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Julia Kienzler

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THE POWER OF MISSION STATEMENTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS  
OF SEC AND BIG 10 ENVIRONMENTAL VERBIAGE

By  
Julia Marie Kienzler

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS  
April 2023

Approved by

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Advisor: Dr. Zachary Vereb

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Reader: Dr. David Rutherford

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Reader: Ms. Kathryn Kidd

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## ABSTRACT

JULIA KIENZLER: The Power of Mission Statements: A Comparative Analysis of SEC and Big 10 Environmental Verbiage  
(Under the direction of Dr. Zachary Vereb)

Since the 1980s, research universities have utilized mission statements as a way to outline their management processes and their knowledge planning. However, even top research institutions across the United States fail to incorporate environmental verbiage into their missions. This study seeks to begin to understand the factors that contribute to a university's decision to use or to not use bold environmental language in their mission statements, especially as this concerns climate change and sustainability. To accomplish this, I conducted a comparative analysis of all twenty-six public SEC and BIG 10 universities by extracting specific environmental terminology from each school's 'mission statement,' 'vision statement,' 'value statement,' and 'strategic plan.' I then proceeded to interpret that data alongside key variables I hypothesized would have a significant impact on the presence of environmental verbiage. These include 'Geographic Location,' 'Academic Program Strength,' 'Racial and Gender Demographics,' and 'Political Affiliation.' The comparative analysis revealed that universities in the Big 10, which are more liberal leaning than SEC schools, publicly employ greater environmental verbiage overall. While politics was the biggest factor identified, several other compounding factors were realized. For example, the comparative analysis revealed that environmental terminology tends to be placed in strategic plans rather than mission statements, the latter which is more available to the public. I suggest that the rationale for this placement pattern coincides with the fact that strategic plans are not overseen by organizations such as the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), unlike mission statements. As one potential policy solution ideal, I propose passing new legislation that ensures that university strategic plans are legally binding. Ensuring that universities are not publishing

false and/or vague narratives in their strategic plan just to uphold their image without doing any real work is critical, because these R1 research institutions are rightfully viewed by the public as leaders. Accordingly, they should also be environmental leaders.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| AASHE   | Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education |
| AMBA    | Association of MBAs   |
| AACSB   | Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)         |
| BIG 10  | Midwest Athletic Conference   |
| EPA     | Environmental Protection Agency                                       |
| EFMD    | European Foundation for Management Development                        |
| HLC     | Higher Learning Commission  |
| EQUIS   | Quality Improvement System  |
| SEC     | Southeastern Conference   |
| R1      | Research 1 Status   |
| MSCHE   | Middle States Commission on Higher Education                          |
| NECHE   | New England Commission of Higher Education                            |
| SACSCOC | Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges   |
| NWCCU   | Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities                     |
| UNEP    | United Nations Environmental Program                                  |
| USR     | University Social Responsibility                                      |
| WAUCN   | World Alliance of Universities on Carbon Neutrality                   |

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Mission statements serve as a window into an organization's core identity by clearly communicating their current collective vision, purpose, and goals. A vision looks down the road at the goals an organization *would like to* accomplish in the future. The mission is what an organization is doing every day over a period of time to accomplish their vision statement. For the purpose of this study, which aims to understand why some universities acknowledge climate change and others do not, terms such as “mission statement,” “vision statement,” “core values,” and “strategic plan” will be interpreted individually based on their specific functionality. This decision was made based on the fact that a university's “vision statement,” “core values,” and “strategic plan” are all individual pieces that although similar, play unique roles in fulfilling the overarching mission statement.

Mission statements, much like vision statements or strategic plans, often include pieces such as: a statement of current purpose, a statement of future goals, their commitments, and/or a statement of strong values. Not all four of these pieces are required for a mission statement to be legitimate. For example, the University of Mississippi mission statement states that “As Mississippi's first comprehensive, public university and academic medical center, the University of Mississippi transforms lives, communities, and the world by providing opportunities for the people of Mississippi and beyond through excellence in learning, discovery, healthcare, and engagement” (Mississippi, 2023). This is interpreted as follows: (1) the university’s current purpose is to provide opportunities to the people of Mississippi and beyond; (2) the future goal is to ultimately to “transform lives, communities, and the world;” and (3) the university values and

commits to the importance of “learning, discovery, healthcare, and engagement” (“Ole Miss,” 2023). A strong mission statement allows a university to differentiate itself from its competition by allowing university leaders to indicate to students the school's values, philosophy, future goals, commitments, and its core strengths that will guide the university in following through with their mission. As a comparison, Auburn University, a Southeastern Conference (SEC) school similar in size to the University of Mississippi, has a mission statement that states “As a land-grant institution, Auburn University is dedicated to improving the lives of the people of Alabama, the nation, and the world through forward-thinking education, life-enhancing research and scholarship, and selfless service” (“Auburn University,” 2023). This university’s current purpose is to improve “the lives of the people of Alabama, the nation, and the world.” Auburn University values the combination of a “forward-thinking education, life-enhancing research and scholarship, and selfless service.” One significant difference between the University of Mississippi mission statement and the Auburn University mission statement is the fact that Auburn University indicates the value that as a university they place on a “forward-thinking education” (“Auburn University,” 2023). This statement alludes to the idea that the university is more progressive and open to new ideas and scientific discoveries. One of the goals of this thesis is to identify any connections between university statements and their commitments to global problems. The specific global issue that this thesis focuses on is climate change.

Mission statements can be accessed on institutions’ websites or in student catalogs, both of which are publicly available information. Every major college and university has a mission statement. The goals outlined in the mission statements released by institutions benefit the community by outlining goals, addressing specific concerns, and by signaling to students the certain skills that are valued by the institution (Meacham, 2008). In other words, these publicly

available statements help to encourage students to be active local and global citizens. Additionally, these officially released mission statements allow students and faculty to hold administrators accountable, by providing social leverage. Mission statements are technically not legally binding. However, donors, students, and community members may not want to associate with the school if that university does not attempt to align with their stated values, goals, and beliefs. It is in the best interest of all institutions to clearly define their goals, to ensure information is readily accessible, to define their purpose and for these schools to adapt these statements as our world changes. As our world changes our universities and colleges also need to change. Climate change is impacting sectors such as energy, agriculture, and water while also increasing the risk for serious health impacts (“Environmental Protection Agency (EPA),” 2023). In order to keep official university statements relevant, higher education official statements must accurately depict and acknowledge current issues, such as climate change, that students will most definitely face in the future, if they students are not already.

As of 2022, Palmer and Short show there are an estimated 6,000 universities in the United States alone. Additionally, there are roughly 16.9 million students who are currently enrolled in college. Mission statements are viewed as one of the most strategic variables for colleges and universities, given their increasing role in accreditation (2008). This simply means that mission statements can impact the universities objectives and their environment. Researchers have discovered that the words universities use, or do not use, impact and influence the overarching campus community (Palmer and Short, 2008). The present thesis aims to better understand the role of mission statements, the impact mission statements can have, and to investigate these questions with a specific focus on the case of the environment: why universities recognize or fail to recognize climate change. While there are many aspects of the environment

besides climate change (e.g., air pollution, water pollution, biodiversity loss, deforestation, etc.), I have chosen to focus on climate change in particular because, if there is any environmental language, it tends to be framed around climate change. This thesis will evaluate and study the language, specifically environmental related verbiage, of university mission statements (and related public pronouncements, such as strategic plans) in the Southern United States and the Northern United States. I chose to compare schools in the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and the Midwest Athletic Conference (Big 10) since the schools are comparable in terms of funding, popularity, research, and size, but located in different regions of the United States. My goal is to identify differences between the two conferences and understand why those differences exist. In addition, I want to try to make sense of the factors that might lead US universities to differ from non-US ones that do include strong environmental verbiage and climate commitments.

In order to accomplish these goals, my research will include a comparative analysis of SEC schools with schools in the Big 10. This analysis will be instrumental in accomplishing these goals by facilitating an interpretation of potential outside factors that influence universities and their choice of environmental verbiage. I will begin below in Chapter 2 by defining specific terms that will be used and discussed throughout the paper, along with relevant outside organizations that oversee mission statements. Next, I evaluate relevant literature regarding the influence of mission statements on campuses and the role universities play in light of the climate crisis, especially noting the dearth of academic literature on climate change in mission statements specifically. Then, I discuss my research findings. Finally, I integrate my research findings with the current literature around this topic; though there exist plenty of research on university mission statements and responsibility, little has been pursued on the specific topic of environmental language and commitments of institutions in the mission statements. This sets the

stage for policy recommendations in chapter six of the thesis. More generally, I suggest that universities have the power to play a leading role in the fight against climate change, and as such have an important obligation not only with regard to policy, but with regard to their powerful influence in the public sphere given their large platforms. These platforms, through the use of specific and intentional language as discussed in, for example, mission statements, have the potential to influence more people than individual actors could ever hope for.

## **Chapter 2: Background**

This chapter will provide the background knowledge necessary to properly analyze university mission statements, the impacts they have, and why universities do or do not recognize climate change. In particular, I will provide background knowledge of R1-Doctoral University research institutions, review key terms, briefly introduce mission statement regulations, and review the connection universities have to climate change.

### **Carnegie Classifying System**

Andrew Carnegie was one of the most influential philanthropists and industrialists in America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the belief that all men had the right to an education, Carnegie made education issues, such as the lack of institutional faculty retirement plans, his top priority (Foundation, 2023). Following the creation of the Carnegie Foundation, The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education was formed in 1968. In 1971, Clark Kerr developed the Carnegie Classifying System as a way to determine if a college or university had the resources to successfully support research and policy analysis. Currently, this system evaluates schools based on select criteria: instructional program, enrollment profile, size and setting, and certain "elective" classifications. Today the mission of the foundation is "to catalyze transformational change in education so that every student has the opportunity to live a healthy, dignified, and fulfilling life" ("Foundation," 2023). The Carnegie classifying system is used to determine the level of research activity present within institutions and is where R1 and R2 research university titles were developed.

### **R1 and R2 Research Universities**

This thesis focuses primarily on R1 Universities because these universities are the most research-intensive institutions, and often with the best financial resources and public influence. These research-intensive schools take their mission statements very seriously in order to attract high levels of top students, experts, and funding. The title, "R1: Doctoral University," which means an institution has extremely high research activity, and the title, "R2: Doctoral University," which means an institution has high research activity, is only awarded to institutions that award at least 20 research/scholarship doctoral degrees and spent a minimum of \$5 million on research expenses ("Foundation," 2023). In FY2020 Vanderbilt University, an R1 research institution reported bringing in \$253.6 million in awards, \$81 million in research funding, and \$26.3 million in industry sponsored research. The university is "committed to helping Vanderbilt faculty, students, labs, centers and institutes secure funding and resources for projects that can improve society from the university, federal and state-sponsored research grants and other external funding mechanisms" (People, 2023). Vanderbilt University prides itself on being a global research university which helps to explain why Vanderbilt University continues to achieve an R1 status. On the other hand, the University of Northern Florida, which was granted R2 status in 2022, had met the 20-research doctoral graduate minimum and also had about \$14 million in expenditures ("New R2 Status," 2022). These two examples exemplify why obtaining R1 status is so impressive as Vanderbilt clearly leads in regard to research innovation and output. The Carnegie classifying system is utilized in other areas, but for the purpose of the study, we will only be focusing on the schools referred to as R1 research institutions.

Being classified as an R1 research university and even attending one of these universities is highly regarded by top professionals across all sectors. According to the University of Maine, which was recently named a "Carnegie R1 Top-Tier Research University", "only 3.7% of the



degree-granting post-secondary institutions in the U.S. have the Carnegie R1 Classification" ("The University of Maine," 2023). Receiving this status not only commends these institutions for their work thus far but encourages them to continue to excel academically in order to avoid losing their prestigious title. This study is focused on mission statements because these statements serve as an effective way to achieve a goal. This goal can be related to anything from academic success to positively impacting communities locally and abroad. The University of Virginia Darden School of Business, one of the highest ranked business schools in the United States, is publicly committed to the belief that the top leadership issues are going to be responsible capitalism, supply chain resilience, climate action, leadership kindness, the rise of machines, hybrid workforces, and diverse leadership ("7 leadership," 2022). As a result, the University of Virginia, by publicly acknowledging issues like climate change, is holding themselves accountable in the eye of the public.

Many of these "high research activity" universities that this study focuses on claim that they are creating the leaders of tomorrow. For instance, the University of Tennessee vision statement is "A world enriched by our ideas, improved through our action, and inspired by the Volunteer spirit of service and leadership" ("University of Tennessee," 2023). If a university claims that they are developing leaders, the university must also be willing to recognize the serious issues that these future leaders will face. Climate change is obviously an issue that will have impacts on all issues facing our future leaders.

### **Mission Statement**

Merriam-Webster defines a mission statement as "something that states the purpose or goal of a business or organization" ("Merriam," 2023). This is not to be confused with vision statements which are achieved through the successful completion of a mission statement. A

mission statement is more concrete, whereas a vision statement is more idealistic. In order to limit the scope of my research, I will only be focusing on mission statements as they are used in an educational setting rather than a business setting. Other related terms that will be accounted for include: vision statements, value statements, and strategic plans in the comparative analysis. Mission statements as used in a business context can have more widely diverging meanings. For instance, Google states, “Our company mission is to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful. That’s why Search makes it easy to discover a broad range of information from a wide variety of sources” (“Google’s mission,” 2023). Unlike mission statements released by universities, Google paints with a very broad brush. The Glossary of Education Reform defines an educational mission statement as “a public declaration that schools or other educational organizations use to describe their founding purpose and major organizational commitments—i.e., what they do and why they do it” (“Glossary,” 2023). Schools strive to differentiate themselves in order to attract the most and the best students. The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign mission statement declares that “The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign is charged by our state to enhance the lives of citizens in Illinois, across the nation and around the world through our leadership in learning, discovery, engagement and economic development” (“University of Illinois,” 2023). Unlike Google, The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign explicitly states who they want to positively impact and the specific ways the university will achieve this mission. Many of these sources have somewhat diverging views on the nature and purpose of mission statements. Based on my research, I believe that the purpose of a mission statement is to describe a goal and how they hope to achieve it.

## **Vision Statement**

While some may use the terms “mission statement” and “vision statement” interchangeably, the education community recognizes major distinctions between the two terms. The Glossary of Education Reform agrees with distinguishing the two terms and defines a vision statement as a “public declaration that schools or other educational organizations use to describe their high-level goals for the future—what they hope to achieve if they successfully fulfill their organizational purpose or mission. A vision statement may describe a school’s loftiest ideals, its core organizational values, its long-term objectives, or what it hopes its students will learn or be capable of doing after graduating” (“The glossary,” 2023) A vision statement will typically build off of the mission statement. As a result, though I focus on mission statements, my analysis also accounts for vision statements.

## **Mission Statement Regulation**

Since the 1980s, universities around the world have utilized mission statements as a way to outline their management processes and their knowledge planning. Today, college and university mission statements often serve two purposes: (1) to outline the foundation upon which the objectives and strategic plans will be built (Pearce and Robinson, 1991) and (2) to unify the organization behind a core purpose and direction to influence decision making (Ireland and Kirk, 2018). This section will bring clarity to definitions that will be referenced in my research and to outline different regional and specialized associations that oversee the mission statement commitments created by colleges and universities. Additionally, this section will look at the connection between mission statements and university climate change commitments, as well as issues of concern, such as the lack of university mission statement uniformity. Ultimately, the environmental language used by universities can either be an asset or a liability.

The language used across institutions matters. Regional and specialized accreditation associations require colleges and universities to have mission statements that establish and publicly communicate the institution's commitments. This allows the public to garner a basic idea of a school's strengths, resources, interests, and beliefs. More importantly, associations such as the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), the Association of MBAs (AMBA), and the European Foundation for Management Development's (EFMD) Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) require colleges and universities to demonstrate the achievement of its mission. For example, the AACSB requires that the "accreditation review focuses on a member's clear determination of its mission" and, therefore, "each institution must achieve and demonstrate an acceptable level of performance consistent with its mission" ("AACSB," 2023). This review, which is conducted every five years, allows students to better understand exactly what they are getting in terms of the quality of the university.

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC), an agency which is overseen by the U.S. Department of Education, is one example of an institutional accreditor in the United States. It accredits universities in the central United States. In order for a post-secondary school to be considered accredited by the HLC, it first must meet five criteria:

1. Mission
2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct
3. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support
4. Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement
5. Institutional Effectiveness, Resources, and Planning (HLC).

Institutions are required by this commission to have a mission statement that "articulates publicly the organization's commitments," "defines the varied internal and external constituencies the organization intends to serve," and finally, the commission requires that the mission statement be made publicly available. To obtain this accreditation, schools have to provide evidence that their achievements align with their mission statement. Furthermore, to retain this accreditation over time, schools have to communicate any mission statement changes to the HLC ("Higher Learning," 2023). This information may play a role in schools deciding to not include any environmental verbiage or to remain vague to avoid having to provide such evidence. Different accrediting agencies oversee different regions of the United States and are all overseen by the U.S. Department of Education. Examples of other commissions include the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), and Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU). These regional accreditations are historically more prestigious than any national accreditation. In the university setting, mission statements are often used to provide context as to how the institution operates while providing directions as to how the university will operate and make decisions into the future. Given that a majority of United States universities are accredited by a regional commission, which ensures that schools are aligning with their mission statements, these schools are unlikely to make any statements that they would not want to be held to. Schools will often refrain from mentioning taboo subjects such as the climate crisis. Over time climate change has become heavily politicized, making the topic nearly impossible to discuss without first acknowledging the political affiliation of those involved.

## **Climate Change**

One of the biggest global issues that urgently needs to be addressed by current and future generations—but is likely to be avoided by universities—is the ongoing and rapidly accelerating climate crisis. Earlier this year, the United Nations reported that it is “now or never” if we want to limit global warming to a maximum of 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial level (“Global warming,” 2023). Despite the frequent warnings, we are currently on track to go beyond this 1.5-degree limit over the next few years. According to the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), countries are not fulfilling their previously established promises and “every fraction of additional warming above 1.5°C will bring worsening impacts, threatening lives, food sources, livelihoods and economies worldwide” (“UNEP,” 2023). The United Nations Secretary-General reported, after reviewing recent findings released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), that if global energy policies are not dramatically altered immediately, our planet will soon be uninhabitable in large parts of the world, for humans and nonhumans alike. If we continue on the path of “business as usual,” we can expect cities to go underwater, storms to continually intensify, water and food shortages, and the extinction of millions of plants and animal species (“Intergovernmental,” 2023). The only way to avoid the worst climate trajectories is to substantially reduce our global fossil fuel usage and to increase the use of sustainable alternatives, and to do so immediately. For adequate mitigation to occur, focus needs to be placed on preparing the students of today who will be our leaders of tomorrow, as well as on large public entities that have a strong voice in the public sphere. This is where R1 research universities come in, given their vast amount of funding, connections, political influence, and overall reputations.

Ultimately, institutions are very selective and particular with their word choices, given that (as universities) they are held accountable for anything they state. A majority of schools tend to recognize topics such as diversity, community service, leadership, education, research, and inclusivity. However, these schools are saying just as much when they do not outwardly recognize an issue. Omission speaks volumes. Institutions are likely hesitant to recognize climate change as an issue, given that universities will be held accountable by different entities to follow through with legitimate action. Universities may be more conservative with their language for fear of alienating potential conservative students, donors, and negative public press for being politically biased, since climate change has become highly politicized in the U.S. This is the unfortunate reality of the politicization of a scientific issue like climate change, which happens to be worse in the US than most other affluent Democratic countries. According to Pew Research, 59% of Americans view climate change as a major threat whereas countries such as France reported 83% (Fagan and Huang, 2020). While a majority of Americans, many of which are Democrats, may be very concerned about climate change it is extremely difficult to pass meaningful legislation given that political gridlock between the House and Senate as of April 2023. The research that I will explore in the next chapter will evaluate university mission statement impact trends over the years, identify university influences on decision-making, and outline how universities could be acting in their essential role as climate leaders.

### **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

In order to answer the research question, "Why does environmental terminology, specifically related to climate change, differ across R1 public four-year universities?" and to add to the conversation, I reviewed literature relative to my topic. This chapter aims to better understand the perceived duties universities have regarding climate change, to understand the impact universities can have on students in relation to this, and to highlight the factors that sway university decisions regarding public acknowledgement of and commitments in the face of the climate crisis. The literature review is split into three parts: 1) mission statements 2) universities and climate change 3) factors that influence universities.

#### **Scholarly Literature on Mission Statements**

Mission statements began to be seen as a tool for emerging strategic planning for the higher education field in the 1980s (Kotler and Murphy, 1981, p. 588). Universities often use strategic planning to ensure that as an academic institution they are maximizing their impact. Strategic planning as defined by The Society for College and University Planning, is "a deliberate, disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an institution is, what it does, and why it does it. The college or university strategic plan provides guidance for institutional decisions, both long-term and day-to-day, and makes sure that decisions and operations: 1) Carry out the institution's mission, vision, and values, 2) Comply with mandates and regulations of government, accrediting bodies, etc. and 3) Keep the institution operationally and fiscally healthy, now and in the future" ("Strategic planning," 2023). Today it is less common to find a college or university without a mission statement. The Higher Learning



Commission (HLC), responsible for the accreditation of most colleges and universities across the United States, requires universities to have a mission statement that “articulates publicly the organization’s commitments, defines the varied internal and external constituencies the organization intends to serve, and includes a strong commitment to high academic standards that sustain and advance excellence in higher learning” (“Higher Learning,” 2023). By requiring a mission statement, the Higher Learning Commission hopes universities will commit to upholding their goals and beliefs. Authors from the article “Mission Possible: Do School Mission Statements Work?” published by *The Journal of Business Ethics* argue that a substantial college or university mission statement should highlight what makes the individual school unique (Davis et al., 2007). This study focuses on the correlation between higher learning schools and the type of students that universities attract. Once a college or university has established a strong mission statement that outlines its fundamental purpose, administrators can use this as a foundation for a strategic plan. The article, “What do mission statements reveal about the values of top universities in the world?” published by the *International Journal of Organizational Analysis* suggests that connecting the strategic plan back to the original mission statement strengthens the plan. After a mission statement is established, a strategic plan can ultimately put the university's goals into action (Breznik and Law, 2019). For example, one part of The Ohio State University’s mission statement is “Educating students through a comprehensive array of distinguished academic programs.” The Ohio State University strategic plan’s first pillar is “Teaching and Learning: Ohio State will be an exemplar of the best teaching, demonstrating leadership by adopting innovative, at-scale approaches to teaching and learning to improve student outcomes” (“Home,” 2023). In this case, the university begins by announcing their desire to have highly ranked academic programs and then proceeds to give a detailed blueprint regarding the steps that

will be taken to improve teaching and research outcomes. This is one of the reasons why what a school's mission statement alludes to is so important, because in theory there should be a direction and measurable connection with the goals of a mission statement and the activities of the institution.

Over time Higher Learning Institutions have begun to "add on" more social responsibility commitments to their mission statements (Baptiste et al., 2022). These "add-ons" tell the public and potential students what they intend to contribute to the world socially while bolstering the overall brand image. Authors from the article, "University Social Responsibility (USR) in the Global Context: An Overview of Literature" note that "higher education institutions worldwide have begun to embrace sustainability issues and engage their campuses and communities in such efforts" (Wigmore-Álvarez and Ruiz-Lozano, 2012, p. 475). This statement ties back to our original research question, which aims to understand why not all elite universities actively embrace sustainability problems.

A study published by the *Business and Society Review*, which focused on environmental verbiage used by universities in their mission statements, revealed that only "a small percentage of colleges and universities include language reflecting sustainability in their respective mission statements" (Lopez and Martin, 2018, p. 359). This study focused on the inclusion of sustainability-language on campuses based on whether a university was private or public and if there was religious affiliation. However, this study did not touch on what the commonalities were between a small percentage of universities that did mention climate change. This is one specific way that I believe my thesis will be able to add to the overall body of literature. The study determined that "the larger society and specific communities may benefit or be harmed by the intent of the strategic direction of an organization as suggested by the mission statement as

well as the subsequent behavior of the organization. In short, the contents of mission statements seem to matter” (Lopez and Martin, 2018, p. 364).

In line with this, one of the first steps universities can take towards helping the environment is simply portraying sustainability principles in their mission statements. A study published by the *International Journal of Educational Management* investigated the mission statements of thirty leading Brazilian universities. For the purpose of this study, a sustainable model was created, and university statements were compared to the model. At the end of the study, researchers found that 80% of universities addressed sustainability in their mission statements, and they concluded that "the mission statement can be an indicator of sustainability and a reflection of the institution's reality” (Deus et al., 2016, p. 412). Brazilian universities seem to recognize that they play a significant role in solving major societal and environmental issues. One limitation of this study is that the authors only analyzed mission statements whereas this thesis analyzes mission statements, vision statements, value statements, and strategic plans of universities. The present thesis also aims to add to that contribution by exploring in greater detail what variables might influence universities to fail to address sustainability in their mission statements, but from a US perspective, rather than a Brazilian one.

A similar study published by the *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* looked at 98 Italian universities and their different individual engagements in societal issues (Colasanti et al., 2021). However, unlike Brazilian universities with high environmental verbiage rates, only 36% of the 98 Italian universities even alluded to engaging in societal problems. Out of this number, only three schools mentioned sustainability in their mission statements (p. 1145). These results invite the question as to why Italian universities are paying weak attention to sustainability and why Brazilian universities tend to do the opposite.

Furthermore, they invite larger questions as to why higher education institutions in the United States generally fail to include environmental verbiage in their mission statements. This failure is quite evident: Among the QS World University Rankings on Sustainability for 2023, only three US schools sit in the top ten (UC Berkeley, University of Pennsylvania, and Yale, none of which are part of the SEC) “(QS Sustainability,” 2023). If many US universities and colleges fail to include clear environmental language, it comes as little surprise that US institutions do not dominate the top ten here.

### **Universities and Climate Change**

Similar to leaders in government, universities play an indispensable role when it comes to mitigating climate change due to their influence and wealth. Since universities are so important in the production of knowledge and science, these schools seem to have a clear role insofar as those matter for the crisis. University leaders, who most likely attended a university themselves, were in all likelihood influenced while being educated by professors, surrounded by other students, and through different experiences. Paul Alivisatos, the current president of the University of Chicago, upon taking the position, reported that “he was honored for this opportunity to lead the distinctive intellectual community and the University of Chicago, *a special place that was so transformative in my early education and guided the throughout my academic career*” (Alivisatos, 2021). Alivisatos clearly credits his university for where he is today in his career. While universities do hope to inspire students to make a difference in the world, people do not have to go to university to do this necessarily and going to university does not even mean that an individual will automatically make a difference. Youth climate activist Greta Thunberg is one such case. However, many of our future leaders will attend university, so it is crucial that all students are educated on the most significant challenges our world is facing.

Even if students are not fully responsible for the creation of those significant global challenges, it will be the world they inherit. Upon graduating, most university students will enter the workforce and go out into different communities while taking the information they learned while in school with them. Universities must ensure that students have a holistic empirical picture of climate change before this occurs. Young people know that climate change is happening and universities, which are major research hubs, need to actively acknowledge the climate crisis, since one aspect fueling the crisis is epistemic: if the general public is unaware of the scientific consensus, this makes smart policy difficult to achieve. The Columbia University Climate School recently reported that “if 16 percent of secondary school students around the world in middle- and high-income countries studied climate change, it would result in cutting almost 19 gigatons of CO<sub>2</sub> by 2050” (Cho and Branch, 2023). This would be a result of students making both better individual choices and eventually supporting sustainable policies. While this thesis does not directly argue for climate change education at the university level, it is clear that this study solidifies the importance of having those conversations.

In 2015 a study was published by the *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* to outline and compare college students' views regarding climate change in China and the United States. These countries were selected because they are the two most significant per capita and annual contributors to the global climate crisis (Barrett et al., 2015). The difference between the college students in China and the college students in the United States came down to how climate change is viewed politically in the individual countries. In China, the government unanimously recognizes climate change as an issue, and the Chinese tend to follow their government. China even recognizes “ecological civilization” as part of its national policy planning (Barrett et al., 2015). As a result, environmental education plays a vital role in the

Chinese education system. Alternatively, climate change is typically viewed as a political rather than a scientific issue in the United States. While aspects of climate policy are undoubtedly political, such as what constitutes acceptable degrees of risk or mitigation, the science is clear. The existence of climate change and the environmental impacts are clear, how to address these facts is political. As a result, the U.S. educational system has not pushed universities to comprehensively teach about climate change in order to reverse any environmental misconceptions university students may have (Barrett et al., 2015). At most, it can be learned in an elective course. Unsurprisingly, students in China who learned about climate change were more likely than students in the United States to be concerned about the environment. Given that China and the United States are the biggest polluters (disregarding historic emissions, of course), it is reasonable to suppose that these countries ought to implement the strictest environmental protection policies to rein in climate change. This study published by the *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* is a clear example of the type of educational and leadership role universities can play in the climate crisis, as the young generations and future generations will, unfortunately, need to be the ones to push our government officials to pass strict environmental legislation. At this point in time, the World Economic Forum reports that China is set to “significantly overachieve” the CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction targets the country previously set through the Paris Agreement by 2030 (“Why China,” 2022). Progress like this and the presence of environmental verbiage in public messaging are correlated (such as, in China’s case, ecological civilization).

Besides China, it is also worth considering climate commitments and verbiage in one of the other biggest historic contributors to climate change: the United Kingdom. In 2021, Keele University, a public research university in the United Kingdom, was named the Sustainability

Institution of the year at the prestigious Green Gowns Awards ceremony which celebrates sustainability in Higher Education. In 2019, Keele University was one of the first universities in the UK and the world to declare a “climate emergency” (“Keele,” 2023). A climate emergency means that urgent actions need to be taken to slow or stop climate change to avoid any irreversible damage (“UNEP,” 2023). It is impressive that Keele University used this term given just how explicitly bold the verbiage is, especially when contrasted with US tendencies. This university has been operating as an environmentally conscious institution since the beginning of the 1990s. On the Keele University website, university leadership declares their commitment to the environment and then state that "In the last six years, the University has invested over £1.2m into carbon reduction and will be investing more every year" (“Keele,” 2023). When asked why the university is so invested in the environment, officials say it is necessary to align "with the ethos at Keele." As a reference, Keele University's mission statement is as follows: "making a difference in society by providing innovative, high-quality education for students from all backgrounds and by undertaking world-leading research that transforms understanding and brings benefit to society, communities and individuals” (“Keele,” 2023). This university is a prime example of how universities should follow through on their mission statements. Keele has since become a model university for climate action and sustainability, one that other universities and leaders across the UK and EU can look up to. Yet questions remain: what influences some universities, like Keele, to become invested in the environment with clear-cut verbiage along and a track-record to support it, while others, such as those US institutions in the SEC, remain largely silent on the issue?

## **Factors that Influence Universities**

A study published by the *Society for Research into Higher Education* analyzed different factors that affect the content of university mission statements in the United Kingdom's higher education system (Barberio et al., 2019). The authors argue that universities face two major issues when drafting a mission statement: The first problem is that universities have different diverse constituents that support the university for different reasons. Additionally, internal university members, such as students, managers, and professors, also have an opinion on what the mission statement should be (Barberio et al., 2019). In the case of Keele, for example, framers of the mission statement were able to align it with the student and faculty values, i.e. its “ethos.” All of these different entities that support the university have different, often conflicting values, and universities are obliged to choose which ones they will most strongly address. This may involve compromise in verbiage and goals, or it may involve strategic omissions of certain highly polarizing language. The second problem is it is believed that legitimate universities should offer comparable experiences, yet at the same time these universities are expected to make sure they distinguish themselves to decrease competition (Barberio et al., 2019). The climate crisis is a major concern to many and there is an abundance of scientific literature that supports these concerns. R1 research institutions, and universities in general, have the ability to make substantial environmental impacts, but these universities have to be willing to accept the fact that not everyone is going to support this decision.

In light of this literature review, and looking ahead, this study looks to identify why some universities are ultimately more sustainable than others by studying the specific language that individual universities use. This will be conducted through a data and content analysis in the following chapter. To summarize, this thesis adds to current literature by specifically comparing



environmental verbiage used by SEC and Big 10 universities; there is a need for this particular research because universities outside of the United States, such as Keele University in the United Kingdom, have focused on climate change commitments and their commitments appear to be highly correlated with their language. For instance, over one hundred universities across the globe have signed an international alliance agreement, the World Alliance of Universities on Carbon Neutrality (WAUCN), to fight climate change (“University of Birmingham,” 2022). Yet none of these universities reside in the United States. Much of the literature I have found only discusses mission statements and diversity statements, but they do not explore climate change. This is an oversight. A few examples of articles that do this are “Mission Possible: Do School Mission Statements Work?” (Davis, et al., 2007) and “What do Mission Statements Reveal about the Values of Top Universities in the World?” (Breznik and Law, 2019). This research will therefore add to the overall literature by diving into university mission statements and seeing if environmental language is ever present.

## Chapter 4: Data Collection and Analysis for Essential Subject Matter

The phrase “Essential Subject Matter” refers to the environmental-related words and phrases pulled from university mission statements. The data collected were accessed through public SEC and Big 10 university websites. An analysis of the websites was conducted with the use of content analysis. The content analysis method was chosen for a variety of reasons, but especially because it is a qualitative research method. A qualitative approach is most appropriate because the present study’s goals require the interpretation of quantitative data against a variety of social, political, and geographic variables.

The steps of the identification process are clearly outlined below in a step-by-step format in Table 1.0, which I cite from Rutherford, (2005). I will elaborate on each step of the process below. In this particular study I am most interested in the deliberate and explicit use of particular words and phrases. I am interested in the existence of these words because I believe that universities that use environmental language on their most viewed webpages (mission statement, vision statement, value statement, and strategic plan pages) are most likely to also be taking the steps to be committed environmentally sustainable campuses, environmentally responsible leadership cultivation, and environmental education.

**Table 1.0 Content Analysis Procedure<sup>1</sup>**

| <b>Step</b>                       | <b>Definition</b>   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1. Define the target of inference | The target is what the researchers want to identify, analyze, and draw conclusions from |

---

<sup>1</sup> I derive Table 1.0 from Rutherford, (2005), though I have slightly modified it.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| 2. Develop the contextual knowledge                    | The contextual knowledge provides the logical bridge between the data that are available and the uncertain target that exists in those data  |
| 3. Determine the data that will be counted as a target | Specifically define what words and phrases are to be counted as data and the process by which they will be identified  |
| 4. Develop the codebook                                | This consists of four sub-steps:<br>1. Develop a prescription for coders, that is, the experience and qualifications needed by coders<br>2. Define the recording units, that is, the types of content items that will be recorded<br>3. Define how the data will be unitized, that is, determine what the unit of analysis will be<br>4. Demonstrate how the developed procedures determine the validity of the analysis |
| 5. Develop a form for the coders                       | Develop the form that will be used by the coders to record the data  |
| 6. Record data   | Coders will follow procedures (as indicated in Sections 4.0-8.1.1) and record the data   |
| 7. Data processing                                     | Transfer data from coding forms to a database  |
| 8. Conduct final analysis                              | Decide if more SEC or Big 10 universities included environmental verbiage  |

**Expanded Explanation of the Process**

The “target of inference” is the environmental words and phrases that are listed in section 2.1 which will also be the recorded content. The presence or lack of presence of such environmental verbiage will be utilized in Chapters 5-6 to draw conclusions as to what possible factors influence universities in how they portray their environmental image as presented in the four sections outlined in section 4.0 (mission statement, vision statement, etc.). In this study

“contextual knowledge” refers to the potential discrepancies of indeterminate language that are discussed at the bottom of section 2.1. For example, “environment” can refer to social or ecological topics, so context is required to ascertain the intended meaning. The “target” mentioned in step 1 refers to the different environmental words and phrases listed in section 2.1 and the identification process is discussed in section 2.2. Finally, the “prescription for coders” is high academic achievement, research experience, and professor recommendations which are discussed in section 1.0.

### **1.0 Overview of this Content Analysis**

The overall purpose of this content analysis is to extract key words and phrases from the websites of specific universities. This study is a manual content analysis as the research materials will be physically recorded from each individual university website. Olivia Reeves (referred to as “Coder A”), an Integrative Marketing and Communications major, and Forrest Kaplan (referred to as “Coder B”), a political science major, both ranked highly academically, will act as the coders. As to their suitability, both students have prior experience acting as coders for similar research projects and the students are highly recommended by the directors of their respective programs.

This is a conceptual type of content analysis. Specific words within a concept will be chosen and then their presence or lack of presence will result in a score. For example, when Coder A is analyzing a university mission statement and comes upon the word “sustainable,” the coders will code (in accordance with the coding rules prescribed below, see Table 2.0) that as a ‘1’, since ‘1’ refers to “presence of specified environmental language.” If Coder A then proceeds to analyze the vision statement and comes upon the phrase “climate change” that will also be coded as a ‘1’. However, if Coder A then looks at the strategic plan and does not see any of the

listed keywords that will be coded as a '0'. The number '1' and higher means there is environmental language present and a '0' means there is no usage of environmental language. If a university were to receive a '2' this just means that two environmental related words/phrases were identified on the indicated public university pages. For the purpose of this study a school that scores a '1' will be interpreted as using weaker language than a school that receives a '5', i.e., as including environmental verbiage. Schools with numbers greater than '0' could of course be used to make inferences *between* schools with verbiage. Due to time constraints, however, I am only concerned with environmental verbiage existing or not existing, not the amount.

Furthermore, this study will be identifying words that are explicitly stated, meaning that the word is directly and clearly specified rather than implied in order to avoid coder errors associated with undue charitability in interpreting university commitments. Coders will strictly code for explicit language, in other words, to minimize the possibility of reading into mission statements more than can be charitably done. However, words that have ambiguous, double meanings will need to be accurately interpreted in order to effectively implement this analysis. For instance, if a university mission states that they "prioritize their student campus environment" this would be coded as a '0' in cases where it does not obviously refer to anything to do with our natural environment, but a social environment or atmosphere. This means that in ambiguous cases coders will need to rely on the contextual knowledge discussed in step 2. For example, the word "environment" can have multiple different connotations.

## **2.0 Goal of this Content Analysis:**

### **2.1 Goal #1: Extract keywords from official university statements on the university website.**

The primary goal is to extract explicitly stated words from university mission statements, vision statements, value statements, and plan of action statements. These words, or lack of words, will then be recorded on the “coding form.” (blank- and example-forms are appended at the end of this chapter, in Tables 3.0 and 4.0 respectively). The keywords that will be extracted and recorded are listed below in no particular order:

**Table 2.0 Keywords and Phrases**

| <b>Words/Phrases</b>                                  | <b>Reason</b>   |
|---|---|
| 1. Sustainability, sustained, sustaining, sustainable | When used in an environmental context this word suggests that they are concerned with “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations).  |
| 2. Socially responsible, social responsibility        | In an environmental context, a university that is socially responsible prioritizes acting in ways that are environmentally friendly.  |
| 3. Environment/environmental                          | “Environmental” terms are significant because climate change will impact environments, sometimes in irreplaceable ways, and as a result affect humans.  |
| 4. Climate change/climate crisis/climate breakdown    | The term “climate change” (as well as variations) is important to code because it is one of the central purposes of the research question which looks to explain the role universities play in climate change.  |
| 5. Global warming/global heating                      | These terms must be included in the coding process because “global warming” and “global heating” go hand in hand with climate change.   |
| 6. Climate  | “Climate” must be coded because of its deep connection to the environment and climate change. We cannot have the phrase “climate change” without the term “climate.” “Climate change” will count as one unit just as “climate” counts as one unit when it |

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  | is on its own, because they mean two different things. However, the phrase ‘climate change’ does include two items, though it will only count as one.   |
| 7. Ecosystem, ecology, ecological, Earth-system, biosphere, nature | All of these are being impacted by climate change. If a university is using any of these words, given their connection to the environment, they most likely believe climate change is an issue. |

It is important to note that this thesis focuses only on environmental sustainability, rather than economic or social sustainability. This is partly due to time constraints, but also to provide the thesis with greater focus. As indicated above, the words and phrases were chosen for specific reasons. For example, different forms of the word “sustainability” are frequently used by the EPA, the Federal Government Agency which works to protect human health and the environment. In this case, the EPA defines sustainability as “Everything that we need for our survival and well-being depends, either directly or indirectly, on our natural environment. To pursue sustainability is to create and maintain the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony to support present and future generations” (“Environmental,” 2023). Phrases such as “socially responsible” refer to an organization or individual’s civil duty to act in a way that helps society. If a university mentions this phrase they should also (presumably) be taking steps to act sustainably. Forms of the word “environment” were selected given the connection to our natural environment, which will be impacted by unmitigated climate change. “Climate crisis” and “climate breakdown” were chosen because of the differing ways that researchers and advocates have referred to climate change (e.g. Parkes 2021 and Read 2022). The phrases “global warming” and “global heating” were selected because climate change describes global warming, which is the gradual increase in average global temperatures (“Global warming,” 2023). As such these are proxies for the central language the thesis is concerned with,

namely climate change. The word “climate,” specifically related to the natural environment, describes the long-term weather in a specific region when used in this context (“Global warming,” 2023). Universities that are concerned with climates presumably also understand how the climate is changing, and what this implies for human society. “Nature,” when referring to the environment, references the physical and material properties on the planet, which is currently changing as we move farther away from a stable, Holocene-like epoch (“Anthropocene,” 2022). The word “ecosystem” in all of its forms was selected because it refers to organisms on the planet which interact in their physical environment, and organisms (as well as biodiversity), stands to be negatively impacted by climate change (“World Wildlife,” 2023). The phrase and word “earth-system” and “biosphere” were chosen because both involve parts of the earth where life exists, which, again will be affected by a changing climate. In short, human emission-causing activities have been shown to impact ecosystems, biosphere, natural systems, and the climate. Sustainable social responsibility is, of course, one way to address these, and universities should be seen to have a role here. The extent to which universities see themselves, institutionally, of having such a role, can plausibly be exhibited through the use of specific environmental verbiage.

When coders must rely on context (in ambiguous cases), the word or phrase under consideration should clearly refer to environmental issues. Many of the included keywords and phrases listed above should be easily identified, but the words “environment” and “nature” are, for instance, potentially problematic. This is because many universities use the term “environment” to refer to their overall campus social environment, rather than actual environmental issues. Additionally, the word “nature” can be used to describe the phenomena of our physical world collectively, but it can also be used to refer to the basic inherent features of



something (e.g. “the nature of the human mind”). This study is not concerned with nature in terms of “nature of justice” or “human nature,” which do not have a clear connection to the environment and so will be unlikely to help us make sense of universities and their perceived environmental commitments. Coders will thus need to use context clues to accurately differentiate between the different meanings of these words in passages where ambiguous language is present. If the coder is unable to make a definite decision based on the context or if they are just unable to decide then the coder should simply code a ‘0’.

## **2.2 Goal #2**

Determine the extent to which environmental terminology is or is not used by a university. This study will be coding for frequency during the recording stage of the content analysis, so the coder should count the number of times a word or phrase appears. Notably, “climate change” will count as one unit just as “climate” counts as one unit because they mean two different things. While the phrase ‘climate change’ does include two items it will only count as one.

## **3.0 Objective of the Content Analysis**

To accomplish the Goals of the Content Analysis, the following objective has been developed:

### **3.1 Objective #1**

Record essential subject matter items specifically as stated on the university webpage whenever possible.

## **4.0 University Webpages and the Recording of Subject Matter Items**

The words listed will be extracted from specified university webpages and recorded on a “coding form” (see example of blank form, Table 3.0). The recording will be done electronically.

Subject matter items can either be copied and pasted from the webpage onto the coding form or typed in. These keywords will be recorded on the coding form in categories that are based on the web page sections in which the subject matter items appear. The following four sections will be the only ones used for this content analysis:

- The mission statements
- The vision statement page
- The value statements
- The strategic plan

All the universities from the SEC and Big 10 should have the four items mentioned above, but if one or more of these statements do not appear on the university website, then the corresponding section(s) on the coding form will receive a '0'. If one of the sections is not explicitly called as described above or has a slightly different name, such as "our collective mission" rather than "mission statement" that does not receive a '0'. However, if it is not clear that the statement names are the same then it will receive a '0'.

### **5.0 Overview of the Steps for Conducting the Content Analysis**

Use the following steps to conduct the content analysis:

1. Prepare the files (Section 6.0)
2. Review the website (Section 7.0)
3. Record basic information onto the coding form (Section 8.0)

### **6.0 Step #1: Prepare the Files**

- Open the "Coding Form" and save the file as the university name followed by your initials. Examples of Coding Form (blank sheet and model sheet) are appended below

in Tables 3.0 and 4.0 respectively. Olivia should put “OR” and Forrest should put “FK.” Each section has an assigned letter (A-D, as indicated below).

- **A** The mission statement
- **B** The vision statement page
- **C** The value statement
- **D** The strategic plan

**7.0 Step #2: Review subject matter as found on publicly available university web pages.**

- Coding is restricted to universities from the SEC and Big 10, as specified below:
  - **Big 10 (Midwest athletic conference):** The University of Michigan, Wisconsin University, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Penn State University, Ohio State University, Michigan State University, Purdue University, University of Minnesota, Indiana University, University of Iowa, University of Nebraska, Rutgers University, and University of Maryland
  - **SEC (Southeastern Conference):** Auburn University, Louisiana State University, Mississippi State University, Texas A&M University, University of Alabama, University of Arkansas, University of Florida, University of Georgia, University of Kentucky, University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), University of Missouri, University of South Carolina, University of Tennessee
- Proceed to the first university website (see above) and identify web pages for items A-D (mission statement, etc.). Copy the URL(s) of items A-D at the bottom of the code sheet. Note: Some of the statements may be on the same page (e.g. a mission statement and vision statement may be published on the same web page).

### **8.0 Step #3: Code and record information from university web pages onto coding sheet.**

- Complete all four sections A-D for one school in the same document. Only code for clear language. In ambiguous cases, refer to rules discussed above. Repeat this process for every assigned school. Make sure to be consistent.

#### **8.1 General rule for recording subject matter items:**

##### **8.1.1. The general rule:**

The coding instructions, which included detailed instructions, above, rely on the coders to be able to go through each section one at a time looking for each individual key word/phrase. The coders will simply be coding each word or phrase in all four sections for every SEC and Big 10 school marking a one for explicit language or a zero for no language.

### **9.0 Post-data collection**

After the coders have collected the data from all the individual universities, I will then code the universities myself as a third coder to determine if the results between all three coders are consistent. After I complete the coding on my own, I will then consider the coding results from the other coders: First, I will begin with coder A and add up the number of SEC schools that included at least one environmental related phrase or word. Then, I will repeat this step for the Big 10 schools. I will then complete this same process for coder B. If there is a clear consensus, I will compile the coding results in the form of two tables, in the subsequent chapter, to then be used to compare the number of SEC schools that included environmental verbiage to the Big 10 schools that included environmental verbiage (see section below). A between-university comparison of word ranges and mission statements vs vision statements will still be accounted for by the coders to facilitate future analysis (discussed in the Chapter 7). In order for

this data to be considered reliable all three coders will need to have 100% agreement. This is due to the relatively small number of coders.

### **10.0 How the Collected Data Will be Analyzed**

Once the coding data unanimously converges, i.e., that we have obtained reliable findings, the next step is to analyze the data. The SEC results and the Big 10 results will both be split into two different excel spreadsheet files named the “Final SEC Coding Results” and “Final Big 10 Coding Results.” These results, which appear here under Tables 5.0 and 6.0 respectively, will allow for easy comparison and analysis of the raw data.

I will list all of the individual schools in their pertaining conference as the school appeared in the coding files. Then four categories will be created: “Total Words,” “Highest Frequency Category,” “Climate Change,” and “Mission Statement.” I will enter the number of environmental terms used by each school under the “Total Words” category for all coders. Then, I will review each school and decide which statement had the highest frequency of environmental verbiage (comparing **A** The mission statement, **B** The vision statement page, **C** The value statement, and **D** The strategic plan). This is so I can compare where environmental verbiage appears most in the SEC and in the Big 10. For instance, mission statements may not include very much environmental language given that it is the most accessible to future students and their families. Next, I will put “yes” or “no” if the term “climate change” appears anywhere in any of the university’s statements or not. This category is important because I believe that if a school explicitly mentions climate change, then that university is most likely the same one taking the necessary steps to combat climate change. Literature related to universities’ relationship to climate change and how mission statements specifically concern climate change are lacking. Then, I will put “yes” or “no” based on if there is environmental verbiage included in the

universities mission statement or not. This category is necessary because most research is done on mission statements, and also this is an area where universities can be held somewhat accountable. Finally, I will total up the “total words,” “the most frequently occurring category,” “Climate Change frequency” and “Mission Statement frequency” to allow for ease of comparison with the other conference. These steps will then be repeated for the second conference.

Finally, once the Tables 5.0-6.0 are completed based off of the steps listed above and an overall basic summary of the raw data in conferences and between conferences is created, I will interpret the data (given converging and diverging findings), using a more comprehensive comparative charts (Tables 8.0 and 9.0).

### **11.0 Variables Chosen to Assist Interpretation of Data**

I will rely on four primary factors that may explain the variation between the conferences. The components included will be 1) geographic highlights, 2) academic program strengths, 3) student racial and gender demographics, and 4) political affiliation. An explanation for choosing these variables, how I will interpret the raw data, and where I plan to find the data will be detailed below.

#### **11.1 Geographic Highlights**

A university’s geographic location is the place where a university exists. In this particular study I am interested to highlight a few potentially relevant geographic factors:

1. Which state?
2. Is the location rural, urban, or suburban?
3. What are the surrounding demographics, industry, and proximity to environmental landmarks or climate impacts such as extreme weather or drought?

I am interested in what state the school is located in because of its primary industry and how it relates to the environment. For instance, Texas is one of the top five crude oil-producing states. The jobs this industry provides may outweigh any environmental costs. In order to determine a state's top industry I will be referring to the Forbes list of "The Biggest Industry in Every State of 2022" (Brown, 2022). I am also interested in whether a school is rural, urban, or suburban because according to the Pew Research Center urban and rural areas are becoming more polarized politically while suburban areas tend to be more in agreement politically (Brown, 2022). The way these people lean politically is often linked to how they view the climate change crisis (Fagan and Huang, 2019). In order to determine if a school is rural, urban, or suburban I will refer to the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau, 2023). I am also concerned with locations that experience measurable climate impacts (e.g. drought, sea-level rise, etc.), or that have highly visible environmental landmarks (e.g. the Great Lakes), where it is likely for the student body to take pride in local environments. All of these factors will likely play a role in whether a university uses a lot of environmental verbiage or little to no environmental verbiage.

### **11.2 Academic Program Strengths**

Universities across the country are known for having specific specialties. I am particularly interested in a university's largest department, their highest ranked program(s), and research areas of national renown. I believe that these are indicators as to whether a university will use environmental language or not. For if a university's largest department is science and/or if the university has a highly ranked science or engineering program, that university may be more inclined to use environmental language given that they may have students coming into the program that want to specialize in environmentally relevant fields/occupations. There is thus a strong incentive that they indicate concern for environmental issues. For instance, Penn State and

the University of Michigan both have top environmental science programs which may lead these schools to be more environmentally conscious. If a school wants to continue to recruit top students to their top program, they may want to show that they are a forward-thinking university by using environmental language on their website. I will determine what the university's top program is by looking at their rankings located on the "about us" section of their website or by locating it on the "US News" website, which ranks schools as well as their programs ("best colleges," 2023). This is one of most popular platforms for college ranking statistics. US News is supported by many universities. For instance, the University of Mississippi proudly states on their website that "Ole Miss ranked No. 77 among public universities in the 2021 U.S. News Best Colleges" ("University of Mississippi", 2023). However, as with all ranking platforms, there is room for some error and/or inaccurate anecdotes.

### **11.3 Student Racial and Gender Demographics**

Two different studies performed by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication analyzed racial/ethnic groups to determine who tends to care the most about climate change and studied the gender differences in the understanding of climate change ("Gender Differences," 2018). It was determined that non-white racial/ethnic groups "are more concerned than Whites about climate change" and that "women consistently have higher risk perceptions" about the damage global warming will cause ("Racial/ethnic," 2020). I chose to use these variables because I believe that (if the variables are true) they may play a role in a university's decision to use or to not use environmental language. For example, a university that is predominately non-white and has a higher percentage of women faculty and students may be more likely to acknowledge climate change, however, to make casual claims for this correlation is outside the scope of this study. I will find this information on university's websites where they



discuss their campus demographics and statistics. For instance, the University of Mississippi lists this information on their homepage under “Facts and Statistics” and then “Quick Facts” (“University of Mississippi,” 2023). Universities often put this information in the brochures that they disperse to students. Ideally, I intended to compare the average age of campus populations, but I was unable to find statistics on this topic for individual universities. Further research is needed to observe how the average age of students, faculty and staff correlates with their use of climate change verbiage in their missions and values.

#### **11.4 Political Affiliation**

A 2020 study published by the Pew Research Center determined that Democrats are much more concerned than Republicans when discussing climate change (Kennedy and Johnson, 2020). Universities do not tend to publish their students’ political affiliations. Universities also may not want to bar any potential donors from donating to the school. However, websites such as Niche can provide a basic insight into how students learn politically. Niche is a website that analyzes universities and provides reviews, data, and insights for prospective students. Niche relies on self-reporting polls to determine student understandings of terms such as “conservative”, “moderate”, and “progressive.” Anecdotally, as a student attending the University of Mississippi, I suspect that a majority of the student body identifies as Republican. If you search the University of Mississippi on Niche, this website confirms my belief (“Student life,” 2023). If this information is reliable, I believe that it could be helpful for interpreting the coding data. I believe universities that lean more Republican will be less likely to use environmental verbiage on their websites. A 2020 poll published by the Pew Research Center reported that almost all Democratic registered voters believed that climate change was a problem for the U.S. as opposed to only 41% of registered Republican voters (Kennedy and Johnson,

2020). If a university historically caters to Republican students, they may be more inclined to shy away from climate change given polling trends.

I am also interested in if the state leans liberal or conservative and how that might influence how the specific area the university is in tends to vote, although I am aware that other factors complicate this: for instance, conservative voters may care about the preservation of natural environments in order to sustain hunting and fishing cultures (see Ducks Unlimited). I will determine how a state leans politically based on the last presidential election, and I will determine if the county the university is in is liberal or conservative based off of the “Best Neighborhood” website (“Prosperity,” 2023). This website gives potential homeowners a feel for the area they are about to move to, in order understand the political climate of the cities the universities are in. This information is vital to interpreting the data I collected because it will help explain why a university may be open or not open to publicly discussing climate change. Universities in Republican-leaning cities, such as Knoxville, TN, may be less likely to use environmental language out of fear of losing community support. Thus, for example, if a university ranks high in environmental verbiage, and if it lies in a liberal-leaning area, this could help to explain why university officials feel confident in using strong language. By contrast, a more conservative, rural region might use some environmental language to signal to hunting enthusiasts given the specific geography or environmental landmarks of the area, while being vague about explicitly climate-related issues.

### **11.5 Summary of the Comparison**

The next chapter will specifically look at the top four schools in the conference with the most environmental language to the four universities with the least amount of environmental language in the opposing conference. I will then compare the SEC and Big 10 universities by

considering geographic highlights, academic program strength, racial, and gender demographics, and political affiliation. I will be using these factors because, as argued above, I believe these factors are the primary indicators that will help predict if a university will choose to prioritize the environment or not.

**Table 3.0 Code Form Blank Example**

| <b>0=Not Present<br/>1=Present</b>                                      | <b>A: Mission<br/>Statement</b> | <b>B: Vision<br/>Statement</b> | <b>C: Value<br/>Statement</b> | <b>D: Strategic<br/>Plan</b> | <b>Total of<br/>Each<br/>Word/Ph<br/>rase</b> |
|---|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| Sustainability<br>Sustained<br>Sustaining<br>Sustainable                |                                 |                                |                               |                              |   |
| Socially<br>responsible<br>Social<br>responsibility                     |                                 |                                |                               |                              |   |
| Environment<br>Environmental<br>(Natural, not<br>social<br>environment) |                                 |                                |                               |                              |   |
| Climate change<br>Climate crisis<br>Climate-<br>breakdown               |                                 |                                |                               |                              |   |
| Global warming  |                                 |                                |                               |                              |   |
| Global heating  |                                 |                                |                               |                              |   |
| Climate<br>(Natural, not<br>social/diversity<br>climate)                |                                 |                                |                               |                              |   |
| Ecosystem<br>Ecology<br>Ecological                                      |                                 |                                |                               |                              |   |
| Earth-system<br>Biosphere   |                                 |                                |                               |                              |   |
| <b>Total of Each<br/>Category</b>                                       |                                 |                                |                               |                              | <b>Overall<br/>Words/P<br/>hrases:</b>        |

**Notes for Coders:**

- Even if ‘sustainability,’ ‘sustained,’ ‘sustaining,’ and ‘sustainable’ were to all be included in the mission statement, this column would still only receive a one.
- This form will be repeated for all 13 SEC and all 13 Big 10 schools in different individual files by Coder A, Coder B, and myself
- Please paste URLs of items A-D above in the blank space below.

**Table 4.0 University of Mississippi Code Form Example**

| <b>0=Not Present<br/>1=Present</b>                                | <b>A: Mission Statement</b> | <b>B: Vision Statement</b> | <b>C: Value Statement</b> | <b>D: Strategic Plan</b> | <b>Total of Each Word/Phrase</b> |
|---|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Sustainability<br>Sustained<br>Sustaining<br>Sustainable          | 0                           | 0                          | 0                         | 1                        | 1                                |
| Socially responsible<br>Social responsibility                     | 0                           | 0                          | 0                         | 0                        | 0                                |
| Environment<br>Environmental<br>(Natural, not social environment) | 0                           | 0                          | 0                         | 1                        | 1                                |
| Climate change<br>Climate crisis<br>Climate-breakdown             | 0                           | 0                          | 0                         | 0                        | 0                                |
| Global warming  | 0                           | 0                          | 0                         | 0                        | 0                                |
| Global heating  | 0                           | 0                          | 0                         | 0                        | 0                                |
| Climate<br>(Natural, not social/diversity climate)                | 0                           | 0                          | 0                         | 0                        | 0                                |
| Ecosystem<br>Ecology<br>Ecological                                | 0                           | 0                          | 0                         | 0                        | 0                                |
| Earth-system<br>Biosphere   | 0                           | 0                          | 0                         | 0                        | 0                                |
| <b>Total of Each Category</b>                                     | <b>0</b>                    | <b>0</b>                   | <b>0</b>                  | <b>2</b>                 | <b>Overall words/phrases: 2</b>  |

**Notes for Coders:**

- Even if ‘sustainability,’ ‘sustained,’ ‘sustaining,’ and ‘sustainable’ were to all be included in the mission statement, this column would still only receive a one.
- This form will be repeated for all 13 SEC and all 13 Big 10 schools in different individual files by Coder A, Coder B, and myself
- Please paste URLs of items A-D above in the blank space below.

**URLs:** [Mission | University of Mississippi \(olemiss.edu\) StrategicPlan-2-27-18-WebVersion.pdf](#)

[| Powered by Box](#)

## Chapter 5: Research Results

My hypothesis from the beginning was that SEC universities would use less environmental language than Big 10 universities. My beliefs were confirmed as four SEC universities, the University of Alabama, the University of Arkansas, the University of South Carolina, and the University of Tennessee, included no environmental language. On the other hand, every Big 10 university used some form of environmental verbiage at least once in either their mission statement, vision statement, value statement, and/or strategic plan. I was surprised to find that some SEC universities, such as Louisiana State University (17), the University of Kentucky (6), and Auburn University (4) would include much more environmental language than their SEC counterparts. Louisiana State University, after all, is known for their long tradition in petroleum engineering which has negative effects on the environment (*U.S. Energy*, 2023).

From the start, I suspected that because of the significant emphasis placed on university mission statements, which broadly state a university's purpose and how they will achieve it, that any university that used environmental language would include some, at the very least vague, language in their mission statement. However, my research found this belief to be unfounded. Much to my surprise, when environmental verbiage was found, it tended not to be present in mission statements. Rather, I found that 20 out of the 26 universities studied had a majority of their environmental verbiage in their strategic plan. Additionally, only 6 out of the 26 universities would reference the environment in their mission statement.



These findings are significant because university mission statements tend to be very accessible and visible on their websites whereas strategic plans are not. In fact, while I was considering which undergraduate schools I would apply to I do not ever recall coming across any strategic plans. I did not even realize universities had strategic plans until starting this research project. I suspect that this sentiment will be shared among many students. This is unsurprising, however, when we consider that universities have to show that they are meeting their mission statement requirements in order to avoid losing certain accreditations (AACSB, 2023). So it makes sense, then, to avoid accountability for commitments, that universities hesitate to include environmental language in mission statements (for fear of alienating prospective students, donors etc.). Mission statements are highly visible on university websites whereas strategic plans tend to be less visible and more difficult to find. These findings are important, because it gives us a possible explanation as to why universities choose to put environmental language in their strategic plans rather than their mission statements.

Given these general results, we are now properly situated to ask: what factors can we reasonably use to infer what influences the decision of universities to include or not to include environmental language? To help answer this question, I have compiled the relevant coding data for both conferences in two charts on the subsequent page (Tables 7.0 and 8.0). Keep in mind that the data was reliably collected through a strict coding process (see section 5.0). All three coders were able to reach a 100% agreement.

**Table 5.0 Final SEC Coding Results**

| <b>Universities</b> | <b>Total Words</b> | <b>Statement with the Highest Amount of Environmental Language</b> | <b>Was “climate change” stated?</b> | <b>Did any words appear in the mission statement?</b> |
|---------------------|--------------------|--|-------------------------------------|---|
| Alabama             | 0                  | N/A  | No                                  | No  |
| Arkansas            | 0                  | N/A  | No                                  | No  |
| Florida             | 1                  | Strategic Plan   | No                                  | No  |
| Georgia             | 1                  | Mission Statement  | No                                  | Yes   |
| Kentucky            | 6                  | Strategic Plan   | Yes                                 | No  |
| Louisiana           | 17                 | Strategic Plan   | Yes                                 | Yes   |
| Mizzou              | 1                  | Strategic Plan   | No                                  | No  |
| MS State            | 1                  | Strategic Plan   | No                                  | No  |
| Ole Miss            | 2                  | Strategic Plan   | No                                  | No  |
| USC                 | 0                  | N/A  | No                                  | No  |
| Tennessee           | 0                  | Strategic Plan   | No                                  | No  |
| Texas               | 2                  | Strategic Plan   | No                                  | No  |
| Auburn              | 4                  | Strategic Plan   | Yes                                 | Yes   |
| <b>Overall</b>      | <b>35 Words</b>    | <b>Strategic Plan</b>  | <b>3/13 Schools</b>                 | <b>3/13 Schools</b>                                   |

**Table 6.0 Final Big 10 Coding Results**

| <b>Universities</b> | <b>Total Words</b> | <b>Statement with the Highest Amount of Environmental Language</b> | <b>Was “climate change” stated?</b> | <b>Did any words appear in the mission statement?</b> |
|---------------------|--------------------|--|-------------------------------------|---|
| Indiana University  | 3                  | Mission Statement  | No                                  | Yes   |
| Michigan State      | 42                 | Strategic Plan   | Yes                                 | No  |

|                |                            |                       |                     |                     |
|----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Penn State     | 53                         | Strategic Plan        | Yes                 | No                  |
| Rutgers        | 24                         | Strategic Plan        | No                  | No                  |
| Ohio State     | 2                          | Strategic Plan        | No                  | No                  |
| Iowa           | 1                          | Strategic Plan        | No                  | No                  |
| Illinois       | 3                          | Strategic Plan        | No                  | No                  |
| Maryland       | 9                          | Mission Statement     | Yes                 | Yes                 |
| Michigan       | 19                         | Strategic Plan        | Yes                 | No                  |
| Minnesota      | 11                         | Strategic Plan        | No                  | No                  |
| Nebraska       | 11                         | Strategic Plan        | No                  | Yes                 |
| Wisconsin      | 6                          | Strategic Plan        | No                  | No                  |
| Purdue         | 8                          | Strategic Plan        | Yes                 | No                  |
| <b>Overall</b> | <b>192</b><br><b>Words</b> | <b>Strategic Plan</b> | <b>5/13 Schools</b> | <b>3/13 Schools</b> |

**Factors Potentially Influencing Verbiage**

To identify any similarities and/or differences between the universities with their different amounts of environmental verbiage I created two different charts. The charts can be found below under Table 7.0: “SEC Influential Factors” and Table 8.0: “Big 10 Influential Factors.” The primary factors I am interested in, which are included in the chart, are “Geographic Location,” “Top Academic Program/Existence of Environmental Program,” “Campus Racial and Gender Demographics,” and “State, City, and Campus Political Affiliation.” To better understand the general geographic location and natural environment of a university I used the U.S. Census Bureau. I used the website “US News Best Colleges,” to identify a school’s “Top Academic Program(s).” I went to each university’s individual website to see if a well-regarded environmental-related major or program existed. To get a better understanding of a universities’ “Racial and Gender” demographics I used “US News Best Colleges” once again. To identify the

“State, City, and Campus Political Affiliation” I referenced the website “Best Neighborhood” website. To better understand a campus political climate I referenced the website “Niche.” This is because universities do not often publish their racial and gender demographics on their websites. I acknowledge that “Better Neighborhoods” and “Niche” may not be 100% accurate, but I believe that they are both able to help fill this gap effectively enough. Due to time constraints, I am only including the political affiliation of the city the university is in and that city’s primary industry for the three or four highest and lowest scoring universities. A limitation of this research is the inability to know exactly who a university’s top donors are and what the donor’s political affiliation is, as well as age averages of campuses.

**Table 7.0 SEC Influential Factors (Lowest Verbiage of both Conferences)**

| <b>Universities</b> | <b>Geographic Highlights</b>  | <b>Highly ranked academic program/environmental program</b>     | <b>Racial and Gender Demographics</b>     | <b>Top 2 Political Affiliation (State/Campus)</b>     |
|---------------------|---|---|---|---|
| <b>Alabama-0</b>    | -City 100k<br>-On the Black Warrior River<br>-hurricanes, erosion   | Architecture<br>Business<br>Nursing<br>Veterinary Medicine      | 57% F<br>43% M<br>23% Minority Enrollment | State: R<br>Tuscaloosa: R<br>Campus: Conservative 31% |
| <b>Arkansas-0</b>   | -City 100k<br>-Near Ozark National Forest and Buffalo National River  | Supply Chain Management/Logistics<br>Engineering<br>Nursing     | 56% F<br>44% M<br>26% Minority Enrollment | State: R<br>Fayetteville: R<br>Campus: Moderate       |
| <b>SC-0</b>         | -City 140k<br>-Midland's region   | International Business<br>Nursing                               | 55% F<br>45% M<br>26% Minority Enrollment | State: R<br>Columbia: Split<br>Campus: Moderate 36%   |
| <b>Tennessee-0</b>  | -City 190k<br>-In Great Appalachian Valley<br>-Tennessee River<br>-Near Great Smoky Mountains National Park | Logistics<br>Social work<br>Education<br>Physical therapy       | 54% F<br>46% M<br>21% Minority Enrollment | State: R<br>Knoxville: R<br>Campus: Moderate 35%      |
| <b>Florida-1</b>    | -City 140k<br>-Urban tree canopy covers 47% of land area<br>-Sea rise/hurricanes<br>-Toxic ponds            | Biological/Agricultural<br>Accounting<br>Nursing<br>Engineering | 56% F<br>44% M<br>49% Minority Enrollment | State: R<br>Campus: Liberal 30%/Moderate 30%          |
| <b>Georgia-1</b>    | -Mid-sized city 120k  | Insurance<br>Real Estate<br>Engineering                         | 58% F<br>42% M<br>32% Minority            | State: D<br>Campus: Moderate 32%                      |
| <b>Mizzou-1</b>     | -City 130k<br>-Missouri River<br>-Prairie region  | Nursing<br>Engineering  | 54% F<br>46% M<br>21% Minority Enrollment | State: R<br>Campus: Moderate 29%                      |

|                           |   |   |  |  |
|---------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| <b>MS State-1</b>         | -Rural city 25k<br>-lowland plains  | College of<br>Veterinary Medicine<br>Engineering  | 50% F<br>50% M<br>27% Minority<br>Enrollment     | State: R<br>Campus: Moderate<br>26%  |
| <b>Ole Miss-2</b>         | -Small City<br>30K<br>-Urban/rural<br>-lowland plains<br>-<br>Tornadoes/flooding                        | Pharmacy<br>Accounting  | 58% F<br>42% M<br>22% Minority<br>Enrollment     | State: R<br>Campus: Conservative<br>28%<br>Very conservative<br>16%                          |
| <b>Texas-2</b>            | -City urban<br>120k<br>-2021 freeze<br>-sea levels<br>-hurricanes                                       | Biological/Agricultural<br>engineering<br>Petroleum<br>engineering<br>Management<br>Nursing | 47% F<br>53% M<br>43% Minority<br>Enrollment     | State: R<br>Campus: Conservative<br>49%  |
| <b>Auburn-4</b>           | -City 77k<br>-Coastal plain,<br>pledmont<br>plateau,<br>Chewacla State<br>Park (V diverse<br>geography) | Nursing<br>Engineering  | 49% F<br>51% M<br>18% Minority<br>Enrollment     | State: R<br>Auburn: R<br>Campus: Conservative<br>32%<br>Very conservative<br>16%             |
| <b>Kentucky-6</b>         | -City 330k<br>-Bluegrass<br>Country<br>-Edge of the<br>Cumberland<br>Gap<br>-KY River                   | Nursing<br>Agriculture  | 57% F<br>43% M<br>25% Minority<br>Enrollment     | State: R<br>Lexington: D<br>Campus: Moderate<br>31%  |
| <b>Louisiana -<br/>17</b> | -Urban city<br>230k<br>-Near the MS<br>River<br>-Campus in<br>NOLA<br>-Sea level rise                   | Engineering<br>(Petroleum)<br>Accounting<br>Architecture                                    | 55% F<br>45% M<br>34% Minority<br>Enrollment     | State: R<br>Baton Rouge: R<br>Campus: Moderate<br>29%  |
| <b>SEC<br/>Results:</b>   |   |   | <b>10/13 higher<br/>% of female<br/>students</b> | <b>State: 12/13 R<br/>Campus: 7/13<br/>Moderate<br/>Conservative: 5/13<br/>Liberal: 1/13</b> |

**Table 8.0 Big 10 Influential Factors (Highest Verbiage of both Conferences)**

| <b>Universities</b>         | <b>Geographic Location</b>   | <b>Academic Program Strength</b>               | <b>Racial and Gender Demographics</b>     | <b>Political Affiliation</b>                  |
|-----------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| <b>Iowa-1</b>               | -City 75k<br>Urban/rural<br>-Agriculture pollution   | Medicine<br>Literature                         | 56% F<br>44% M<br>26% Minority Enrollment | State: R<br>Iowa City: D<br>Campus: Liberal   |
| <b>Ohio State-2</b>         | -City 787k   | Medicine<br>Nursing<br>Finance                 | 50% F<br>50% M<br>35% Minority Enrollment | State: R<br>Columbus: R<br>Campus: Liberal    |
| <b>Indiana University-3</b> | -City 80k<br>- “Gateway to Scenic Southern Indiana”  | Music<br>Business<br>Computer technology       | 50% F<br>50% M<br>31% Minority Enrollment | State: R<br>Bloomington: D<br>Campus: Liberal |
| <b>Illinois-3</b>           | -City 90k<br>-Urban suburban<br>-Nutrient pollution<br>-Lots of farming                    | Engineering                                    | 46% F<br>54% M<br>60% Minority Enrollment | State: D<br>Campaign: D<br>Campus: Liberal    |
| <b>Wisconsin-6</b>          | -City 270k<br>-Urban<br>-Threatening crops and bodies of water                             | Medicine<br>Engineering<br>Nursing<br>Business | 53% F<br>47% M<br>34% Minority Enrollment | State: D<br>Campus:<br>Liberal/progressive    |
| <b>Purdue-8</b>             | -City 45k<br>-Suburban<br>-Urban suburban  | Engineering                                    | 43% F<br>57% M<br>38% Minority Enrollment | State: R<br>Campus: Moderate                  |
| <b>Maryland-9</b>           | -City 35k<br>-Suburban<br>-Sea level rise, Eutrophication in Chesapeake Bay<br>-Hurricanes | Computer Science<br>Biology                    | 49% F<br>51% M<br>55% Minority Enrollment | State: D<br>Campus: Liberal                   |
| <b>Minnesota-11</b>         | -City 430k<br>-Urban<br>-Losing ice cover on lakes   | Engineering<br>Business                        | 55% F<br>45% M<br>37% Minority Enrollment | State: D<br>Campus: Liberal                   |

|                          |   |  |   |  |
|--------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| <b>Nebraska-11</b>       | -City 291k<br>-Urban<br>-Water contamination            | Engineering<br>Business<br>Nursing                       | 50% F<br>50% M<br>24% Minority Enrollment | State: R<br>Campus: Moderate                                     |
| <b>Michigan-19</b>       | -City 24k<br>-Urban suburban<br>-The Great Lakes        | Engineering<br>Nursing<br>Computer science               | 51% F<br>49% M<br>47% Minority Enrollment | State: D<br>Ann Arbor: D<br>Campus: Liberal/progressive          |
| <b>Rutgers-24</b>        | -City 760k<br>-Central NJ<br>-Near NYC and Philadelphia | Computer science<br>Psychology                           | 50% F<br>50% M<br>66% Minority Enrollment | State: D<br>New Brunswick: D<br>Campus: Liberal                  |
| <b>Michigan State-42</b> | -City 48k<br>-Flint water crisis, Lake Michigan         | Agriculture and Natural Studies<br>Nursing<br>Biological | 52% F<br>48% M<br>32% Minority Enrollment | State: D<br>Lansing: D<br>Campus: Liberal                        |
| <b>Penn State-53</b>     | -Mid-Atlantic region<br>-Small city 10k<br>-Rural       | Engineering<br>Environmental Science                     | 47% F<br>53% M<br>35% Minority Enrollment | State: D<br>State College: D<br>Campus: Liberal                  |
| <b>Big 10 Results:</b>   |   |  | <b>5/13 higher % of female students</b>   | <b>State: 8/13 D<br/>Campus: 11/13 Liberal<br/>2/13 Moderate</b> |

## Interpretation of the Data

### High Ranking Universities

To compare the universities I decided to focus on the four highest scoring universities in the Big 10 conference because as a whole they had significantly more environmental verbiage than the SEC. I then pulled the four lowest scoring universities from the SEC because the SEC did not have the high numbers in terms of environmental verbiage as the Big 10 did. I then compared the four highest scoring schools in the Big 10 to the four lowest scoring universities in the SEC. There were some commonalities among the four universities in the Big 10 that scored the highest. Penn State (53), Michigan State University (42), Rutgers University (28), and the University of Michigan (19) are all very liberal-leaning. All four of these high-value universities



are situated in a state that is Democratic, where the city tends to vote Democratic, and all four of the campuses have a more liberal leaning campus environment. All four of these campuses do offer some environmental related major (e.g., Michigan State University offers Agriculture and Natural Studies). However, having an environmentally related program or major was a common trend among all schools including the ones in the SEC that scored zero (e.g., University of Tennessee Environmental Engineering degree). In the SEC the program/major, therefore, did not play a significant role in the appearance of language. This is possibly due to the fact that their environmental programs are not necessarily the highest regarded. All four of these universities that ranked highest vary in city population size and whether they are urban, suburban, or rural. They are also all in different Northern/East Coast States. In Michigan the primary industry is tourism and farming (Sawe, 2019). However, in 2022 the University of Michigan reported that Michigan is actually being viewed as “as a place less at risk to harmful climate change impacts than many other states around the country” (“Climate change,” 2022). While Michigan is unlikely to see the biggest immediate impacts of climate change in the United States, they still have the fourth highest amount of environmental language out of 26 universities. Note, however, that Michigan is situated near the Great Lakes, which may be a source of local environmental pride. In any case, my research supports the claim that one of the most important variables that possibly influences environmental verbiage tendencies concerns politics. Politics and political affiliation seem to play one of the biggest roles in the decision to acknowledge climate change and to make environmental goals. It is important to note that while studies have shown that women are more likely to worry about climate change that this finding did not reflect in this particular study (“Racial/ethnic,” 2020). Big 10 universities on average had a higher percentage

of male dominant universities than the SEC universities and the Big 10 still had significantly more environmental verbiage despite having lower amounts of female students.

### **Low Ranking Universities**

Overall, the SEC had much a lower amount of environmental verbiage. The University of Alabama (0), the University of Arkansas (0), the University of South Carolina (0), and the University of Tennessee (0) did not include any environmental verbiage. All four of these universities reside in Republican voting states. Their respective cities, other than Columbia, SC which is pretty split, are all Republican-voting. Niche reported that the University of Alabama and the University of Arkansas are predominantly Republican and that the University of South Carolina and the University of Tennessee are 35% Moderate, while the rest is split between other political parties (“Find,” 2023). All four of the universities also have environmental degree programs, though these programs are not necessarily highly regarded. For example, the University of South Carolina offers a program entitled “Study of Earth, Ocean and Environment” and the University of Tennessee offers Environmental Studies. South Carolina and Alabama, being coastal states, face erosion, sea-level rise, and intensified hurricanes (“World Economic Forum,” 2019). Arkansas has the famous Hot Spring and Tennessee is home to the Great Smokey Mountain National Park, which is threatened by climate change (“U.S. Department of the Interior,” 2023). However, despite all four universities having deep connections to the environment, those factors appear insufficient to motivate the inclusion of clear and distinct environmental language on areas frequented areas on their website. Ultimately, I can only speculate as to why some universities rank high and others rank low (e.g. blue or red, academic science programs of renown, location impacted by climate impacts, etc.). Still, it seems

reasonable to conclude that the way the state, the city, and the college students vote most strongly influences the verbiage decisions universities make.

### **Relevance for Policy**

All the universities in this study are categorized as R1 Research Institutions. As previously mentioned, these are the universities that grant at least 20 research/scholarship doctoral degrees and spend a minimum of \$5 million on research annually. All of these universities are leaders and the work they do with students can lead to future advancements in a multitude of different educational fields. All of these universities are doing research that at the very least indirectly relates to climate change, but not all of them are proudly and publicly advertising it. To the contrary, with the exception of some university strategic plans, many SEC universities minimize environmental language. Only 6 out of 26 schools even slightly, for example, referenced the environment in their mission statement. These mission statements represent the foundational goals for the university and their students. Universities can make strategic plans, but until they actually include the environment in their mission statement it is unclear if they will ever achieve the goals. Ultimately, university mission statements are the only partially binding articles that can hold universities accountable (“AACSB,” 2023).

## **Chapter 6: Policy Recommendations**

### **Depoliticize Climate Change**

One of the most significant social barriers that may stand in the way of university decisions is the politicizing of climate change science. Overall, my study suggests that politics plays the largest role in predicting environmental language usage. Many of these R1 Research Institutions have some of the top science programs in the country, and these universities should be leaning into these programs in order to make educated decisions regarding the climate crisis. Although this is undoubtedly a complicated issue, I believe that one important first step towards depoliticizing climate change is finding common ground. All people want the same basic necessities: clean water, clean air, nutritious food, efficient transportation, homeland security, and energy. According to *The New York Times*, all these different aspects that Americans cherish will be threatened by climate change (Flavelle, 2021). Universities need to be actively using their resources and their connections to help people understand what the term climate change encompasses. Climate change does not discriminate based on a person's political affiliation (though it may disproportionately affect those with less means), which is why it is so important to actively educate students on this issue which has become a major point of political debate.

### **Strategic Plan Accountability**

The next step is to encourage all universities to discuss a climate change strategy within their strategic plan. For example, Michigan State University's strategic plan clearly explains that one of their goals is to reduce their overall greenhouse gas emissions by 50% ("Michigan State, 2022"). They also update the general public on their emission reduction progress. I would encourage these universities to include the phrase 'climate change,' but to also consider using the

phrase in their mission statement. I believe that if universities start to use this language, regardless of their state's political affiliation, this could make a real difference when it comes to depoliticizing the topic. The next goal is to have the United States Department of Education create a national organization that evaluates the progress universities are making based on their strategic plan, much like the AACSB does with mission statements and accreditation. This would hold the strategic plan to the same standard as mission statements. Government funding should be awarded to universities that are committed to actively working towards completing their strategic plan goals. A university that has environmental language would be considered as "active" if they are actually making measurable progress towards becoming more sustainable. Universities would be required to show proof of the results, such as lowering their fossil fuel emissions, to the government entity that awarded the money. A study conducted by Hanover Research, an organization specializing in academy administration processes, stresses the importance of having "an actor responsible for monitoring" a universities strategic plan ("Southern University," 2014, p. 5). Hanover Research recommends having this person be someone from within the institution, but I believe that in order to avoid any biases, an outside organization needs to be formed to monitor the university's mission statements.

### **International Universities**

Universities across the European Union, the United Kingdom, and China have taken steps to form international alliances that are committed to fighting climate change. The University of Birmingham, located in the UK, and the Southeast University, in China, "have joined forces to lead the establishment of a global alliance of universities aiming to boost their contribution to fighting climate change" ("University of Birmingham," 2022 ). It is called the World Alliance of Universities on Carbon Neutrality (WAUCN), and this partnership has united 15 of the top

universities in China as well as 13 global universities (2022). Another example of universities fighting to reduce their emissions can be found in the UK. As of 2022, 140 universities had reportedly backed a set of climate commitments developed by Universities UK which outlines university reduction targets and supports the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Accord (“Universities,” 2022). These alliances are incentivizing universities to hold one another accountable, and it creates a continuous open dialogue between universities which allows them to share ideas. It is clear that the language universities use does matter because the commitments they make, assuming a third-party arbiter like the AACSB, will dictate whether they choose to take climate action or not. Universities in the United States should be incentivized by the United States government to join global alliances that contribute to fighting climate change. I think that doing this can help depoliticize the topic of climate change by showing people that the rest of the world is in support of decreasing global emissions. On top of the incentives to join a global alliance and believe that there should be additional accreditations and financial support for diverting away from fossil fuels. Financial incentives are imperative because, as my study revealed, universities are not likely to just decide to lower their emissions, particularly if universities lean Republican.

### **Limitations of the Analysis**

While conducting this research and the content analysis I have identified several shortcomings that may have potentially skewed the results. Part of my research was interested in what factors play a role in a university deciding to acknowledge or to ignore climate change. I have found that factors such as geography and student political affiliation do play a role, but I also believe that major donors can also influence university decisions. An article from the *New York Times* revealed that, at George Mason University, multiple wealthy donors such as the

Charles Koch Foundation, a conservative-leaning organization, had been donating money with strings attached (Green and Saul, 2018). It is not uncommon for big money donors to have an influence over classes that are taught, the professors that are hired, and even the students that are admitted, though I cannot discuss this further. This is a potential limitation to my research because it is difficult to uncover which donors have the most say. Identifying influential donors is also extremely tasking because some universities would never want the general public to know that their decisions on education and university policy were constrained by the partial values of their top donors. Due to time constraints I was unable to hold any interviews with university officials in order to dive further into this sector, though future research on this may help deepen our understanding of the factors influencing university environmental language.

Another potential limitation to this thesis is that the data collection and analysis was conducted by three university students. While we were able to achieve the same findings, future research could achieve more robust results by recruiting a larger sample of coders to review official university statements. I was also unable to code for every single environmental related term, so I had to focus on the words that I felt were the most likely to be used and/or the most important. Given this, there is the possibility that certain terms or phrases may not have been accounted for in some university statements.

It is also difficult to know the exact political affiliation on a university campus. Having lived in Illinois, where the Big 10 is popular, and currently attending an SEC school, I feel like I have a fairly accurate idea of what a universities political climate would look like, though I realize there are potential limitations with these anecdotal intuitions. I relied on the website Niche to help get an idea of the university's political climate, although I acknowledge that it may

not have been the most accurate source. Universities may not state the percentage of Republicans vs. Democrats on campus because it could deter certain students from attending the university.

### **Feasibility of Prescriptions**

As is obvious, it will be very difficult to depoliticize climate change due to the tense political climate in the United States. Ultimately, every effort to gain climate change supporters will be deemed to be a political move. It will also be difficult to monitor the environmental progress universities are making. Finding the government funding to award to universities will also be a potential issue as not all political leaders will be willing to support the idea. For instance, a congressperson, who represents a predominantly Republican area, may not want to support the creation of a program that supports the environment if the support is perceived to be politically motivated. This may be seen as an unfavorable move by their constituents if they do not believe climate change is a major issue. Another potential issue is that universities may just eliminate their climate language or put it in a different, less visible document if strategic plans were suddenly to be monitored. Even if this is the case, advocates would be able to identify universities that had suddenly changed their language, so this prescription would at least have the utility of making it more transparent to the public which universities are environmental allies. Even if this is not convincing, however, I argue that it is still important to enforce the strategic plans regardless of what a university decides to do. If a university does decide to remove the language from their strategic plan, if it is already there, this clearly suggests they do not want to actually follow through with their promise to the environment.



## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

Universities are viewed as an integral part of society across the United States, and they often serve as catalysts for change. The language that these institutions choose to use matters in this process. Yet the extreme differences between the amount of environmental language used by R1 Research Institutions in the North vs. the South are concerning. Today universities across the country should be setting precedent by rising to the challenge and uniting students against prominent issues such as climate change. While universities in the Big 10 may have more environmental language, this thesis suggests that it is still predominantly found in their strategic plan section. This often makes the environmental language difficult to find because university strategic plans are not promoted to the public as much as statements like mission statements are and are much less set in stone. This finding also means that universities are not required to actually fulfill the environmental promises they make. By contrast with strategic plans, many regional and specialized accreditation associations require that colleges and universities have mission statements that communicate their commitments to the public. There is power in the language. As stated previously associations such as the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the Association of MBAs (AMBA), and the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) require colleges and universities to demonstrate the achievement or progress towards its mission. Thus, universities are very particular when it comes to what is included in their mission statement. My research has found that a majority of universities are placing their climate action plans within their strategic plan. Universities, as leaders in the production of knowledge, should be contributing to the depoliticization of climate change and

not adding to it. From this I argue that top ranked universities, R1 Research Institutions, should be setting the precedent moving forward by putting bold environmental verbiage in their mission statements. I also recommend creating new organizations that oversee universities' strategic plans to ensure that universities align with their plan in the same way that organizations oversee university mission statements. R1 Research Institutions, specifically in the Big 10 and the SEC, have the opportunity to be on the right side of history by publicly acknowledging climate change and by creating a plan of their own to reduce fossil fuel emissions. As our world changes, our universities and colleges also need to change. In order to keep official university statements relevant, higher education official statements must accurately depict and acknowledge current issues, such as climate change, that students will most definitely face in the future, if they are not already. In the end, younger generations will be left to face the harshest impacts of climate change and so top universities are doing students a disservice by failing to acknowledge climate change.

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