

The 2023-24 State of Student Sustainability report highlights the work done by the U-M Ann Arbor Student Sustainability Coalition (SSC), what we have heard from students over the past year as priorities, and support that SSC needs to succeed and grow our impact into the future.

Who we are

The [Student Sustainability Coalition](#) is a group of university-employed students dedicated to building a culture of sustainability at the U-M Ann Arbor campus. Using environmental justice and anti-racism frameworks as a guide, we strive to advance our shared goals of social and environmental sustainability through funding student-led initiatives and fostering cross-campus partnerships.



SSC team photo from 2023 Student Sustainability Summit, Michigan Union.

What we do

Our team manages several different programs to engage with students and promote sustainability on campus. This work includes:

- Facilitating and growing the **Student Carbon Neutrality Network (SCANN)**, a group of over 15 student organizations that advocate for a just transition to carbon neutrality at U-M. This is done through advocacy around high-level sustainability hires, university building standards, carbon tax implementation, and centering student engagement in important conversations. SCANN met monthly for over a year with the U-M Chief Financial Officer and Lead Campus Planner during Campus Plan 2050 and Vision 2034 development.
- Organizing and participating in the [Student Sustainability Advisory Board \(SSAB\)](#). Originally convened by President Ono, the board now meets monthly with Associate VP of Campus Sustainability Shana Weber and the head of the Office of Campus of Sustainability (OCS) Andy Berki. SSC employs a “funnel and megaphone” approach in this space, synthesizing student ideas for administrators while also sharing broadly to our student networks the various priorities and involvement opportunities in regards to campus sustainability.
- **Administering the Planet Blue Student Innovation Fund (PBSIF) and Social and Environmental Sustainability (SES) grant**, with an annual budget of \$100,000.
- Holding **Sustainability Coffee Chats** where small groups of students meet weekly over coffee to discuss sustainability at U-M. SSC provides free coffee and connects students to the resources they are seeking to actionize their sustainability interests.
- **Convening sustainability-focused students and staff from Flint, Dearborn & Ann Arbor’s campuses** to increase tri-campus communication and collaboration. Thus far, this has increased Flint and Dearborn student participation in SCANN, enabled Flint & Dearborn

students' participation in SSAB meetings, and built relationships across campuses that have contributed to progress on U-M Dearborn and Ann Arbor's Seed Libraries, among other efforts.

What we did in AY 2023-24

- **Granted \$119,261 to 18 student, sustainability-centered projects** through the [PBSIF](#) and [SES](#) grant programs (**full report [here](#)**). Examples include:
 - A sawmill to process fallen trees on campus for sustainable reuse purposes across campus operations, research, etc.
 - A trip to Vermont to study business and sustainability challenges in agriculture ([article](#))
 - An interdisciplinary art workshop
 - A food history poster exhibit
 - A system for converting PLA plastic into 3D printing materials
 - Compost bins and additional signage on the Diag
- Hosted the fourth annual [Student Sustainability Summit](#) in October 2023, a celebration of student sustainability work and advocacy on campus and beyond.
- Advised Campus Plan 2050 and Vision 2034, project teams, to ensure the integration of student-centered sustainability and resilience outcomes. Doing so since January 2023, SSC attributes this consistent collaboration to the "Climate Action, Sustainability & Environmental Justice" core impact area of Vision 2034.
- Provided feedback on final round candidates for the new Vice Provost for Sustainability and Climate Action.

What we hear

A central component of our work is engaging with students across campus. While they have many asks for the university, the following are some of the most commonly heard calls for action.

Students want:

- **Action on environmental justice**
 - Students are aware that long-term sustainability is a global issue, and campus sustainability operates within larger contexts. Students are concerned about several issues and would like the university to engage with them in order to assess U-M's role in taking action. Some examples of environmental justice concerns include Line 5 under the Straits of Mackinac, Atlanta's Cop City, divestment from the military-industrial complex, and Indigenous landback initiatives.
- **Centralized structures tackling sustainability at U-M**
 - Many groups and students in sustainability circles feel that the decentralized nature of sustainability at U-M prohibits actionable progress and makes information inaccessible. Strongly coordinated offices that appear to the outside user as possibly one office or effort are critical for action across all three campuses, in addition to medical and athletic

operations. With the hiring of VP Shana Weber and the incoming Vice Provost, we are optimistic that this need will be realized in the near future.

- **Industry-leading green building standards**
 - Students continue to advocate for all new U-M buildings to meet and surpass LEED platinum certification, with additional considerations asked for, including nature-informed design, renewable energy systems, material circularity, and more. Students are concerned about increased development at U-M and its consequences regarding accessible green space and ecosystem degradation.
- **Expanded composting and recycling initiatives**
 - There is a need for more accessible compost bins on all three U-M campuses, for example, in the Diag and in university Unions. Students on the Dearborn and Flint campuses have described their lack of clear instructional information on what to recycle and compost and their desire for more bins on campus.
- **Sustainable “swag” at University events**
 - Students are concerned about U-M’s “swag” culture and the impact this mass procurement has on the environment. Students worked with LSA Program Manager Caitlin Jacobs on an assessment of procurement of “swag” in the Environ 391 project course, finding that event attendance is impacted by the desirability of the item given away, with item quality being a more positive factor than item presence.
- **More efficient and sustainable campus transit**
 - Many students don’t have cars and struggle to get to and from their classes, especially on North Campus. Reliable buses are essential for bringing the campus together and are far better for the environment than individual vehicles. Additional considerations of regional construction projects’ impacts on student mobility are also needed. Students have specifically cited a lack of transit connection to Matthaei Botanical Gardens and the Campus Farm.
- **Carbon pricing at the university level**
 - A variety of other universities and colleges have implemented carbon pricing, and students believe carbon pricing would have a positive impact on sustainability work. Examples may include an air travel mitigation fee or a campus-wide proxy tax. Students have actively engaged with numerous administrators on this topic, drafting a policy [proposal](#) to implement an air travel mitigation fee to address, and hope to see continued progress as the University plans for Scope 3 emissions management.

What we need to grow our impact

Our team engages in ongoing reflection to identify areas for improvement in order to strengthen our impact. This includes exploring structural changes that can be made at the university level, as well as seeking increased financial and logistical support for SSC. The focus areas identified below we believe are important to address in a timely manner, and include asks of support from our cross-campus partners.

Increased support for the Planet Blue Student Innovation Fund (PBSIF).

SSC recognizes its most impactful medium for change outside of genuine student connections is our robust and popular grant programs. Benchmarking with some of our on-campus grantmaking peers, a near-term raising of the fund budget to \$200,000 would address some of the high demand we have seen in recent years. SSC went over-budget¹ during FY23 on the PBSIF budget due to skyrocketing demand for sustainability funding on campus. PBSIF is an integral program on this campus, and increasing the number of projects creates a widespread impact. An increase in funding would greatly benefit sustainability on campus, allowing more projects to be generated by students, faculty, and staff.

A physical center for sustainability on campus that allows for genuine connecting, collaborating, and community-building for students, faculty, and staff surrounding their sustainability work. This is a broadly-recognized need that has been elevated to various stakeholders and administrators across campus. With conversations underway on this topic with administrators, it is a top priority based on a year of student engagement and feedback that we must prioritize.

Greater support for student and staff sustainability initiatives on the Flint and Dearborn campuses. This includes providing adequate funding to existing sustainability programs and initiatives to help them grow, as well as empowering sustainability-minded Flint and Dearborn students to use funding in a way that is best for their respective needs. This funding could be used to compensate students for their time in leading sustainability activities on the Flint and Dearborn campuses (e.g., Dearborn SSC, Flint SSC). Increasing student jobs to support current departments enables further growth in sustainability action on both campuses and centers student ideas. Staff and students already working toward sustainability goals are eager to continue strengthening channels of communication between Ann Arbor, Dearborn & Flint campuses.

Expansion of paid student leadership and campus-as-lab opportunities

Student Life Sustainability (SLS) provides high-impact working/learning experiences for students, through SSC and other programs such as U-M Sustainable Food Program and Planet Blue Student Leaders. Working closely with SLS staff members, SSC realizes the need for increased support from the administration in building out capacity for SLS student opportunities. With current programs growing and interns being hired for projects across the department, SSC hopes to see the administration direct more funding towards building our capacity for impact, alongside increases in funding for our grant programs.

¹ Due to budgetary circumstances, this was possible during FY23. This budget flexibility to support program growth is not cemented for the future at this time.



For more information and collaboration inquiries, please contact AY 24-25 SSC Co-Presidents Andrew van Baal (avanbaal@umich.edu) and Trevor Wallace (trewalla@umich.edu).