

Q&A: Why we need sustainability to achieve public health

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Sustainability has been a hot topic for many years, with people adopting practices such as recycling, repurposing, and other environmentally friendly acts.

But [sustainability](#) is so much more than this, and includes the health and well-being of people and society at large. Universities play a critical role in advancing the cause. Working to promote sustainability can influence effect and amplify change beyond the institution, said Wendy Purcell, professor at the Rutgers School of Public Health, whose work focuses on how universities and higher education can help to tackle challenges such as the [climate crisis](#), food insecurity and pandemic risk.

Purcell's new book on the subject, "The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sustainability in Higher Education," which comes out in February, talks about what sustainability means and how universities are key to sustainable development.

What does sustainability mean?

Sustainability is about people, planet, and shared prosperity: It's about stewarding natural, human, and cultural resources for the benefit of all—now and into the future. It's an agenda firmly rooted in equity and [social justice](#) across generations, which is reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals set out by the United Nations in 2015. These global goals represent the nearest thing we have to a strategy for our world. Seventeen of the goals were agreed upon by 193 countries with the aim to create a world that leaves no one behind.

How are sustainability and public health connected?

The intersection between planetary health and [human health](#) is profound—from the air we breathe and the food we eat to the homes we live in and the work we do.

[The Lancet Countdown](#) tracks the connections between public health and climate change and makes for sobering reading, from the spread of

infectious diseases to rising food insecurity. My recent [paper](#) documents the health impacts of extreme climate events—from heat waves to smoke from wildfires—and shows how [climate change](#) is multiplying health risks and exacerbating inequalities in society.

As well as affecting individual health, sustainability is about health systems and the social factors that affect health like housing, education, and decent work.

Why is sustainability a priority for the Rutgers School of Public Health?

Public health is interdisciplinary, bringing together different disciplines to focus on the health of people and populations. The Rutgers School of Public Health is the ideal place to explore questions that span the disciplines and develop solutions that connect the environment, society, and the economy using the lens of health.

Healthy planet and healthy people make for a healthy society and economy. One of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, SDG4 "Quality Education," shows that education for sustainable development is about sustainable lifestyles, [human rights](#), gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciate of cultural diversity—all of which resonate strongly with the school's mission, vision, and values.

I am truly excited to be part of Rutgers, an anchor institution in New Jersey and central to the state's agenda for health for all, economic inclusion, and equity.

What is being done at the Rutgers School of Public Health?

A recent [study](#) shows student interest in [sustainable development](#) rose 18 percent year-on-year with demand outstripping the supply of programs by 2.5 times. Students know that the pursuit of sustainability is critical to achieving a more inclusive society, a healthier planet, and a more balanced economy.

The task now is for universities and colleges to step up to meet this increased demand—and we plan to do just that.

I'm developing a suite of new courses related to sustainability, climate, and [health](#) at the Rutgers School of Public Health, New Jersey's only accredited school of [public health](#). I'm also developing new programs for those in business and organizational settings who need solutions to the problems they are facing every day. At Rutgers, the Rutgers Climate Action Group is championing climate justice, civic responsibility, and actionable scholarship.

You can learn more about the school's efforts around sustainability by visiting the Rutgers School of Public Health's annual tent on Rutgers Day.

How can college students contribute to sustainability?

Working to ensure that all students are both sustainability and climate literate is part of the responsibility of any university to help set up its graduates and learners for lifelong success in a world hungry for solutions to the grand challenge of our day.

Too often, sustainability is a marginal activity and not mainstreamed into programs of study. This leaves students having to find opportunities outside the classroom to pursue their interests in helping create a more just and inclusive world. I'd encourage students to get involved through

their courses and activities on campus, working with their university to promote sustainability initiatives and campaigns. The 17-book project on higher education and the Sustainable Development Goals I am leading as series editor places the student voice at the heart of this agenda for change.

Provided by Rutgers University

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