

“Just Sustainability” Environmental Justice Campaign Case Study

Fall 2020 | By Annie Selle

Project Overview

The UVM Eco-Reps have long existed to encourage sustainable behaviors in UVM students, faculty, and community members. After a summer of Black Lives Matter protests, six months of a global pandemic and the associated economic crisis, Eco-Reps felt a need to adjust the program to be more active on justice issues within the environmentalism movement. The goal of this campaign is for Eco-Reps to understand how justice is at the heart of sustainability, and educate our peers on that intersection, how environmentalism can be white-washed or green-washed, and which habits individuals can change to be a part of a more environmentally just community. In addition, it was Eco-Reps’ goal to change systems to make it easier for students to choose a more sustainable option.

Background

Environmental justice calls for equitable distribution of environmental services, such as clean air, clean water, accessible green spaces, healthy food, and more. For BIPOC individuals and communities, there are vast inequalities in access to environmental services and resources. The wealthiest White people are responsible for the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions, yet BIPOC communities are paying the price.

Environmental injustice is present everywhere, including here in Vermont. From treatment of migrant farm workers on dairy farms to the low-income and BIPOC people of Winooski facing hearing-impairing sound pollution of the F-35s, Vermont is no different in the inequitable distribution of environmental services and resources. In addition, our only running landfill is in Coventry, VT, an economically depressed area.

To add insult to injury, the face of the environmental movement is White-washed, meaning the contributions of BIPOC have been systematically erased from public perception of the movement. If you google image search ‘environmentalist’, the majority of results are of people who appear White. Public perception of environmentalism is often that good White people save the day. That perception completely erases the true leaders of the movement— Indigenous people, Black people, and people of color. Ugandan visionary Vanessa Nakate, for example, was cropped out of a photo of her and fellow white environmentalists—including Greta Thunberg—by a media outlet. UVM Eco-Reps must listen to and follow BIPOC leadership in the environmental movement in order for us to make meaningful change.

Goals

The “Just Sustainability” campaign had the following goals:

- Educate and engage peers through fun, community building, COVID-safe programming:
 - What is environmental (in)justice?
 - What can we do about it as students?
 - How does it show up in our lives, campus and communities?
- Make changes in various systems at UVM so that peers have an easier time making the more sustainable choice
- Build stronger connections with other organizations at UVM and in Burlington

Implementation

The UVM Eco-Reps program consists of 20 students that are divided up into five community teams, with each team assigned to a specified residential area on campus. Efforts included several campus wide programs as well as smaller programming initiatives held in residential locations. In addition, we had one virtual Eco-Rep working from their home to serve the remote student population.

To build community within the Eco-Reps, we decided to have group meetings consisting mainly of virtual activities in which Eco-Reps could talk with one another and share ideas. In addition, we listened to three presentations from outside sources for our educational benefit. Organizations include: UVM Office of Civic Engagement on voter rights and registration, a member of Food Not Bombs Burlington on how to get involved in the movement, and the outreach representative of Chittenden Solid Waste District on how solid waste disposal works in Chittenden county.

The programming held this semester were virtual, in partnership with other organizations, and in person:

- 1) **Environmental Justice Panel:** A partnership with UVM Organize and the Black Perspective in which speakers gave a teach-in during the weeks-long Battery Park protests of Late Summer/ Fall 2020. Eco-Reps co-sponsored the event, meaning we helped to advertise on our social media page.
- 2) **Climate Strike Sewing-Circle Teach-In:** A partnership with UVM Organize in which a professional seamstress taught a circle of people how to make repairs to clothes, and also talked about the fast-fashion industry and how we can do our part to avoid it.
- 3) **Virtual Hike:** Our virtual Eco-Rep Instagram Live Streamed a hike around her local natural area, Niagara Falls, while talking about Indigenous rights and history of that area and across the country.
- 4) **Trinity Trash Pick-up:** A preparatory event in which Trinity campus Eco-Reps led a group of students through a trash pick-up in the woods behind their

residence halls. Many bags of trash were collected and set aside for an art project in the Eerie Eco Extravaganza.

- 5) **Bike for Bagels:** A partnership with the Wellness Environment in which students biked along bike lanes to reach a bagel shop in town. While biking, Eco-Reps educated peers about the injustice of bike lane and road development for BIPOC communities.
- 6) **Eerie Eco Extravaganza:** A tabling event in which Trinity Eco-Reps had several stations outside their residence hall. Participants were able to play a waste sorting game where they learned how to correctly sort between recyclables, compostables, and landfill waste; they built a community art project with the trash from the Trinity trash pick-up, and examined a map containing environmental information and geographic distribution with the goal of highlighting environmental injustices of the globe.
- 7) **Beautifully Sustainable and Equitable:** A tabling event in which an Eco-Rep showcased sustainably and ethically-sourced beauty products, as well as homemade waste-free beauty products, and engaged with students about how to most affordably substitute those products in their routine.
- 8) **Clothing Swap:** Students brought clothes to the swap and were then able to take clothes. The purpose of the event was to allow students to have another avenue besides fast fashion to update their wardrobe, and educate on the ills of fast-fashion.
- 9) **What You Need To Know About the Green New Deal and the GWSA:** A virtual event in which speakers Rigo Melgar and Lauren Oats presented about the Green New Deal and Vermont's Global Warming Solutions Act.
- 10) **Land & Food Justice Discussion:** A virtual event in which guest speakers educated attendees about the land and food justice movement across the globe.
- 11) **True Cost Movie Screening:** A virtual movie screening of the documentary "True Cost," which gives insight on the fast-fashion industry's harmful effects on humans and the environment.
- 12) **Scavenger Hunt:** A digital scavenger hunt in which posters with QR codes were hidden all over Athletic campus. Participants scanned the QR codes to find clues as to the whereabouts of the other QR codes, and would also learn information about Indigenous rights and history along the way.

Timeline

This year, Eco-Reps decided to streamline our normal two-campaign semester to a one-campaign semester. The "Just Sustainability" campaign will also extend into Spring 2021, as the topic is so broad, important, and pervasive, that it encompasses many possibilities in which Eco-Reps and students can engage.

Partnership programs occurred first:

- Environmental Justice Panel, 9/21
- Climate Strike Sewing-Circle Teach-In, 10/16

A few programs occurred during the month of October:

- Trinity Team Trash Pick-up, 10/24
- Virtual Hike, 10/24
- Eerie Eco Extravaganza, 10/31
- Bike for Bagels, 10/31

The majority of the programs occurred in in the timespan of about one week:

- Beautifully Sustainable and Equitable, 11/6
- Clothing Swap, 11/6
- Scavenger Hunt, 11/9
- What you need to know about the Green New Deal and the GWSD, 11/10
- Land & Food Justice Discussion, 11/12
- True Cost movie screening, 11/15

Financing

Expenses

- \$14 Bike for Bagels
- \$100 Eerie eco-extravaganza, raffle prizes of gift cards to local BIPOC-owned businesses
- \$20 Beautifully Sustainable and Equitable
- \$25 Land & Food justice Discussion, gift card to Ben and Jerry's for Kahoot winners.

Results

The Just Sustainability campaign resulted in 219 HEI (High-engagement impressions) and 352 LEI (low-engagement impressions) for all 12 programs. Returning Eco-Reps noted that the campaign seemed more successful this year than last, most likely because of the importance of the subject matter of environmental justice. In addition, COVID left a dearth of activities for students to choose from and engage with, so it is possible that Eco-Reps filled a much-needed social gap for safe social activities, adding another layer of meaning to our programming.

Figure 1 compares HEI of the four program types. As shown by the graph, “passing through” programs result in the most HEI, with an average of 34 impressions per program. This higher number of impressions is most likely due to the fact that students do not need to sign up. In addition, this style relies less on advertising than programs of the other styles—quite often, the event itself is most of the advertising. The downside of this style is that each impression may not be as deeply engaged as some of the other styles due to attendees making less of a time commitment to the program.

Partnered programs and virtual programs had similar HEI results, and “time and place” events had the fewest impressions. However, in Figure 2, we can see that all program types are rated reasonably successful no matter the type. The highest of any

program held was What You Need To Know About The GND & GWSA, rated at 9.5/10. Participants and organizers thought it was so successful because of its high attendance at 58 participants, most of whom stayed for the full duration of the program. Organizers, attendees, and speakers agreed that speakers were able to deeply engage in knowledge, passions, and questions with attendees.

Both programs rated the lowest, the Virtual Hike and Bike for Bagels and 6.5 and 6 respectively, both cite lack of attendance as the reason their program was not as successful. As reflected by the organizing Eco-Rep, a skilled returner of the program, “I wish there was a better turn out so we could have a genuine group bike ride and discussion. Coordinating with partners [Wellness Environment staff] is great but when the two groups have different definitions of successful events the Change Agent should work out a better compromise to be sure both goals are accomplished.” In this case, partnering with Wellness Environment proved to be a restriction to advertising the event to students outside of the Wellness Environment.

Many Change Agents listed “more advertising” or “more attendance” as ways they could improve their program in the future. Also, well-attended events typically had a hook to draw students in. In the case of the GND & GWSA virtual event, a draw for many attendees was extra credit points for environmental classes. Another successful program was the Clothing Swap, which resulted in 48 HEI and 96 LEI. The hook for this event was the promise of free clothes and a fun, interactive shopping experience. In addition, the clothing swap was well visible from students just passing by. It was located in a centrally-located tent with large, colorful signs, and clothes hanging up outside to attract passersby.

Were the goals of the campaign met?

Many of the goals were met:

- Community and friendship among Eco-Reps was built, strengthening the Eco-Rep team and the sharing of ideas
- Fun, engaging, educational, COVID-safe programs were created for students

High engagement impressions for each event type

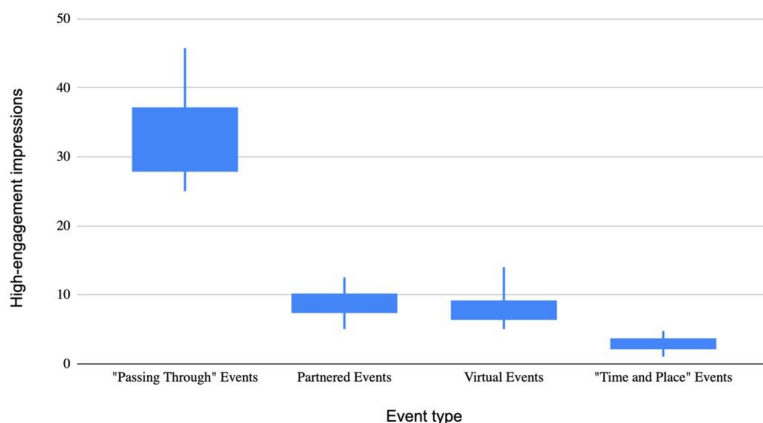


Figure 1. A boxplot categorizing all events into four types: “Passing through” events in which participants must be present in person but do not have to show up at a time and a place; “Partnered” events that occur in conjunction with another organization; “Virtual” events, occurring online; and “Time and Place” events, where participants must show up to a place at a specific time, sometimes requiring tickets. HEI on the y-axis.

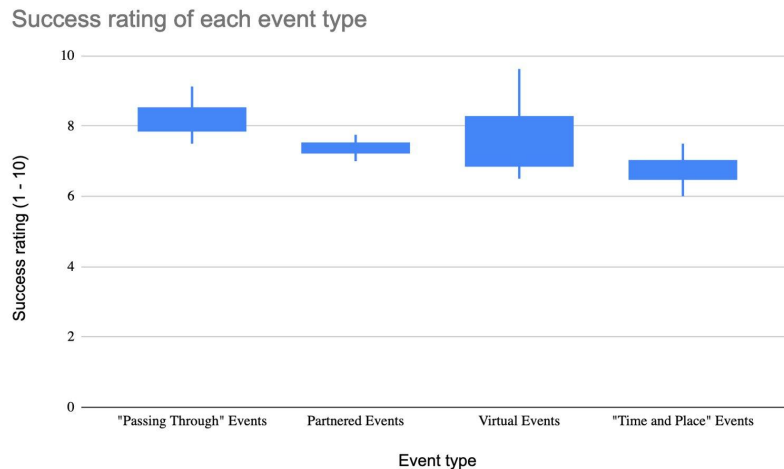


Figure 2. A boxplot categorizing all events into four types. The y-axis graphs “Success rating” from 1 - 10, which was self-documented by Eco-Reps after each program was held.

Lessons Learned

Many Eco-Reps mentioned how data collection for HEI and LEI was challenging due to juggling many tasks while running a program. It is also hard to quantify LEI especially, so this number is typically a very rough estimate. Moving forward, more consideration can be put into data collection and classification.

In addition, we learned that using the marketing tracking sheet (a checklist where Eco-Reps can monitor which marketing strategies they have done and which they have yet to do) is extremely useful in improving Eco-Rep marketing skills. The tracking sheet was not implemented until late into the semester, whereupon it was no longer needed for programs that had transpired. It will be an important asset in the early stages of planning Eco-Rep programming next semester.

Finally, we are excited to continue the campaign topic of “Just Sustainability” into the Spring semester and double-down on our research, engagement, and education on environmental justice issues. It will be good to include even more action steps that students can use as a jumping off point into activism and change.