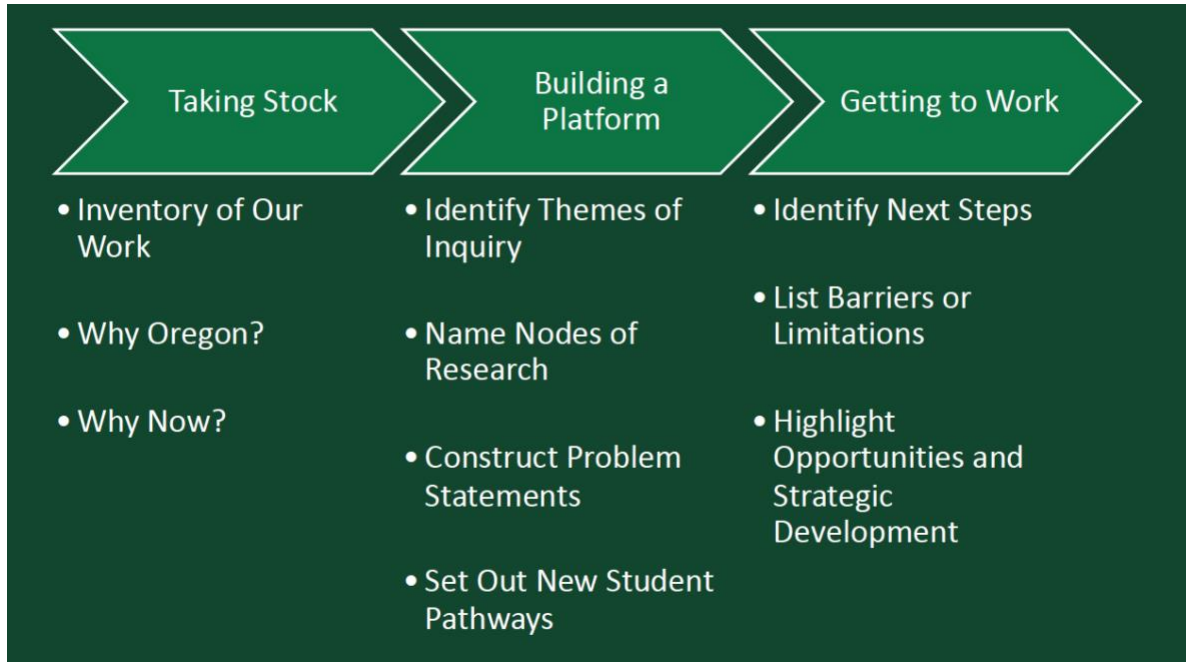
With our Environment Initiative we strive to be:

- *Multi-disciplinary and innovative in finding opportunities for teaching and research;*
- *Policy-relevant, applied, translational work, and responsive to a call to action;*
- *Rooted and focused on issues of equality, equity and social and environmental justice in which we add and amplify voices in the conversation;*
- *Relevant and responsive to the needs of the state and eco-region;*
- *Tied to direct student outcomes, and new ways of thinking about professional pathways for a changing world.*

Campus Workshops, Surveys and Meetings – Fall 2020-Spring 2021

Beginning in Fall 2020, the Office of the Provost led a series of informational sessions and brainstorming workshops involving more than 60 faculty and staff to spark collaboration, encourage creative thinking, and gather information. In addition, the campus community was offered a survey mechanism that generated more than 120 responses. Meetings with individual faculty, groups within schools and colleges, administrative units, and various university offices generated additional data and input.

This campus process was structured around three distinct parts – (1) how we responsibly inventory and describe all our existing work in this area and fully tell our story, (2) how we can organize ourselves to generate new possibilities that are responsive to the guiding principles, and (3) what the specific steps are for moving forward including understanding the barriers that may exist.



Taking Stock and Telling Our Story

For some time, the campus community has needed a university effort to recognize, inventory, and share our existing excellence in the area of the environment. The UO benefits tremendously from decades of leadership and dedication to environmental issues. From our start, the EI has recognized the long-standing need for the university to more fully embrace and effectively share the incredible breadth and depth of the exiting teaching, research, and service that UO students, faculty, and staff have been committed to and leaders in for at least 40 years. As part of the campus engagement process, all participants were given the chance to provide input on the work we currently do, the stories we need to tell, and mechanisms for bringing all of this information together in ways that make our internal and external communication more effective. One of the central goals of the EI will be to responsibly gather this information and develop ways to share both internally and externally.

Participants recognized that by taking stock and telling our story, the EI leverages UO’s greatest strength – the time and talent of its people, and their decades-long commitment to impactful environmental teaching, research, and service – to give our institution a competitive advantage in the field of the environment.

Imagining Our Work in New Ways - Themes of Inquiry/ Research and Teaching Nodes

Part two of the engagement process asked participants to think about how we could organize our current and future work across and outside of disciplinary boundaries in response to the call to

action and guiding principles. These themes of inquiry or research/teaching nodes represent ways to identify and generate new approaches for research and teaching, as well as promoting engagement and interaction with external communities.

To encourage thinking on this front, we asked:

- Using the guiding principles as a frame, what ideas do you have for thematic nodes of inquiry that UO could develop? Are there broad thematic questions that engage a range of university expertise?
- Are there specific research questions or teaching opportunities that could guide a multi-disciplinary research team or proposal?
- How can these themes and nodes build relationships outside of the university and create opportunities for students?

In looking at the themes that emerged from this process, we made an effort to identify places where researchers and teachers from more than one school or college were or could be engaged, where potential for new degree and professional pathways may or could exist, and where opportunity to engage externally with impacted communities and public decisionmakers is or could be present. We also asked participants to think creatively and strategically about the potential significance, relevance, and distinction that could emerge from working in these various areas.

Throughout the submissions, two significant and integrated themes emerged regardless of the underlying substantive content – (1) the need to address the urgency of climate change and (2) in addressing climate change and other issues, the need to address questions of social equity and justice. A phrase that seems to capture the sentiment is – **working to build and realize a just and livable future.**

With the urgency created by the impacts of **climate change** and the need for **environmental justice** woven throughout, the following areas of emphasis emerged from the process:

- Environmental Hazards and Landscape Resilience
- Energy and Decarbonization
- Water Futures and Community Restoration
- Sustainable Human Systems and the Built Environment
- Social Change through Environmental Education and Communication
- Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Sovereignty
- Restoration, Biodiversity and Rewilding
- Environmental Entrepreneurship and Circular Economies

Campus respondents provided myriad research questions – for existing multi-disciplinary teams and for potential opportunities. Many expressed interest in and ideas for co-teaching multi-disciplinary courses and building more experiential learning opportunities for students. The participants generated tremendous energy around building partnerships that respond to community need and creating pathways for student engagement using responsible and reciprocal mechanisms. The content reflected a wide expanse of existing activities that merit attention, as well as new and exciting ideas particularly around new degree pathways for students that reflect

the changing world and marketplace that they enter. This segment of the workshop unlocked creative capacity and excitement about future opportunities. Over the long term, it may be very worthwhile to offer the community a regular opportunity to participate in this kind of generative process. While the above listed themes provide useful focus for the next stage of our work, the respondents also recognized that an EI structure that is flexible and nimble enough to accommodate new and changing ideas and energy will be a valuable asset for the community.

Specific responses ranged from questions about what drives decision-making on the environment looking at connections between policy making, education and journalism; to how we might connect natural sciences and humanities to create a more integrated understanding of climate change on human, biological and physical environments; to acknowledging and supporting the multiple ways that Indigenous Peoples steward and manage lands, resources, and relationships, and how might those practices inform contemporary debates over land/resource management, conservation, protection, and stewardship; to how can we better translate scientific information about hazards and risk to the public and decision makers so that they can be better prepared to address climate adaptation and hazard mitigation to build more resilient communities; to what does an undergraduate program focused on environmental literacy across the various disciplines and fields or a program that offered a degree track in climate studies look like? And this represents just a summary of some of the ideas generated!

Moving Toward a More Integrated Campus Effort

In order to ensure that the engagement process included tangible next steps and stayed connected to the realities and challenges in higher education, we ended each workshop, survey, and conversation with a specific discussion about how to move forward in concrete ways. This effort included taking note of specific impediments or limitations that create disincentives in the system. We asked participants to be as specific as possible about how an initiative situated in the Office of the Provost could effectively work to advance our collective efforts.

To accomplish these goals, we asked the following questions:

- What do you envision for this initiative and what do we need to accomplish our goals?
- How can the university support faculty, administrators and staff members to successfully engage in this initiative?
- What are the barriers or limitations you believe may exist?

The common barriers identified are familiar, but not unique, to the Environment Initiative. For nearly all respondents, there was a focus on the availability of time and resources; administrative processes and policies that pull away from core substantive work; structure and incentives created by disciplinary silos; competition with ourselves for resources; and the value of long-term commitment and focus in this area (to avoid this being just another project that loses support over time). While no one initiative can resolve all of these barriers, the EI could devote energy to removing barriers for and creating solutions that encourage engaged, multidisciplinary work. Respondents pointed out that situating the EI within the Office of the Provost provides the access point to work strategically at the university level to address some of these challenges.

Participants envisioned tremendous potential for a campus-wide initiative to synergize and amplify our environment related work in research, teaching, and service. Participants, while

appropriately skeptical, were also enthusiastic about the opportunity to join the effort in particular and concrete ways. We need a nimble platform structure and deft leadership to prioritize and identify policies, processes, and projects that will create the collective future we envision. Throughout the conversations, the conceptual framework of a platform or a hub was frequently referenced to describe or represent a way for an organizational structure to undergird and serve as a foundation for our collective efforts on campus.

LAUNCHING A CAMPUS-WIDE ENVIRONMENT INITIATIVE – WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

After a broad engagement process and the inevitable delays associated with the impacts of the global pandemic, the UO seems poised to officially launch our efforts, while continuing to build and refine the ideas that have been generated thus far. The University of Oregon’s Environment Initiative would seek to expand institutional support for teaching, research, public service, community education, professional pathways, and the campus laboratory as it relates to our emerging world based on the guiding principles and research/teaching nodes listed above.

As our world makes clear, we face a set of related and integrated threats – the effects of global climate change, the impacts of structural racism, increased economic insecurity, and the public health outfall of a global pandemic. These are grand challenges and higher education should stand ready to use its time and talents to help. We also know that these threats have a disproportionate effect on Black, Indigenous, and communities of color. As a result, the timing for a broadly defined campus-wide initiative on the environment could not be more salient if it is designed to embrace the issues on the table and moves academic life out of its comfort zone. Every discipline can have role in advancing research and teaching that helps us build and realize a more just and sustainable future.

Building the Initiative

From the engagement process, a clear understanding of the value in situating the EI within the Office of the Provost emerged. This structure would work to direct university efforts toward projects and activities on the initiative. This work would include channeling and focusing research services, academic oversight, government relations, communications, and development attention and energy to the people and projects that are part of the initiative.

Rather than creating a traditional structure, the EI’s would offer a hub for emerging and innovative projects that engage across disciplinary lines and work to reduce the disincentives of this kind of work. In this context, the EI could incentivize and promote the kind of transdisciplinary work that this moment in history calls forth. It can be structured to be nimble and responsive to support emerging research questions and teaching approaches that are more oriented to delivering solutions to the challenges we face, and less constrained by the confines of traditional structures of higher education. It could also be a place to experiment with new ideas around degree pathways or organize our work around grand challenges that we face. The particular emphases or themes may change over time, but the guiding principles—transdisciplinary, applied, translational work that engages broad constituencies—will remain constant. Rather than create organizational heft, the initiative seeks to be engaged, responsive

and in reciprocal relationships with students, faculty, staff, and the communities it serves with a focus on preparing students for the world they face.

This approach could provide the infrastructure to promote connections among existing areas of research and education, create space for collaboration, and provide support for the growth and development of multi-disciplinary partnerships. If well built, this centralized platform can:

- Draw attention to faculty and student projects by connecting unit and campus communications to amplify research, teaching, and service in environment related issues.
- Bring together new research teams. Support transdisciplinary funding through grant administration and removing obstacles to collaboration.
- Facilitate channels for community partnerships – local, tribal, state, regional, national, global levels.
- Leverage university advising expertise to train students for new and emerging careers in environmental fields.
- Provide project management support for emerging priorities.
- Direct university level resources and services to environment related projects and priorities.
- Promote existing degree pathways and lead efforts to create new degree pathways in response to a rapidly changing professional landscape.
- Represent the UO externally and build inter-institutional partnerships with state, regional, national, and global organizations.

If successful, the Environment Initiative will form a network of collaboration –that reflects what it means for higher education to be responsible and responsive to the threats we face as a society. The development of this supportive structure for faculty, students, and communities engaging in critical environmental problem-solving ultimately positions the University of Oregon to create institutes, centers, programs, schools, or colleges that pull strengths from other university models while keenly seizing upon that which makes Oregon distinct – our longstanding and concrete commitment to multi-disciplinarity, our deep and broad expertise in humanities and arts, our expanding investment in basic science research and our nationally ranked programs in our professional schools.