Faculty input sought for new climate and sustainability school

Following deliberations by a Blueprint Advisory Committee in the fall, leaders are seeking faculty input on proposals for the new school's structure, composition and areas of focus.

BY AMY ADAMS

Emails are out inviting a representative sample of Stanford faculty to provide feedback on issues relating to the new school focused on climate and sustainability. Those faculty will have an opportunity to discuss the school in depth, ask questions of a panel and provide feedback that will guide decision-makers.

The school, announced by Stanford President Marc Tessier-Lavigne in May, arose as part of the Long-Range Vision as a way of focusing Stanford research and education on urgent issues facing the planet. Throughout the fall, a Blueprint Advisory Committee composed of faculty from all seven schools and many institutes met to discuss organization for the new school. In December, that group submitted reports describing options for the school's academic structure, educational programs, cross-cutting themes and engagement opportunities. In parallel, a Sustainability Task Force composed of Stanford alumni and external thought leaders has been discussing how the school can become a leader in climate and sustainability education, scholarship and solutions.

Now, Kathryn “Kam” Moler, Vice Provost and Dean of Research, and Stephan Graham, the Chester Naramore Dean of the School of Earth, Energy, and Environmental Sciences, who are leading the effort, are seeking feedback from a broader sample of Stanford faculty. Those participants will discuss topics including how faculty will join the new school, whether the new school should consider engagement efforts as part of the tenure process and whether the school should include the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment and the Precourt Institute for Energy.
“We want to know what faculty think and feel to advise our decision-making,” Moler said. “We can try to answer those questions based on individual conversations, meetings and Town Halls. But I’m not sure that we’re getting a representative group with that, and also I’ve discovered that people’s opinions often evolve after discussion – especially informed, thoughtful discussion.”

To gather informed feedback, the group is employing a process called Deliberative Polling developed by James Fishkin (https://profiles.stanford.edu/james-fishkin), professor of communication and Director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy (http://cdd.stanford.edu/). Fishkin developed the technique as a way of gathering informed opinions from a representative sample of people.

“The process involves enabling populations to think in-depth about an issue beyond just the soundbites,” Fishkin said. “We want to know what people would really think if they engaged with each other about the strongest argument on either side.” The process has been used 110 times in 30 countries, but until now never with faculty.

“The Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford has developed techniques for having those conversations at events around the world, and we thought it would be helpful to apply their methods here at home,” Moler said.

In deliberative polling, participants read prepared materials that detail the pros and cons of a set of decisions. Participants then meet in small, moderated groups to discuss each issue and draw up questions for a balanced panel of people who are for and against different outcomes. Fishkin’s group then captures changes in attitudes through polls administered before and after the discussions. In this case, the role of moderator will be played by a crowdsourcing platform developed by Ashish Goel (https://profiles.stanford.edu/ashish-goel), professor of management science and engineering.

For the process to work, participants have to be representative of the population being sampled. At Stanford, that means faculty from every school, with or without a connection to sustainability research or education. Participants will meet for two three-hour sessions to be held on Jan. 30 and 31.

It’s a significant time commitment, but one Mark Horowitz (https://profiles.stanford.edu/mark-horowitz), professor of computer science and of electrical engineering, thinks invited faculty will find both fun and satisfying. Horowitz doesn’t engage in sustainability research but has been serving on the

Blueprint Advisory Committee.

“It’s fun to meet people from different areas and learn how they think,” Horowitz said. “My faculty colleagues are an amazing group of people. On the occasions when interdisciplinary groups form I learn a lot and I prosper from those introductions.”
Beyond being enjoyable to discuss challenging issues with colleagues, many faculty care deeply about sustainability even if it isn't a primary focus of their research, Horowitz said. Providing thoughtful opinions on thorny issues about the new school's structure is one way of helping the planet and the people on it. “Especially in the world we live in now, it's beneficial that people get together and chat about tradeoffs in big decisions like those facing us in forming the new school,” he said.

In recognition of the time commitment, particularly for younger faculty with children, Moler and Graham are planning additional outreach for how they can support those faculty and encourage their participation.

Moler said invitations went to faculty who do work related to sustainability and who are likely to interface with the new school, and to additional faculty from all seven schools. She hopes to have at least 200 participants but will accept more depending on how many people respond to the invitations.

After the meeting, briefing materials including pros and cons of the questions discussed will be posted on the new school’s website (https://sustainabilityinitiative.stanford.edu/), along with a report on findings from the meeting. A second event later in the winter will gather opinions from students. The Blueprint Advisory Committee will integrate the feedback from both events into options that they present to decision-makers including the faculty senate, the executive cabinet, president, provost and Board of Trustees.

Moler expects to present a final proposal for the school – representing the culmination of more than four years of work and the investment of more than 100 faculty, plus the original ideas of more than 200 faculty, staff and students – to the board of trustees in spring. If the board approves, the school could begin offering programming in the next academic year.

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Moler is also professor of physics and of applied physics. Graham is also a professor of geological sciences. Horowitz is also Yahoo! Founders Professor in the School of Engineering and a member of Stanford Bio-X (https://biox.stanford.edu/), Precourt Institute for Energy (https://energy.stanford.edu/) and the Wu Tsai Neurosciences Institute (https://neuroscience.stanford.edu/). Fishkin is also the Janet M. Peck Professor of International Communication and an affiliate of the Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (https://hai.stanford.edu/).

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