

# Sustainability

## Offers Variety of Career Opportunities

A growing number of students are taking courses or even pursuing majors in “sustainability.” But are there sufficient jobs on the market to warrant the level of interest? By attending this special webinar, you’ll learn what career opportunities are available – and how to take advantage of them. **Will O’Brien**, director of the new Center for Sustainability in Business at the Robert A. Foisie School of Business, will also participate in the webinar.

Can sustainability provide you with a sustainable career?

Increasingly, students who want to make an impact are choosing careers in sustainability, which seeks to promote practices that minimize harm to the environment.



*Kross*

Colleges and universities – including WPI – have increasingly responded to the growing popularity, and are offering courses and majors in sustainability, which includes consideration of ecology,

economics, politics and culture. The Robert A. Foisie School of Business recently announced the Center for Sustainability in Business and WPI has many other programs related to sustainability.

But do the jobs exist to support the growing number of students who are focusing on sustainability?

**Katie Kross**, author of *Profession and Purpose: A Resource Guide for MBA Careers in Sustainability*, believes they do. Kross, who serves as managing director of the Center for Energy, Development, and the Global Environment (EDGE) at Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business, will address “**Career Opportunities**

**in Sustainability” during a Special Webinar Series webinar scheduled for 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 5, 2015.** To register, [click here](#).

While there are a limited number of positions for those who want to serve as directors of sustainability at major corporations, there are many other opportunities, she said, as sustainability “opens a larger umbrella.”

“The career landscape in sustainability is really diverse and the field is evolving,” Kross said.

Some companies have sustainability departments, but they tend to be small, she said. Other opportunities have developed, though, not only in the private sector, but at non-profits, in government and in academia, where Kross found her niche.

In addition to working directly in sustainability, those who are interested in protecting the environment or otherwise making a positive impact can find careers at investment companies that specialize in impact investing, or at firms that specialize in green building or clean energy. They can work at consulting firms that have sustainability practices or become social entrepreneurs.



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## Kross Began Sustainability Career by Accident

Although she's made a career in sustainability and written a book about it, Katie Kross said, "I had never heard the term 'sustainability' before I started my MBA."

"I went to UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School to study entrepreneurship and I stumbled into a meeting of Net Impact, where the discussion was about orienting the MBA skill set toward making an environmental impact on the world," she said. "I was instantly hooked. The idea of using the tools and efficiency of the private sector, and applying it toward making the world a better place was very compelling."

After finishing her MBA, she applied for and was hired as executive director of UNC's Center for Sustainable Enterprise. She moved on to Duke University to lead its Center for Energy, Development, and the Global Environment (EDGE), but she left for a year and a half to help launch the non-profit North Carolina Sustainability Center.

"I wanted to help build something from scratch and I felt that it was needed in North Carolina," she said. "It was a chance for me to get closer to the field."

Given challenges such as funding, once the center was up and running, it was rolled into North Carolina State University.

Her book, *Profession and Purpose* "came about by default," she said. While serving as executive director of the Center for Sustainable Enterprise, "students would ask me for insights about a career that could have a positive impact on the world, so I wrote down my thoughts. It started as a one-page handout, then grew to 10 pages, then eventually became long enough so that I could propose it as a book."

They can also take more traditional business jobs at companies that are in sustainability-related businesses or that have a culture where sustainability is important, such as Patagonia, an outdoor clothing company that has incorporated sustainability into its mission. Working as a brand manager or finance manager at such a company combines the business skills learned as an MBA student with personal interests in sustainability.

Additional jobs that we can't even imagine today are likely to be created in the near future, according to Kross.

"When I wrote an updated edition of my book, I initially thought it was just a matter of updating some of the websites that were listed," she said, "but so much had changed between 2009 and 2014, I had to make major changes.

There are new disciplines and new positions that were not even on the radar 10 years ago."

Increasingly, for example, companies are seeking job applicants with skills in supply chain sustainability, lifecycle analysis, data analysis, communications and other areas that are "more specialized and nuanced," she said.

Many companies have taken the first steps and established sustainability programs, but now they are considering "more thorny, systematic challenges," such as developing partnerships with companies throughout their supply chain or working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

She added that opportunities also differ from one country to another. In some countries, for example, resource constraints forced companies to adopt sustainable

## Sustainability Careers Matrix

		COMPANY/ORGANIZATION	
		Traditional	Sustainability-Oriented
JOB/ROLE	Traditional	<b>Examples</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial Analyst, <i>Intel</i></li> <li>Consultant, <i>McKinsey</i></li> <li>Senior Brand Manager, <i>Coca-Cola</i></li> </ul>	<b>Examples</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Marketing Manager, <i>Burt's Bees</i></li> <li>Portfolio Manager, <i>REDF</i></li> <li>Senior Supply Planner, <i>Patagonia</i></li> </ul>
	Sustainability-Oriented	<b>Examples</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>VP, Sustainability, <i>Bank of America</i></li> <li>Energy Analyst, <i>Facebook</i></li> <li>Manager, Sustainable Innovation, <i>Gap Inc.</i></li> </ul>	<b>Examples</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Senior Mgr., Sustainable Innovations, <i>Green Mountain Coffee Roasters</i></li> <li>Sustainable Enterprise Program Manager, <i>World Resources Institute</i></li> <li>Sustainability Analyst, <i>Blu Skye</i></li> </ul>

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Do you want to work in an organization where everyone shares your values, or a big traditional company with potential for large-scale impact? Do you want to work in a role where sustainability is the focus of your day-to-day job, or where you are part of the company's core business functions? There are sustainability career options in all four quadrants of this matrix, but it is important to understand your focus.

business practices earlier than in the U.S., while in other parts of the world sustainability may not be a priority.

“The impact jobs that we will see in five years do not exist now,” she said. As the field continues to change, “You may be writing your own job description.”

### Preparing For Jobs That Don't Exist Yet

While the evolution of sustainability may be encouraging for future job seekers, how should today's students prepare for jobs that don't exist yet?

Employers may increasingly be seeking specialized skills, but, conversely, they also value employees with diverse work experience, according to Kross.

“In many MBA career fields, employers like to see a clear corporate-ladder progression on a candidate's resume,” she said, yet in research for her book, “We were surprised to hear some sustainability employers say they look for the opposite. Many employers I interviewed value a mix of private-sector business skills and an understanding of purpose-related issues.”

For sustainability programs to be sustainable, they must serve a business purpose. Those in the industry need to be able to demonstrate that sustainability not only improves efficiency and enhances the company's reputation, but creates an opportunity for making money.

“No matter how passionate you are about environmental issues,” she said, “the key to convincing a business audience about their importance is convincing them in business terms. That means a manager going into a sustainability role must have a deep understanding of the company, its competitive context, and its business processes.”

The ability to identify sustainable solutions and to lead change to implement those solutions is also

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“Sustainable solutions often require fundamentally new ways of thinking about existing systems and processes,” Kross said, so understanding systems dynamics is also important.

“Changing a company's business practices — whether that's convincing your firm's operations department to handle purchasing differently or pushing new metrics to supply chain partners — requires persistence, ingenuity, and salesmanship.”

### Finding the Right Fit

Kross cautioned that not every company that promotes itself as being committed to sustainability is as dedicated as it appears to be.

“Some companies are certainly going through the motions for positive PR,” Kross said. “But others see sustainability initiatives as bottom-line business drivers. They may seek operational cost savings from reducing energy use or waste, or they may want to improve employee attraction and retention.”

Whatever is driving the employer's interest in sustainability, it's important that it aligns with

your interest. Working as an intern is always a good way to find out if there's a good fit, but Kross also suggested checking The Global 100 Index of the top sustainable companies, the Dow Jones Sustainability Indices and *Newsweek's* Green Rankings. If a company appears on more than one list of top sustainable companies, chances are its efforts have some credibility.

She also suggested, “You can also try contacting an alumnus who is not in the sustainability department and asking, ‘What do you think of your company's efforts?’ It can be quite telling if the person says, ‘I didn't know we had a sustainability department.’”

If a company is not what it appears to be, there are plenty of other opportunities.

“The message I try to leave students with is one of hope and optimism,” Kross said. “There are incredible opportunities to make a difference in the world.” ■

[Click here](#) for more information about “**Career Opportunities in Sustainability**”

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