

Dear Carnegie Mellon University,

When I first became more involved in environmental sustainability and waste management practices at Carnegie Mellon University as an undergraduate student, I came in with limited understanding of the topics. Like many other people, my focus was narrowed in on what the individual could change about their lifestyle to contribute toward a more sustainable future. As my involvement increased, however, I slowly began to realize the complexity of waste management and the issue with that approach. Once applied to CMU itself, it became clear that the university perpetuated this individualization of waste management responsibilities and was in need of further reflection on its commitment to sustainability.

Like most universities, CMU often touts its commitment to sustainability and paints itself as a leader in the field:

Leading the way. Setting the Standard. Carnegie Mellon is committed to environmental research and education and we are equally committed to adopting sustainable practices that will reduce the operational footprint of our campuses.

As a student who has been active in my efforts making the campus a more sustainable space, however, I have had a drastically different experience than the one CMU advertises. Responsibility for sustainability is often pushed onto the shoulders of students, students who do not have the time or resources to make substantial, systemic change at the university. This is something I have seen happen again and again within the university's primary environmental sustainability club, Sustainable Earth. My involvement in sustainability efforts at CMU began when I joined Sustainable Earth. Being the only campus organization focused on environmental sustainability, Sustainable Earth covers a wide range of topics and projects, from things like environmental justice outreach, to advocacy within the university, to sustainability education for other students. The club has many dedicated members but is stretched thin. Because of the lack of university resources, the club often becomes a sustainability hub people go to for resources. For example, on several occasions, students from the club were asked to stand by trash cans in CMU's University Center to direct others on how to sort their trash between landfill and recycling bins. While Sustainable Earth enjoys helping out fellow students and providing information, when the university begins coming to the club in search of student volunteers to do work which should be paid for, the clear lack of commitment for sustainability from CMU is highlighted.

My membership in the club then led me to find a part-time student job within university Housing Services. The position, Housing Sustainability Assistant (HSA), was mostly centered around improving waste management practices across the university's residential facilities. While working in the position, I felt extremely passionate about the projects we pursued. I worked closely with three other student staff members and created educational posters and presentations for residents, tabled in dorms, and even dug through trash by hand for trash audits. Most initiatives were education-based, teaching other students how to recycle and live sustainably while on-campus. Looking back and reflecting on our initiatives, what the HSAs could work on was very superficial. Even

when I became even more involved at a higher level after being promoted to Housing Sustainability Lead (HSL), it was difficult to make more systemic changes within waste management. The projects my team could work on really only addressed symptoms of a bad waste management system rather than tackling the problem of waste production itself. We did not have the authority, funding, or knowledge to fundamentally change

how CMU approached sustainability. I spent a lot of time and effort which ultimately led to unremarkable changes.

In Summer 2020, I pursued an undergraduate research project with support from a summer research grant from the university. This research project was focused on the individualization of responsibility for waste management, especially at CMU, and asked, “how did we get to this point of maximum trash, and what could be done to improve the cultural relationship of producer, consumer, and the endless stream of trash?” Through my research, I found that “in order to establish a more sustainable waste management system, producers must recognize and act upon their responsibility in minimizing the amount of waste their products create rather than promoting the individualization of responsibility.” I studied the social, cultural, and political systems surrounding waste management, because I wanted to identify how waste management practices at CMU and beyond could be improved upon and addressed through art to maximize sustainability. CMU plays into the individualization of responsibility by fostering a campus which makes it difficult for students to live sustainably while pushing initiatives that depend on student choices. I argue in my paper that one fundamental way the university could live up to their commitment to sustainability is through the creation of an Office of Sustainability. I also argue that sustainability and art are inextricably connected through culture, and that art can play a significant role in issues such as waste management by drawing attention to certain issues, encouraging change, inspiring passion, and more.

The sustainability initiatives CMU does work on are similar to the work I did as the Housing Sustainability Lead in residence halls, in that they focus on fixing the symptoms of a bad waste management system rather than the problem itself. For example, the language CMU uses online and on posters suggest that waste creation and disposal are still responsibilities of the individual because of their emphasis on recycling rather than reducing and reusing. Carnegie Mellon’s “Recycling and Waste Management” website page shows how to dispose of waste at the university, with one section even dedicated to a list of vague reasons why recycling is important: “to reduce global warming, to prevent air pollution, to solve the problem of scarcity of landfills, to prevent water pollution, to save energy.” This language emphasizes that the university’s waste management system continues to work off the framework that the individual is responsible for consuming, and therefore discarding, trash. This waste management strategy fails to criticize the larger issue of production within waste management systems. If anything, the opposite has been stressed to students as the university’s priority. For example, during a monthly meeting Sustainable Earth conducted with CMU’s Sustainability Initiative Steering Committee, a member of the committee emphasized that he would like to focus on not what the university should be doing, but what students individually should be doing.

Entropy+ is a vital part of campus because of its convenience for students. It offers a variety of necessary items and is easily accessible being located in the middle of campus. The products which are offered, however, contain an overwhelming amount of plastic packaging. The only products which do not contain packaging are some selections of extremely expensive fruits. Additionally, the companies which supply Entropy+ are mostly large corporations, the same ones which are to blame for the amount of waste produced today. It is frustrating to hear university leadership want to emphasize individual student action rather than university-level action within sustainability when vital components of campus, like Entropy+, only offer products which do not allow for sustainable living on campus. It is unfair to provide students with unsustainable options

and then turn around and ask them to do better with what they are given.

The fixation on recycling and individual responsibility draws attention to either a lack of understanding about sustainability or a lack of commitment toward sustainability, which could both be addressed through a group of passionate, knowledgeable people in the form of an Office of Sustainability. Ongoing sustainability initiatives on campus are often temporary, since they are student-run and therefore incapable of making long-lasting change, disconnected from each other, without adequate funding, and not a priority to the people working on it, as sustainability at CMU most likely is not their primary job. If Carnegie Mellon truly believes itself to be a leader in sustainability, it will start by playing catch up through the establishment of an Office of Sustainability.

I believe the university has failed to live up to its “commitment to lead by example in preserving and protecting our natural resources” through its refusal to create an Office of Sustainability. I have met with CMU’s Sustainability Initiative Steering Committee, which was created by the Provost Jim Garrett in response to the demands for an Office of Sustainability, several times about the creation of an office and have come away each time disappointed and frustrated. Over the past few years, CMU’s President Farnam Jahanian and Provost Garrett have received an onslaught of recommendations to create the office. Here is a partial timeline of the recommendations made as stated in CMU’s Graduate Student Assembly (GSA)’s letter supporting the Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee’s report on sustainability, “The Future of Sustainability Education, Research and Practice at CMU”:

During Academic Year 2017-2018, a group of CMU students approached the Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) to support the idea of a sustainability office here at Carnegie Mellon University. In May 2018, the GSA general body voted to endorse this idea, following a similar endorsement by the Undergraduate Student Senate. The students presented their ideas to the Faculty Senate, which resulted in the formation of the Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee on Sustainability at CMU. In February 2019, this committee prepared a report entitled “The Future of Sustainability Education, Research and Practice at CMU.” Since then, the committee shared the report with the GSA Executive Committee. After careful review of this document, the GSA Executive Committee fully supports the report and the recommendations therein.

Despite the recommendations from the student group, GSA and the Undergraduate Student Senate, the 15 page report from the Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee, an additional letter from Sustainable Earth, and a petition with 302 signatures from students and alumni, Provost Garrett still declined to create such an office. The Sustainability Initiative he adopted instead emphasizes the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and holds very little in concrete action. With the exception of one person, leadership within the initiative are not individuals solely focused on sustainability at the university but rather include faculty and staff already involved in the university in other manners.

Entropy+ is a significant part of most students’ lives at CMU. It is important that it reflects the university’s claims of sustainability in the products they offer, in how they treat their staff, and in fair pricing. Ultimately though, the issues at Entropy are only one aspect of CMU’s broken approach on sustainability. These issues affect the university everywhere and at every level. Instead of all these student-led efforts, there is a serious need for coordinated and targeted work with the full attention of the university brought to these issues. Based on sustainability being listed as one of CMU’s eight core university values: “to lead by example in preserving and protecting our natural resources, and in our approach to responsible financial planning,” Carnegie Mellon clearly recognizes the importance of sustainability. Yet it refuses to even create an Office of Sustainability. The university must start living up to its own promises and create a centralized office for sustainability with full-time staff, administration, and a budget.

With a topic as difficult to tackle as sustainability, CMU needs an Office of Sustainability. Students do not have enough power to adequately address sustainability issues, which can be seen in my work within CMU's residence halls. Without a more centralized platform for sustainability, tackling such a systemic issue is nearly impossible. Funding is also a major issue when it comes to student initiatives and activities. It is possible to gain funding through grants and such, but it is limited and not guaranteed. This is also an issue an office would ameliorate. Additionally, with an issue like sustainability, it is important that initiatives tackling it are sustainable themselves, as a short project would most likely be unable to properly tackle such a deep-rooted issue. Student leaders are constantly cycling through CMU. We only have around four years to understand, plan, and implement initiatives. I have found that when graduating students try to keep projects alive by passing them down to newer students, that they can easily lose momentum and fade away. In order to create meaningful, long-lasting change, there needs to be a permanent structure which allows for it, and there needs to be people working in that structure which can prioritize sustainability at Carnegie Mellon through paid, full-time positions. All of these requirements point toward the creation of an Office of Sustainability.

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