



WORDS OF WISDOM FROM ALUMNI

**Generalized career advice & insight into the field of
sustainability.**

Highlights:

This resource features advice and insight from six Rice University alumni. While they all have different backgrounds, it is important to remember that this is not inclusive of the numerous paths you can take to develop a greener career.

Nonetheless, here are key universal points:

- There is no one path to a green career.
- The environmental field is collaborative, driven by a common goal.
- Don't be afraid to network and ask for help.
- Incorporating environmentalism and sustainability into your career can provide fulfillment.

Cassidy Kempf '17

Role: Natural Resources Specialist at Houston Arboretum & Nature Center

Education: BS in Ecology & Evolutionary Biology and BA in Policy Studies

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Build your story.

Reach out to professors and mentors.

- Cassidy's professors were a source of inspiration. Specifically, her conservation biology professor introduced her to prairie conservation, had personal meetings for career development with her, and helped Cassidy with networks and references for her first job.

Value internships.

- Go in depth: your internships will be what you pull from when you apply for competitive environmental jobs.
- Entry-level environmental jobs are hard to come by: develop experience where you can.

Take time for self-reflection.

- Throughout college and internships, take time to self-evaluate. Ask yourself what you like and didn't like with each experience.
- Your job is what you are going to be doing all day, every day. Have certainty that you are happy with what you do.

Work for a greater good.

- Green careers can provide fulfillment.

The environmental field collaborates.

- Everyone's in this together: share resources.
 - For example: the Arboretum hosts a collaborative plant sale each spring with Houston Audubon and the Parks department to strengthen the presence of native plant propagation in Houston.
- There is collaboration for creating case studies and producing information about the environment.

Rachel Powers '93

Role: Executive Director of the Citizens' Environmental Coalition

Education: BA in Art & Art History, MBA from University of Phoenix

Nonprofit & Advocacy Career Pathways include:

Working directly for a non-profit:

- Rachel tends to look for strong writing skills, accounting majors, and business, communications, and strategy backgrounds when she hires. People skills are important for nonprofits.

"If a tree falls in the forest and no is seeing or hearing it... the environmental movement isn't growing."

- "What's my way in?"
 - There is no direct pathway for nonprofits.
 - Rice is extraordinarily capable: from a nonprofit perspective, you get an entry-level job and climb your way up in leadership.

Research:

- If you do great research, make sure it translates to real life. How can it change the world? How can it advocate for the environment?

Specialize or major in something else:

- Some backgrounds, such as environmental science, may be better equipped for helping the environment in other ways. For example - there are a number of growing environmental consulting jobs that focus on impacts.

Grad School:

- Before you spend money on graduate school, make sure you want to know what you want to learn. Get work experience, and get paid to learn what you want to do, as opposed to going to graduate school and then discovering.
- Example: you can get environmental education jobs as soon as you graduate! Rachel waited 10 years before going to grad school - and she's glad she did. She had a very specific objective.

Rachel Powers '93

Find purpose through a green career.

- You can make a difference everyday, in any role.
- At summer camps and nature centers throughout the years, Rachel has helped people connect with nature and understand the value of natural areas, which leads to protecting the Earth and thinking differently about the world around us.

Influencing policy creates a bigger impact.

- An architect Rachel knows builds environmentally responsible buildings (LEED certified,) and is excited to build in a manner that is respectful of the world we live in. Later in her career, the architect provided input on green buildings legislation, which impacts every building in the state.
- Policy = change on a massive scale, which can better the world.

Patience is a key virtue.

- Many endeavors can take up to thirty years. Projects such as trails and water quality can be difficult to conceptualize, fund, and build. Create a plan, work with others, and all of a sudden the project comes to fruition, and it's an incredible feeling.
- Rachel's children are a source of inspiration: it is our duty to create the best world possible for future generations.

Brian Spector '93

Role: Energy Industry Veteran, Rice Professor, and member of Humanities Advisory Board.

Education: BA English and Economics, Rice MBA Finance.

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Develop a business lens.

- In Brian's first job, he was hired as an economist at a technical consulting company, but ended up creating much of their work product, relying on his writing skills as he learned the consulting aspect of his job.
 - The ability to write and communicate has propelled his success in business.
- Every student should take statistics, math, and economics classes: build a business background to open up a world of jobs to pursue anything.
- Humanities taught him to think differently:
 - To Brian, there is a tight correlation between his ability to be proficient in analyzing poetry and working through the details of commercial contracts. You have to figure out what is relevant.
- While making hires at various companies: often only math/econ students were applying, when humanities students would be proficient and valued.

Sustainability is a developing field.

- Sustainability is an important initiative of the energy industry.
- Throughout his career in the energy field, sustainability began developing in the early 2000's. Prior to this, environmental concerns, such as reducing emissions, were still on the minds of large companies. Today, several companies are in favor of a carbon tax because they want a defined outcome, not one left to regulatory whims.

"You will always get farther working in the system than you will trying to punch at the outside."

- Try and make the changes on the inside.
- Solutions to today's environmental problems are going to be technologically driven.

Above all else, create change by voting.

- The biggest change this generation can make is at the ballot box.

Veronica Johnson '16

Role: Southwestern University Sustainability Coordinator

Education: BA in Environmental Engineering and Bard College MBA in sustainability

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Make it work:

- There is no direct path for sustainability: Be willing to pick up part-time jobs as you pursue higher education, apply for jobs, or figure out what your next steps are.

Get a Master's.

- Many sustainability careers, especially those in higher education or corporate-level, require a master's or several years of experience.
- Veronica's MBA enabled her to achieve her current position at Southwestern.

Develop networks:

- While at Rice, take advantage of your resources. Develop mentoring and networking relationships to help advise you and connect you to future careers.

Power-Play: Have an influence.

- You can advocate for sustainability in any career or position.
- Veronica recommends that you strive for a position of power, where people respect and value your opinions.
 - You can always encourage your coworkers to be sustainable, but it's difficult to make system-wide change if you're not at a supervisory level.

Find your niche:

- Veronica may be an environmental engineering major, but she found she was most successful at her internship role at the sustainability office.
- When you pursue what you're good at, you can find a greater purpose.
 - Everyday Veronica wakes up excited for work because she is in a 'niche' role that she enjoys. The salary nor the job is not the most important aspect of your career.

Finding what makes you happy is essential!

Travis Kwee '18

Role: Circular Economy specialist, data analyst, & mechanical engineer focused on developing solutions to environmental issues.

Education: BS in Mechanical Engineering & minor in Energy & Water Sustainability

"The sustainability industry is inherently collaborative, not competitive."

- Sustainability pushes for a common good, even when working with competing companies.
 - Having a healthier work environment increases fulfillment and decreases risk of burn-out
- Sustainability is inclusive, and there's much to learn about what people value in different backgrounds.

Sustainability is constantly evolving.

- Problem solving is a focus, requiring creativity and working with people from different backgrounds.

Ask for help.

- Unlike other industries, there's an underlying incentive for people to help you find a position. From financing, to renewables, green buildings, environmental consulting, and sustainability communications, there is a network of people willing to help and collaborate.

Preparing for sustainability: Develop a diverse skill-set.

- Develop skills such as data analysis, problem-solving, and business communications: these can be applied at any job.
- For example: sustainability has a traditional approach, which is based more on reports, and a modern approach, which is focused on creating new initiatives. Many companies will employ a wide range of people for both kinds of sustainability teams.
 - Modern sustainability asks: how do we change the game on products and energy?

Sustainability is a universal cause.

- The environment is a common thread of all social issues
- Whatever issue you are passionate about, the environment is linked. This is a powerful motivator for your everyday work.

"Everything is dependent upon having a healthy, stable, and livable environment."

Richard Johnson '92

Role: Rice University Director of Administrative Center for Sustainability and Energy

Education: BS Civil Engineering, and MUEP Urban Engineering and Planning UVA

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Have a specific goal in mind.

- Narrow down your interest by talking to people and researching different positions.
- Work toward being very specific. Avoid brief “5 minute conversations to figure out what a person wants and how to help them” for the people you’re networking with. A specific interest can also help people think of the right person to connect you with..

Networking is very important.

- Start networking early to find internships.
- Many career paths are unconventional: learn how people got to where they are.
- Keep an up-to-date LinkedIn profile and resume, and have appropriate social media.
- Attend conferences in focus areas to help you work on your pitch.
- Talk to faculty. If they know your interests, they might be able to pass on opportunities when former students or other connections reach out to them!

Green jobs can be “born green” or can “become green”

-- the latter is a much larger set than the former.

- Looking for “sustainability” in the job title is limiting.
- You can bring your interests to your job, and take on sustainability-related projects

Have real-world experience before going to grad school.

- If you know you want a PhD, this may not apply to you.
- For example, if getting an MBA, some prior work experience for context is helpful.
 - “Going to grad school after having worked for three years made the graduate school experience so much better because I had some context.”