

Interviewer1: ... do our other interviews, but I guess to be safe that might be the best way to go about it.

ER: I'm surprised no one else has asked you that.

I1: Who else... I know some people from Colorado were interviewed yesterday. Yeah it's interesting.

ER: Anyway, sorry to take up so much time

I2: No, it's alright. So to start off can you tell us a little bit about your role at U of M?

ER: Sure, so I am the Sustainability Director so I have been hired to oversee the implementation of our climate action plan which is outdated at this point in time. It's meant to reach through the year 2020. But I am supposed to be the person overseeing and leading and coordinating and driving our sustainability work as a university. I would say we've come to define what that looks like to a large extent by STARS reporting tool. Are you guys familiar with STARS?

I1: Yeah.

ER: So I'd say we look to that tool to help us make sure we're hitting all the things, right. That we're not just talking about environmental sustainability any more but we're also talking about social justice and environmental justice and culture and employee engagement and the connection between sustainability and our educational mission.

I report directly to a Vice President for Operations and Finance. I am not housed within the facilities department which I think is usually the more common place for sustainability staff to be. And I have 3 full time employees, one her work is focused on our green office program managing our revolving loan fund and some of our other student internships and

student projects. And then I have two staff who work totally on recycling and waste diversion. Any kind of additional composting efforts and things like that that we try on campus. Yeah that's the gist of it.

I2: When was your current climate action plan implemented and where is it at right now?

You've touched on that a bit but...

ER: What do you mean where is it at right now?

I2: Is it being revised? Is it sort of like, are you meeting the goals that were set in it, that kind of thing?

ER: So our initial plan was put together in 2009 and signed in 2010. We've implemented some of the things in it. We had also researched and tried to implement a lot of the things in it. Quite a few of those things had not been successful. Some of that has been the result of not having enough money. Some of it has been the result of lack of political will. Some of it has been the result of gosh technical things like our relationship with Northwestern Energy and what kind of customer we are for them.

Um, so yeah we are I would say in terms of the status of our climate... So I still refer to our climate action plan for strategies that we might continue to pursue. I wouldn't say it's dead in the water. But we have had to, I mean getting that work done is I think all about context and what the financial and cultural and political picture is at your university at any given time.

So we've managed to do good work on climate action. Can I say we have followed our climate action plan? Not strictly, not concretely because it laid out a 10 years time line to achieve carbon neutrality which um, we definitely have not done and was not technically feasible for us to do. So um, yeah we continue to do the work. We do need to revise it, I don't

have a time line for revision because I am completing STARS, our 3rd STARS report right now, and that's a huge lift. So it probably won't get revised honestly until maybe the fall, starting in the fall semester. And I would say even then I would be more inclined to develop a more comprehensive sustainability plan, rather than just a climate action plan

I1: In the past 10 years were any progress reports developed or anything to refer back to the plan and how things are going?

5:05

ER: Um-hm, I mean it was part of the American College and University President's Climate Commitment. (side talk re: ringing phone.) And if you're a member, an institutional member of Second Nature you have to submit progress reports every two years I think. So yes we have not, we haven't published a progress report in probably... I think 2016 was our last one. And you can find all of that on our website too. We have a whole... and if you go to the Second Nature website they've got all of their member institutions data published as well.

I1: Would those be STARS reports or separate?

ER: No they're progress reports, climate action progress reports. Because Second Nature doesn't really care about your STARS report. It's a totally separate organization. So we haven't done one in a few years but we did just complete our most recent, we are almost done with our most recent greenhouse gas emissions inventory. So I am not going to publish a progress report that specifically speaks to the climate action plan probably because that feels irrelevant at this point, a little outdated. But I will update the campus on where we are in terms of our total emissions footprint and how we... the reasons we are where we are.

I1: You talked about the carbon neutrality goal for 2020. I'm curious, do you have any thoughts on why such an ambitious goal was made and maybe some reasons why that

might've not been attainable? And then also if there is a new plan for carbon neutrality down the road?

ER: These are really big questions! (laughs) It was an aggressive goal because we had a group of student activists that really wanted us to pick an aggressive goal. And we had a university president at the time who knew he was going to retire in 5 years so he probably didn't mind signing onto something that he knew couldn't be accomplished.

Um, wasn't accomplished and probably really wasn't feasibly accomplishable, because we haven't had an administration that really wants to make the financial investments that are going to be required for carbon neutrality. We also have a really big roadblock here at UM that you guys don't have at MSU with our utility with Northwestern Energy, who is also your utility. But the deal for us is we are categorized differently as a customer. We signed a contract a number of years ago, where we're called a default customer. Which means that we are contractually obligated to purchase our electricity from Northwestern.

One of the major tools in toolbox for campuses that have significantly moved the dial on climate action or even achieved neutrality by now is that most of them have entered into what's called a power purchase agreement which is where they work with an energy developer offsite some where. Right they're investing in large scale renewables that are not on their own campus. Sometimes some of those large scale renewables are, usually it's solar. Right? Geothermal, heating and cooling loops and stuff like that.

But if they are seeking to do something really big that will cover the bulk of their energy consumption they're working with an outside energy developer. And they make an agreement over a certain fixed price they will purchase that electricity from that developer instead of their own utility. Or maybe they're working with their own utility on that project right, as a

partnership. We can't do that, we can't actually pursue a power purchase agreement which means that we either have to generate all of it on site behind the meter, solar on our rooftops, solar on our parking lots. That's really kind of our options honestly for large on site renewables. Or our utility provider has to be the one to green all the energy coming from the grid, which Northwestern Energy does not appear to have any plans to do.

And then as far as next goals, I honestly at least at the moment carbon neutrality is super important and it's great and I think we should definitely keep it... in view. It's not going to happen in the next 5-10 years for this university. Um, barring significant federal legislative change and significant political change in our state. So I guess I am not inclined to set a goal of carbon neutrality right now. I am very interested... because I am not interested in signing up for another goal that we're not going to meet and then everyone gets disappointed. I want to set a goal that is ambitious but do-able. And I want to use the tools that we know we have and we can actually use.

So my preference would be for us to create a 3-5 year plan that includes a whole lot of energy conservation, some on site renewables, behavior change, really addresses what I know we can do around footprint rather than, rather than setting us up for failure because we... can't use some of the biggest most important tools that universities have used for carbon neutrality. So I think that's it.

I1: Thanks.

I2: So you mentioned working on the STARS report and all that. So like who is in charge of sort of monitoring that progress and like collecting all that data?

ER: You're looking at her.

I2: Yeah, I kind of figured! Um. You mentioned funding a bit too, but what has been the

biggest barriers that you've run into in implementing your climate action plan?

ER: I mean I think it can be boiled down to sort of 3 things. **Lack of political will, it's not a high enough priority for decision makers to get something that ambitious and complicated done and expensive.** **We've had declining enrollment, every year since I've been here.** So I've been in this role for 6.5 years so the entire time I've been here the... institutional narrative has been one of scarcity. We don't have enough resources to do this. So telling university presidents that they should invest \$3M in large scale solar doesn't fly. Especially not until, I mean solar hasn't really been that viable in terms of payback until pretty recently. And three is bandwidth. I mean I am one full time person and getting this work done is really hard. It's complicated, it's really dynamic and diverse and takes a certain kind of person I think to do it, to just persevere and not burn out. We have a team of 4 and I am the only one who explicitly focuses on climate action strategies. So it's a capacity issue too.

II: I know we talked about the neutrality goal and just kind of some of the things in the plan that couldn't maybe be met for whatever reasons. But do you feel like success has come from the plan in other areas?

ER: **Yeah I mean we have some of the strategies outlined in our climate action plan have been implemented. And it definitely provided a foundation of research and quantitative data for us to use when figuring out where we're going to get the most bang for our buck in terms of emissions reductions.** It just... it served the purpose of creating structure to some of the work that I do and the work that our sustainable campus committee does. So yeah there were things that were useful about it for sure. I am definitely glad we did it. There's no part of me that thinks it was a useless exercise.

15:05

I2: Is there any like student involvement in like creating your plan or as part of the plan itself?

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ER: I just want to make sure I understand you right, does our climate action plan include strategies specifically directed at students?

I2: Well that and like is there any sort of like student engagement or input or like was there in creating the plan?

ER: Yes. Yup, there was a ton of campus stakeholder engagement. All campus affiliates, students, faculty, staff, there were students as part of their classwork that were involved in doing some of the research and writing. Actually one of the main authors at the time, part time sustainability professional on campus who is also a grad student in the Environmental Studies program. And then our climate action plan does include a number of behavior change strategies for emissions reduction. And all of those would include students. We talk about turning off lights or driving less, right which is one that nobody likes to talk about but honestly it's like yeah if you want to have a personal change, if you want to take an immediate action, meaningful action to address your own emissions footprint then we stop driving.

And so that sort of thing is in the climate action plan. And all of those behavior change related strategies are directed at students faculty and staff.

I1: So with the student's input do you feel like they had a pretty good representation of their voice and values in the plan?

ER: Yeah I mean I think the biggest thing that they did was advocate for the aggressive neutrality goal. I don't think they played a major role in the writing of it. I think our sustainability director at the time... my predecessor, she definitely did the bulk of the heavy

lifting on writing the document and doing the research. And by research I mean you know it takes I feel like sometimes people think that climate action plan are just like yeah you just kind of make a wish list of all the things that you want to be able to accomplish that reduce your emissions footprint right. Well not really. If you're going to propose that the UM achieve carbon neutrality in part by um, using more renewable energy or using as much renewable energy as possible, that's a really technical problem. How much space do you have on campus for solar? Are you going to buy wind from somewhere? How the heck does that happen? That is a complicated investment and legal question. So I think students had input at the level of like... yeah we think solar is good. Yeah we think energy competitions in the dorms is a good idea. Or we really think changing how parking is managed on campus so that people drive less, to encourage people to drive less. That seems like a really good strategy.

So I think they played that kind of role and definitely they advocated for the aggressive carbon neutrality deadline. But I feel like the bulk of the research was done by the two sustainability staff, one of whom was a grad student. But she was getting paid to write the plan so she wasn't doing it from like an activist perspective. She was doing it as like a staff perspective.

II: And based on the successes and um, I guess drawbacks of the plan, can you see anything that might have led certain parts of the plan to be more successful than others?

ER: I mean I have seen climate action plan that are not as... quantitative as ours. Have you guys looked at our climate action plan?

II: Um-hm.

ER: It's numbers heavy. I mean there's a lot in there. There's like estimates related to how much we can generate with solar. How much will we need to spend on carbon offsets. It was

a lot of work and I would say that having those numbers, having Sheri do all that number crunching was really helpful. Like I think climate action plan that are really vague and kind of like yeah we want to do some solar. We want to like turn off some water cooler refrigeration to save energy. We want to like reduce the number of vending stations we have.

We our climate action plan goes through and is like we would have to get rid of a ton of freaking vending stations to make any dent in our energy footprint right?! So she calculated how much energy savings could be realized from turning the lights off in the vending stations or getting rid of them. So I think that's a strength of our climate action plan.

And as far as as like how it could've looked different I can't think of anything. It was incredibly comprehensive and well done.

I1: Just based on the plans we've looked at, it's super comprehensive. It's a lot longer I guess than some of the other ones we've read. If you were to go about doing it again, would you stick with that longer length to make sure you could include all that? Or would you try to maybe have a little more condensed actual plan and maybe appendices?

ER: I don't know, I think format is kind of secondary. I mean the climate action plan, yeah I don't know, I haven't really thought that much about format. It seems to me like for the document to be useful it needs to be useful to the energy manager, the sustainability director. Students read the thing but nobody is holding students accountable for making sure that those strategies are done. So relevant to students for sure, but... yeah I don't think I would change anything. I mean our next one will look different but I am not going to be writing it with the intention of keeping it succinct. I am going to be writing it with the intention that it's useful. So however long I have to make it for it to be useful. If that makes sense?

I1: Yeah, thanks!

I2: I don't think I have any more questions. I don't know if you do Nick?

I1: I am trying to think how to best word this. I know we kind of touched on funding but like with the original plan, like was there explicit... did you have funds set aside, or where were you looking for those funds? And how has that changed over time?

ER: Funding for all of our sustainability work is pretty piecemeal from wherever we can get it.

So when Sheri started writing the climate action plan. And even when the university president at the time signed it I am not under the impression... it was 11 years ago, it was a long time ago. So I wasn't around for that but um, I am not under the impression that he promised any specific amount of funding or budget for getting that work done. So and even now I would say that part of the... creativity and finagling of my job is that it's my responsibility to kind of scavenge around and like find pots of money for sustainability projects.

Part of that is like convincing people who access to more resources than I do to invest some of those resources in sustainability projects. And I try to do what I can to save them money. You know like if I have access to money to do an energy conservation project, I will send some of those resources there way and hope that in return part of what happens is they circle back at some point and say oh hey we decided to invest some of those savings in XYZ sustainability work. So no there's not a lot of money, there's not a big budget for the really large capital investments that we need to get done unfortunately. But we do it in smaller pieces. That's why the work is slower, that's why we're not carbon neutral by 2020 because we haven't been willing to invest millions. We invest a couple hundred thousand here, a couple hundred thousand here. For better or worse.

I1: That probably covers everything. Do you have anything else Jessie?

I2: I don't think so.

25:20

ER: What is the class for? What is this project for?

I1: So it's an independent study so it's like kind of a research project but we're getting credit for it. But it's just looking at different climate action plans and climate action planning at universities similar to MSU. In the end we're going to be giving a presentation to the campus sustainability advisory council and just help start the gears moving for MSU's new whatever comes next with climate action planning.

ER: What is your climate action plan? What's the status of your climate action plan?

I2: Our most recent one was started in 2009 and signed in 2011. But it needs to be updated so yeah that's... we're not writing a new plan but we're going to try to help guide the new plan.

I1: I think 2016 is the most recent update that we have. So it seems like we might be in a similar situation to you guys. But definitely I think the office of sustainability is looking to create a new full fledged plan somewhere down the road. And get that rolling.

ER: Who else are you guys interviewing?

I2: We've interviewed the sustainability coordinator at CSU, Weber State and um...

I1: Utah State. So those are main four schools that we're looking into that we determined have enough similarities to MSU to draw some good information.

ER: Cool, that's awesome! Well it sounds like a fun project. If you guys end up sharing it afterwards, I would love to check it out and see what else you heard from other schools. It'd be really cool.

I1: Definitely.

ER: Great.

I2: Thank you so much for your time and input!

ER: Yeah you're welcome, thanks for your interest in sustainability and your leadership at MSU. I am sure the committee will be really grateful for the work you guys have done. Let me know if you need clarification on anything.

I1: I have an off topic question, did you work with Paul Edland when he was at UM?

ER: Yeah Paul was a student of mine. First in the class that I taught that did our very first STARS report. And then he was not a student in my business class but he was my Americorps service member volunteer. And then he... yup he left Missoula and moved to Bozeman waiting for that position and the sustainability office to open up. So yeah Paul is one of my success stories!

I1: Awesome, I work with the Office of Sustainability and he's my immediate boss, so I was thinking you probably worked with him.

ER: He's great. He continues to be an excellent resource.

I1: Awesome!

ER: Sweet. Well thanks Nicolas and Jessica, you guys have a great day.

I1: Thank you.

I2: Thanks, you too!

28:55