



The State University of New York  
**Student Assembly**

Committee on Higher Education  
Committee on Environmental Conservation

Testimony of The State University of New York Student  
Assembly (SUNY SA)

November 13, 2019

On behalf of the SUNY Student Assembly, and the 1.4 Million students of our great University system, we very much appreciate the tireless efforts of the Honorable Assembly Members and Committee Chairs Glick and Englebright for hosting a public hearing to address the intersection of higher education, sustainable development, and the goals and actions associated with reducing our carbon footprint and ensuring our communities are safe and livable for all.

The Student Assembly is the recognized system-wide student government supporting the students of SUNY. We are comprised of student leaders from across the state and represent the students of the many University centers, colleges, technology colleges, and community colleges. In addition, we are also involved in advocacy on the local, state, and federal level. The President of the Student Assembly serves as the head of the organized student government for all 64 campuses in the system and holds the position as the only student member of the SUNY board of trustees. Twice annually the Student Assembly brings together hundreds of student leaders from across the state and beyond to participate in student leadership conferences, where the organization's advocacy priorities are finalized, and members are offered the opportunity to network and learn leadership skills from students, campus and system administration, and world class faculty through various workshops and lectures.

Additionally, Student Assembly representatives meet on a monthly basis to coordinate advocacy efforts and further refine strategies towards the advancement of quality and affordability in public higher education. We operate a variety of committees focused on promoting academic excellence throughout the system and highlight areas of campus safety, disability services, gender equity, and sustainability.

As an institution of public higher education, The state university of New York (SUNY) has an obligation and an opportunity to be a leader in the field of environmental sustainability. SUNY accounts for one of New York's largest energy consumers, with a utility and vehicle fuels budget of over \$250 million. Additionally, over 40% of public infrastructure in the state is accounted for by SUNY, and our community of students, faculty, staff, and alumni represent more than five million people.<sup>1</sup>

The Governor has established a goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40% by the year 2030. The New York Power Authority (NYPA), The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA), and SUNY amongst other agencies, are all working towards this goal.<sup>2</sup> In order to accelerate progress towards this goal our Chancellor Kristina Johnson revealed SUNY's Clean Energy Road Map. This roadmap includes plans to develop new building efficiency standards, energy management best practices, and a clean energy workforce across New York State. Furthermore it aims to outline strategies for leveraging

<sup>1</sup>SUNY, Sustainability, Capital Facilities <https://system.suny.edu/capital-facilities/energy>

[management/sustainability/](#)

<sup>2</sup>SUNY, Sustainability, Executive Order 88 <https://system.suny.edu/capital-facilities/executive-order-88/>

SUNY's academic and research capabilities to become a center for developing clean energy technologies and solutions.<sup>3</sup>

Our system is responsible for educating students on the social, environmental, and economic impacts of sustainability. It is imperative to students that all elements of our educational experience be integrated with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. These goals exemplify the top 17 priorities of the United Nations for achievement by the year 2030<sup>4</sup>. Examples include the impact of life on land, quality education, gender equality, innovation and infrastructure, peace, justice, and partnerships for the goals. The United Nations has signified that the Sustainable Development Goals provide a blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. Ending poverty and other deprivations goes hand in hand with strategies that improve health, education, reduce inequalities, and spur economic growth. Students across our system wish to be engaged in research and coursework that highlights elements of these goals and by doing so our academic offerings are more competitive, attractive, and include how we can tackle climate change from the classroom to the community.

Additionally, our campuses are enrolled in a variety of statewide and national organizations dedicated to enhancing sustainability culture and practices. More than a third of SUNY campuses are enrolled in The Association for Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). However, only ten SUNY campuses are reporting for AASHE's Sustainability Tracking Assessment and Rating System. This rating system is designed to provide a framework for understanding sustainability in all sectors of higher education, create incentives for continual improvement, and enable meaningful comparisons over time using a common set of measurements. Investment in our students and our system will allow for an increase in the participation in measures such as AASHE's STARS and yield more sustainable communities across the state for years to come.

Adequate capital investment in SUNY would allow for our campuses to accelerate the process of retrofitting buildings to meet environmental standards. Upgrading utilities such as water, heating and cooling, and electricity are all major components of our footprint. Proper resource management of water can yield low flow systems that reduce water by millions of gallons. Additionally, Campus ponds and other bodies of water in our environment can be utilized for irrigation of fields, and green infrastructure can be utilized to ensure proper storm water management measures are taken. Heating and cooling costs are also a major expenditure and can be tackled by investment into projects such as green roofs, solar, wind, and geothermal energy where appropriate. Energy efficient lighting and technological devices can also yield great savings as an investment into our campuses and state.

Our institutions operate a variety of buildings at all levels of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. In addition to SUNY infrastructure The SUNY Polytechnic Institute as well as the College of Environmental Science and Forestry now offer programs specifically designed to grow the next generation clean energy workforce. The two universities have combined to offer the Green Building Experimental Learning Collaborative, a series of courses where students are given the opportunity to participate in LEED certification of

<sup>3</sup>State University of New York Clean Energy Road Map <https://www.nypa.gov-/media/nypa/documents/document-library/cleanenergy/suny-clean-energy-roadmap.pdf> <sup>4</sup>Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

buildings and will have the opportunity to prepare for and take certification exams.<sup>5</sup> The Student Assembly supports investment into new academic and research offerings and promotes standards above and beyond those of LEED certification. Furthermore, investment into academic programs for all students in engineering, architectural, or related programs across SUNY will ensure that graduates will enter the workforce with competitive credentials related to LEED building construction and management. It is important to our students, faculty, and staff that our infrastructure demonstrate the highest level of environmental design. We support investment into our built and natural environment that favors complete streets, an approach to design that requires safe and comfortable travel and access for users of all ages and abilities regardless of their mode of transportation.

Further investment into our sustainability culture and academic initiatives on campuses will benefit our students and communities the most. Capital investment is only one piece of the puzzle as it is the engagement aspect of sustainability that will yield further advancement of sustainable development in New York. Components of sustainability education such as ecological literacy, waste management and resource use practices, and the economic impact of decision making all contribute to individual Campus and Community carbon footprints.

With an increase in funding for capital and infrastructure combined with the ability to expand and offer new programs and opportunities related to emerging technologies and renewable energy, campuses across the state will be equipped to provide quality education that demonstrates the most impactful elements of sustainable development and act as a model for other colleges and universities as well as for our students and the community around us.

<sup>5</sup>SUNY Invests in LEED Education With New Collaborative <https://www.usgbc.org/articles/suny-invests-leed-education-new-collaborative-usgbc-new-york-upstate>