



# A Proposal for a Minor in Sustainability



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## Abstract

It is nearly undeniable that humans are altering the earth and rapidly depleting natural resources, compromising the future of generations to come. Thus, the importance of sustainability and sustainable practices is becoming increasingly important and relevant. While the world is working to innovate and prioritize sustainability, it is important that the University of Richmond must do the same. This proposal is for the addition of a minor in sustainability added to the university's available education opportunities. The minor will be a total of six classes; three core sustainability classes and three additional classes to effectively cover the three pillars of sustainability (environmental, social, and economic sustainability). The minor would be beneficial to the University of Richmond in that it requires minimal costs of only two additional faculty members and would provide unquestionable benefits. A minor in sustainability would improve the university's AASHE STARS rating, allow the university to gain a competitive advantage among other institutions, and would allow the university to entice more prospective students and produce more competitive graduates that are global citizens. Furthermore, the university would be symbolizing that it understands the importance of sustainability by introducing this minor. Around the globe, businesses, communities, colleges, and individuals are taking the necessary steps to work towards a sustainable future. The University of Richmond, with the introduction of a sustainability minor, has the opportunity to help lead the way instead of falling behind.

## Giving the People What They Want

The issue of creating a sustainable society and future has been receiving more attention lately. Many people, specifically young generations, are prioritizing sustainable thinking and addressing climate change (Hanks et al, 2008).



Figure 1: Taken from George Washington University. The sustainability minor will have a major impact beyond just expanded curriculum. (George Washington University, 2018)

- A survey of 26,000 young people aged 18-35 found that 45% of respondents listed climate change as the most serious issue globally, the largest response listed (Babington-Ashaye, 2016)
- Another survey of 5,000 people aged 18-25 found over 30% of respondents said that they would boycott a business of company that did not prioritize sustainable practices (Masdar, 2016).
- According to a UN Accenture CEO survey, 97% of CEOs believe that considering sustainability and sustainable practices is vital to the future successes of their business (United Nations Global Compact, 2016).

It is increasingly evident that the younger generations are interested in sustainability. Furthermore, businesses are recognizing the importance of sustainability and are working to move towards more sustainable practices. If the University of Richmond wants to remain attractive to prospective students and want to continue to produce competitive graduates that succeed in their careers, a minor in sustainability will only benefit.

## Reaping the Benefits

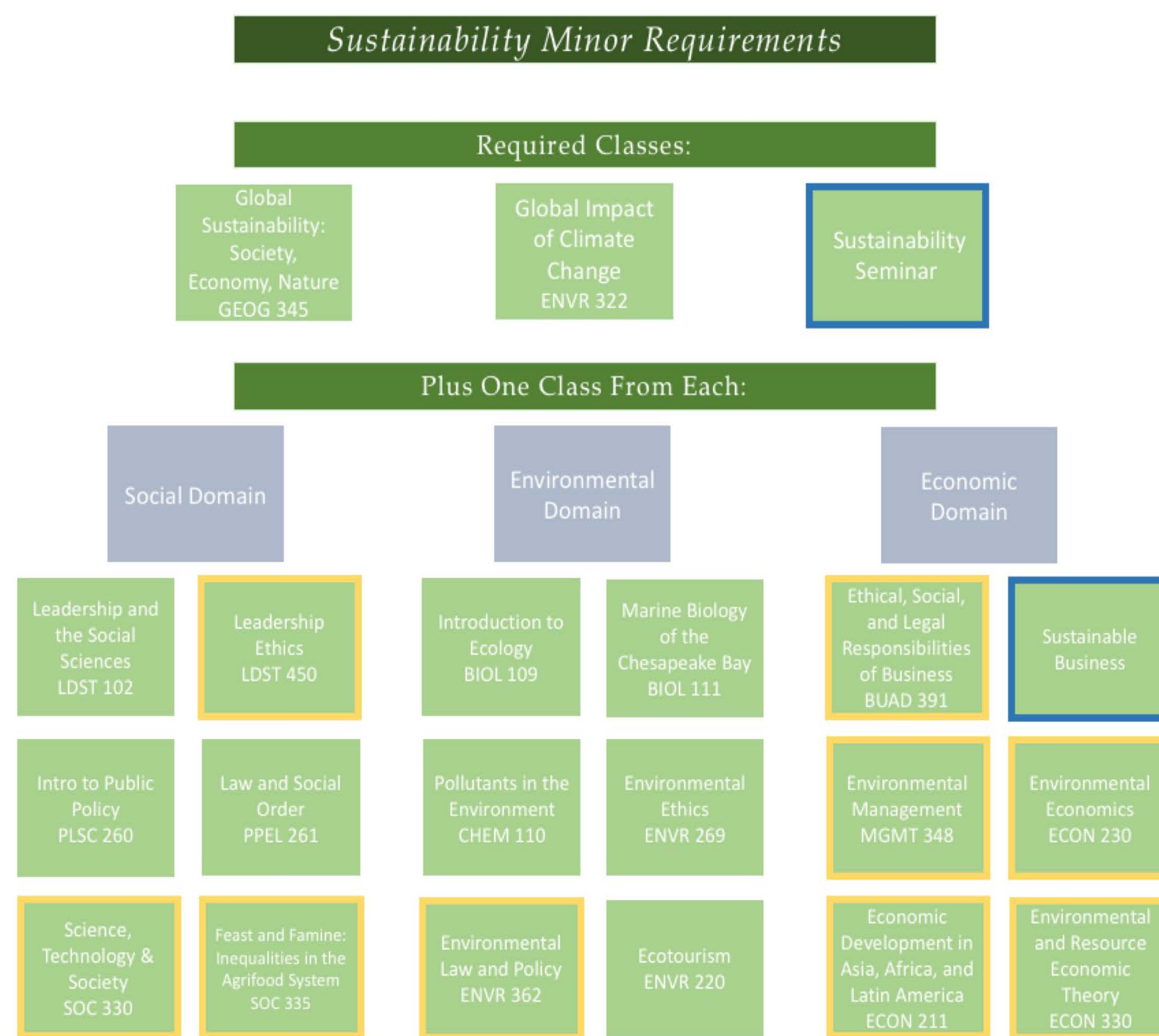
Offering a minor in sustainability will:

- Improve the University of Richmond's AASHE STARS rating, specifically in the sustainability curriculum category and the learning outcomes category.
- Help the University of Richmond maintain applicant pools as the younger generations increasingly prioritize sustainability.
- Maintain the university's reputation for creating competitive graduates in the workplace.
- Act as a symbol to publicly display the university's acknowledgement of the importance of sustainability and commitment to work towards a sustainable future.

The only costs to the university are the additional hiring of two faculty members to teach two new courses, outlined in blue (Figure 2). The benefits reach beyond just the curriculum (Figure 1).

## The Sustainability Minor

The sustainability minor will focus on the three pillars of sustainability as described by the United Nations: economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Environmental sustainability describes maintaining natural resources and minimizing human impact on the earth, allowing biological systems to remain diverse and function indefinitely. Social sustainability refers to building social support systems, communities, and political structures that foster human wellbeing and maintain social order. Economic sustainability describes the ability of an economy to produce a defined level of production indefinitely into the future (Blackburn, 2007).



Yellow borders indicate classes that require outside prerequisites. Blue borders indicate classes that will be created for the minor.

Figure 2: Sustainability minor courses. Minors will take three core courses and three additional courses, one from each of the pillars of sustainability.

Students will take three core classes and 3 additional courses that are chosen from the three domains: environmental, social, and economic sustainability (Figure 2). Each domain includes at least one class in which prerequisites outside of the minor are not required. This allows the minor to be accessible to everyone.

## Joining the Club

A survey of higher institutions found that from 2008 to 2012, sustainability degree programs increased 57% (from 1,183 to 1,859). Furthermore, as of 2012, a total of 141 sustainability degree programs are offered by 114 institutions. Of those, around two-thirds are undergraduate degrees (Vincent 2013).

- Emory University**  
Out of 5,281 total undergraduate students, 1,128 students graduate with a degree that includes sustainability (AASHE-Emory, 2017). Emory's sustainability minor is truly interdisciplinary, with faculty on the steering committee ranging from the physics department to the German studies department (Emory University, 2018).
- Arizona State**  
70% of students chose to pursue a degree that includes sustainability at Arizona State University (AASHE-Arizona State University). Students are passionate and excited about what they are learning and are confident that it will help them secure a job after graduation and help them lead a more sustainable life (Paul, 2015).



Figure 3: Students collaborating on sustainability projects (University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 2016).

- Notre Dame**  
At Notre Dame, the vast majority of students who choose to pursue a minor in sustainability are students who do not come from other sustainability fields, such as environmental science. After only two years, the sustainability minor at Notre Dame became the most popular minor for students (Hellman, 2018 pers. comm.)
- University of Massachusetts Dartmouth**  
The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth has seen exceptional success with its interdisciplinary sustainability minor. The minor was established in 2008 and quickly became the most popular and fastest growing minor offered by the university (University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 2016). The university also includes an applied knowledge component through projects (Figure 3).

The University of Richmond could easily adopt a sustainability minor that emulates these schools. Arizona State, Emory University, Notre Dame have gold STARS ratings. The schools have a diverse array of students pursuing the minor and have found their sustainability minors to be popular and successful.

## Conclusions

The University of Richmond has been given a unique opportunity to become a leader in sustainability education. Currently, none of the top ten liberal arts schools in the United States as ranked by US News offer minors in sustainability (The 10 Best Liberal Arts Colleges in America, 2016). If the University took advantage of this opportunity and offered a minor in sustainability, the university would act as a leader and gain competitiveness with these schools. While many schools offer sustainability minors, few of those schools are small liberal arts schools. For incoming students looking for a small liberal arts experience who also value sustainability and are interested in a sustainability minor, the University of Richmond will be able to out-compete all other liberal arts schools and gain more applicants. This is not new for the university; though a small school, the University of Richmond offers a nationally-recognized business school, top-ranked science facilities, and was the first school in the United States to offer a leadership school. Being unique and innovative is what drives prospective student interest in the university. Adding a sustainability minor will only enhance that effect.

Sustainability is not a trend; it is a necessity. The rest of the world is moving and mobilizing to incorporate sustainability into everything humans do, as it is what humans need to do to survive. If the university does not want to be left behind, it must do the same.

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