

SUSTAINABILITY STATEMENT

A recent definition of sustainability, taken from the PSU website, described sustainability as:

Meeting the economic, social, and environmental needs of the present without compromising the similar needs of future generations.

The Department of Communication proposes that understanding communication about sustainability, in both the private and public spheres, is critical to the achievement of sustainability in environmental, economic, social, and political processes and outcomes.

Communication scholars study discourse--communicative acts that occur across a variety of media and interpersonal contexts--and it is through such communicative acts that we come to understand and respond to our world. We don't just "find" the facts of the world, we create them through communicating about them. Thus, the relationships of humans, as individuals and as members of societies, to the natural world are defined by the way we talk about this relationship. Through discourse we discover some problems and ignore others. Our discourse defines and frames situations, issues and problems in certain ways that imply certain solutions and actions. Thus, what is being discussed, the terms and tone of that discussion, and who has the most access to and control over the discussion, are critical in solving problems, creative thinking and action.

It follows that analyzing the discourse surrounding the range of issues subsumed under the label "sustainability" is critically important to understanding how their origins, implications, magnitude and solutions are understood by publics, the media and policy makers.

The nature and style of discourse can foster sustainable social environments conducive to creative problem solving or, alternatively, social environments rife with division and discord. The former must be nurtured and the latter avoided for the individual, organizational and cultural changes necessary to bring about sustainable living.

The central role of research, teaching and service in the Department of Communication regarding sustainability is, therefore, to learn about and help implement communication strategies that create more sustainable practices and shed light on communication processes that undermine these efforts.

These general considerations can find expression in four major themes for teaching, research and community service in the Department of Communication:

Communication about environmental sustainability

- Communication about sustainability efforts, for example in the physical sciences, so that scientists can better communicate with each other and with broader publics.
- Communication from institutions to the public, often via media, regarding sustainability, its meaning, how to attain it, how individuals can live sustainable lives, etc.
- Investigation into how people, through individual talk, affect institutional routines.
- Journalism, public relations and advertising efforts regarding sustainability, involving the nature of news coverage and framing of the various issues involved, and the efforts of organizations and businesses to “position” themselves in beneficial ways (to themselves) regarding sustainability
- How people understand such terms as sustainability and “green,” and how they don’t understand them, and why.

Using communication to develop sustainable social contexts to achieve environmental sustainability

- Communication to develop the social capital (trust, sense of common purpose) needed to face challenging decisions regarding resource management.
- Communication to create broad social consensus about the need to change individual, social and institutional behaviors.
- Communication to help manage the inevitable conflicts that will emerge as communities change to meet the challenge of sustainability.
- Communication to create the openness to new ideas and to change that is necessary to achieve environmental sustainability.

Sustainability as ethics

- Sustainability requires that the future be a “stakeholder” in all decisions, and most theories of ethics incorporate such an “other” orientation as a standard for ethical decision making.
- Ethical communication is sustainable communication, in that ethical communication encourages continuing communication and is necessary for building trust and creating social capital.
- Many communication theories assume a desirable outcome of communication to be the creation of a sustainable social environment where participants’ goals can be met while respecting the dignity of other participants.

- Does concern with sustainability become a social class issue, such that people of different social class groups become more engaged with it or are differentially asked to make changes to support it.

Micro and Macro Sustainability

- Communication processes and contexts that lead individuals to make decisions supporting sustainability.
- Communication processes and contexts that lead institutions and organizations to make decisions supporting sustainability.
- Communication processes and contexts that link organizations and individuals in ways that encourage sustainability at both levels.

Projects and activities conducted by faculty related to sustainability

Students in *David Kennamer's* research methods class conducted research projects about greenwashing, the marketing technique which touts the supposed environmentally friendly qualities of products.

Students examined marketing of bottled water and sustainability in *Susan Poulsen's* theory classes. Prof. Poulsen also worked with graduate students who advised community partners on sustainable communication practices in leadership, decision making and intercultural work groups.

David Ritchie's students facilitate, transcribe and analyze conversations on sustainability related topics, such as recycling.

Media literacy students in *Jil Freeman's* class focused on media artifacts related to sustainability.

Kenny Bagley's freshman students create items from sustainable materials and do six hours volunteer work out for an organization involved with sustainability issues.

Much of *Char Schell's* research program examines "what do non-scientists hear when scientists speak."

Cynthia Coleman received a grant to study how stakeholders talk about Columbia River fisheries and Indian treaty rights.

-- Prepared by J. David Kennamer, Assistant Professor of Communication