



Preliminary Research into

Curricula in Sustainability for Cultural Heritage Conservation

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Introduction

As preservers of heritage, the goal of conservation is to do no harm to the objects in our care, but we must also consider effects on the environment, intangible culture, financial stability and social relevance of collecting institutions and heritage sites. The next generation of conservators is ready for this shift, but is the academic world prepared to gear its teaching towards sustainability?

The UCLA/Getty Program in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage has engaged in a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant-funded initiative to eventually integrate sustainability topics into the curriculum through assignments, exercises and other interactive methods. By offering this set of knowledge and skills interspersed throughout all conservation courses, the objective is to encourage students toward a more sustainability-oriented mindset.

We made connections on campus that enhance our own program's foundations in sustainable knowledge and foster opportunities for collaboration. While thinking locally about our own campus, we also looked globally at academic education in conservation to survey and take the metaphorical temperature of progress in sustainability inclusion for the field.

Discussions revolving around global issues and systemic practices will help center the conversation around the need for inclusion of all perspectives to consider planetary finite resources and equitable preservation of culture as interconnected components. Interweaving sustainability topics within conservation discourse will help frame the complexity of the challenges we face to sustain the field and model resilience.

Methodology

The project team brought in a Research Associate to lay out objectives for understanding how the cultural heritage field approaches sustainability, how graduate conservation programs incorporate and promote sustainability, and how it is taught and engaged with on campus at UCLA.

We initially identified and interviewed educators who are already involved in this work at other conservation programs. The discussions with experts expanded to practitioners and allied professionals about their involvement with internship and fellowship education and formation of green teams in museums, archives and private practice.

It is characteristic of the coursework at UCLA/Getty to involve all stakeholders in conversations about all aspects of the heritage objects and sites that are in our care, examining the historical, cultural and political contexts. This aids us in finding ways to connect with the broader communities that should be involved and helped decolonize our teaching and practices.

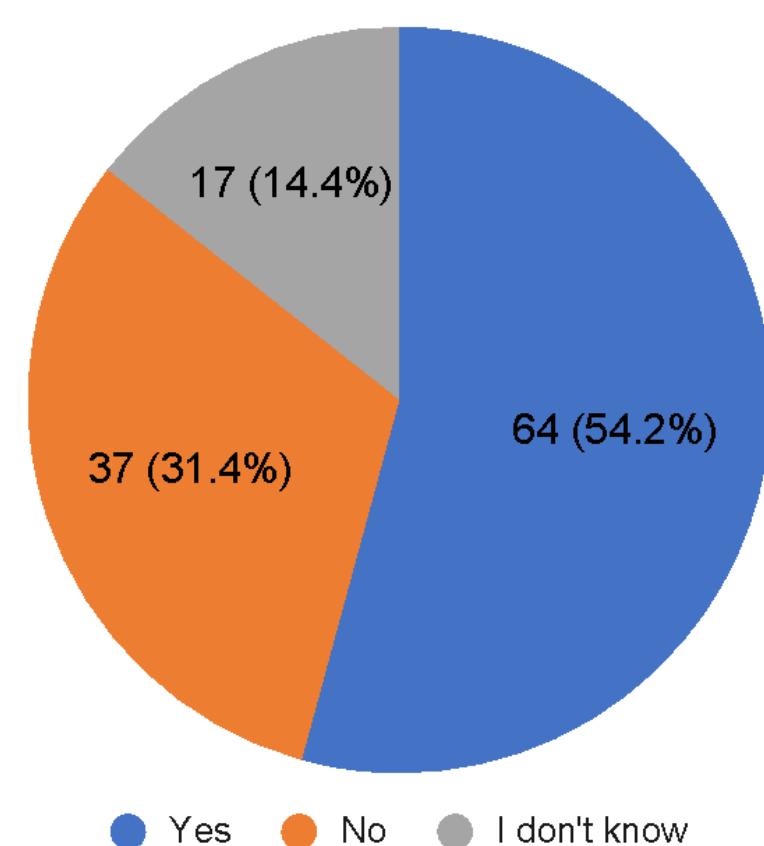
One of the classes in which embedding sustainability was field-tested is Ellen Pearlstein's course on Collections Management, a joint class between the Conservation program and the Information Studies Department. This course incorporated sustainable practices into lectures about environmental control, museums in disaster-prone regions, solutions drawn from traditional ecological knowledge, and green travel, packing and mount-making methods.

In addition, we reached out to initiatives on our campus toward the goal of green lab certification. Our conservation labs are substantially different from other labs on campus, so it was an interesting challenge as we posed our own considerations, such as a high reliance on a broad array of solvents and the use of virgin materials.

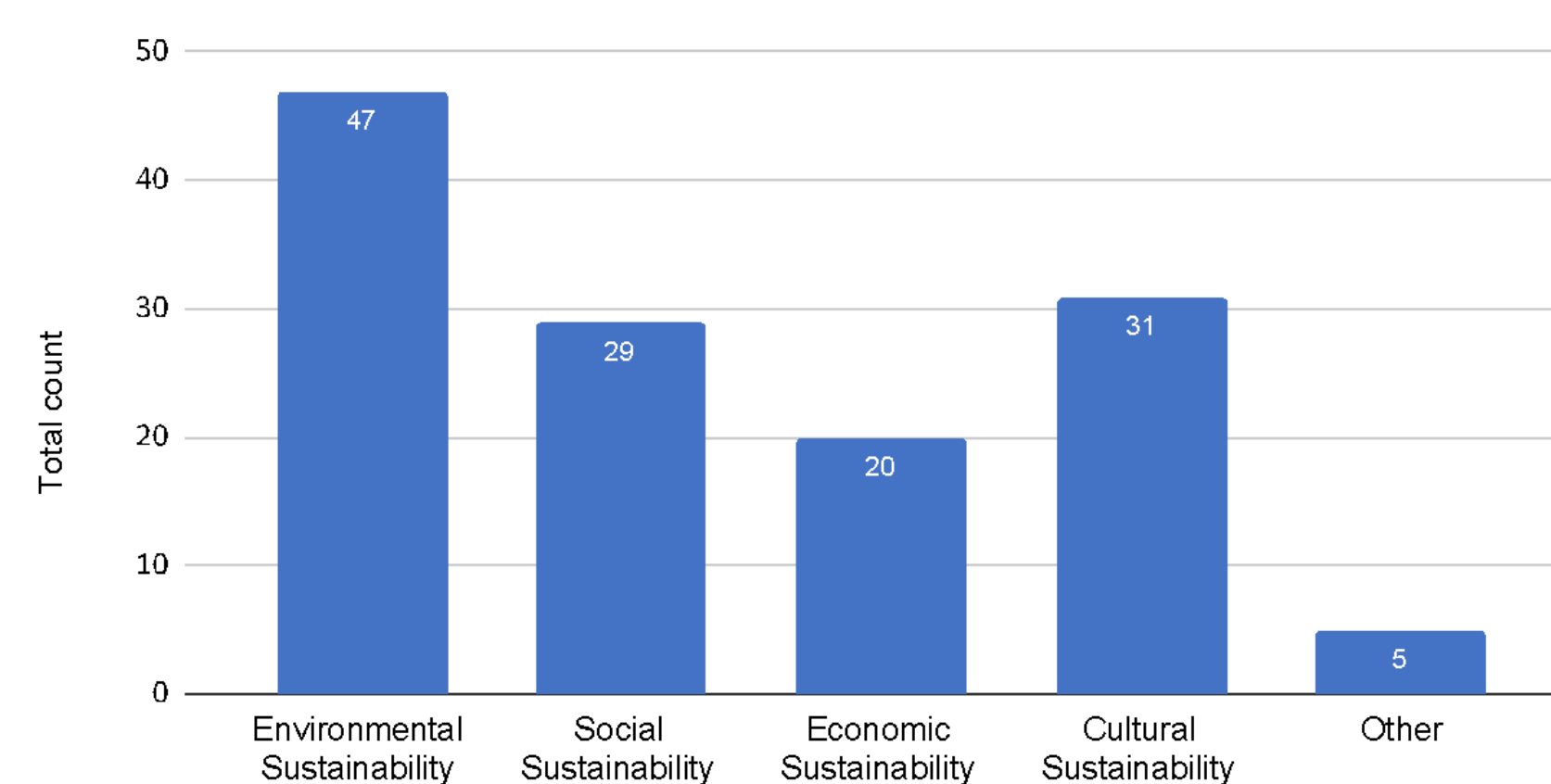
Acknowledgements

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Does your cultural heritage conservation/preservation department include sustainability topics in your curriculum?



Which of the following subcategories of sustainability do you discuss in relation to your curriculum?



Select visuals from survey results. Courtesy of UCLA Digital Archaeology Lab
Survey conducted from September 3, 2021 through October 5, 2021

Sustainability Frameworks

The **Three Pillars of Sustainability** are environmental, social, and economic sustainability, with a fourth pillar recently proposed as cultural sustainability. The intersectionality and interdependence of issues involving all of these pillars is imperative to understanding how systems can be structured for inclusion of essential perspectives and presenting opportunities for collaborative efforts.

The concept of **Planetary Boundaries** is essentially living within the means of our living planet and its natural resources and coming to terms with the fact that humanity is already living outside these, both socially and ecologically. Therefore, keeping in mind the essential needs for humanity, we can ensure that a thriving humanity is more meaningful in the long-term than the focus on growth that is often attributed to successful economies.

The United Nations' 17 **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** are tied to their 2030 framework to "achieve a better future for all". This comprehensive and universally designed plan seeks to bridge the ever-widening poverty and equity gap through a cooperative effort between countries.

Integrating **Education for Sustainability (EfS)** involves a complex interweaving of sustainability logic and perspective into course study. Universities have been facing pressure to transform their programs to suit a new generation in a changing world that needs to be equipped with the tools to cooperatively solve complex contemporary issues.

The inclusion of **multiple perspectives** is a necessary part of cultural heritage conservation, especially with its inherent interdisciplinarity. Students should take a **systems thinking** approach to cultural heritage storage, transport, display, and renovation in light of their effects on our planetary boundaries, resource depletion, and unseen effects material consumption has on local and global communities. Seeing the whole picture allows for a broader understanding of past injustices, current inequity, and **future consequences** of the decisions being made in the cultural heritage sector.

Survey Summary

We created an aggregated list of conservation training and programs and sent targeted emails to approximately 175 educators, coordinators and department heads to ensure a large geographic scope. The survey was also posted to the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) Global Conservation Forum, and we encouraged colleagues and Project Advisors to share with their networks. Ninety-five participants filled out the survey and we received an additional twenty-five partial responses (see select visuals, left).

The survey was anonymous, but we offered our contact information and the option to provide email addresses to facilitate information sharing. The survey questions included demographic information about participants' institutions and the country in which they work. The responses by country spanned a very broad global scope consisting of the following regions: Europe, the Middle East, Australasia, North America and South America.

Questions regarding curriculum were formulated with the goal of understanding how sustainability is structured in program coursework, either through separate classes or integrated more broadly, and about incorporating sustainability through use of specific materials and in performing conservation activities. We also wanted to ascertain if there are plans for future sustainability inclusion, significant barriers to inclusion, and if the programs have initiatives in place for greening their labs.

One-on-one interviews included the following recurring themes: a necessity for integration of concepts as part of a larger cultural heritage ecosystem; using practical challenges involving expense, time and availability of materials to build decision-making skills; and incorporating a future-facing outlook in developing skills for adaptation. Some also mentioned the need to evaluate what we consider ideal treatments and rethink the life expectancy of materials. There is strong agreement that students are driving many of the projects in a sustainable direction.

What's Next??

In reviewing the survey data and results from our literature search and interviews, a significant finding was that conservation educators need more resources to incorporate this framework easily and conveniently without needing to expand their curriculum.

The next phase of the initiative will involve a close evaluation of pedagogical systems for integrating sustainability into the existing curriculum to ensure that emerging professionals in art conservation, built heritage, libraries, archives, archaeology and historic preservation will prioritize intersectional environmentalism. A future goal is to disseminate educational models broadly for adaptation by others.



Students performing a collections survey for Collections Management class, taught by Professor Ellen Pearlstein. Image courtesy of Justine Wuebold.