

How Spelman College Turned Food Waste into a Campus-Wide Climate Solution

Summary

How does a college build a composting program with almost zero contamination? In this conversation, Ilesha Baldwin, Spelman College's first Sustainability Coordinator, joins host and Spelman alumna Eriqah Vincent to talk about the history of the Sustainable Spelman initiative, the college's Climate Action Plan, its approach to energy-efficient building retrofits, and how a back-of-house composting model has helped Spelman divert hundreds of thousands of pounds of food waste from the landfill.

Key Takeaways

- Sustainable Spelman traces back to a speech by former president Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum around 2010, and has grown into a campus-wide initiative built on the idea that sustainability is foundational, not an afterthought.
- Spelman's Climate Action Plan, first developed around 2011–2012 and now being updated with support from Southface and Sustain Our Future, lays out how the college can reduce its carbon emissions and reach climate neutrality.
- Energy-efficiency retrofits are prioritized as part of larger capital projects rather than standalone efforts, and every new building is now constructed to LEED Gold standards, a legacy of a Spelman Board of Trustees resolution.
- Spelman's food waste and composting program, run in partnership with dining provider Bon Appétit and composting partner CompostNow, uses a back-of-house model that keeps contamination rates extremely low and has diverted more than 300,000 pounds of food waste from landfills since 2020.
- Ilesha's advice for sustainability staff at smaller, less-resourced institutions: build trust, get curious about what people are already working on, and tie sustainability to existing projects instead of introducing something new.

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Eriqah Vincent: Wonderful. Thank you all so much for being with us once again on this Georgia Climate Digest interview series for Drawdown Georgia. We are glad to be back with more interviews of climate and sustainability leaders in the state. I'm beyond honored and excited to bring you all our guest today, Ilesha Baldwin, the Sustainability Coordinator at Spelman College.

She's the first sustainability coordinator at the college. As many of you have probably heard me discuss before, I'm a Spelman woman — I'm a Spelman grad. Ilesha is also, so I'm excited to be here with my Spelman sister to talk more about sustainability at Spelman. Thank you so much,

Iesha, for being with us today to talk with us more about Spelman's sustainability initiatives. I'm really excited to chat with you about it.

Iesha Baldwin: Thank you so much, Eriqah, for having me, and this is a great way to launch 2026, so I'm super excited about this interview.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely, absolutely. So Iesha, if you could introduce yourself first and foremost to our audience, and tell us about the work you do generally at Spelman, and where your purview falls at the college.

Iesha Baldwin: Yes, so I am Iesha, and as Eriqah mentioned, I'm the first Sustainability Coordinator at Spelman. What that means for our institution is that we've allocated resources to accelerate sustainability on our campus. I work really closely with our facilities team, helping with building improvements, energy efficiency, water conservation, and so on.

Then there's the other side of sustainability that's really near and dear to my heart, and I know Eriqah's as well — the community engagement side of sustainability. That's the side where we're engaging across campus, within different departments, and with our alumnae and people connected to Spelman in different ways. That looks like events, conversations like this, and different programming that really makes more people in our community feel that they're a part of sustainability.

Eriqah Vincent: Fantastic, thank you. When I was a student at Spelman — I graduated in 2010 — the Sustainable Spelman initiative was new-ish at that time. I remember it launching as I was becoming a student involved in environmental sustainability, both on campus and in the Atlanta University Center in general. So could you let us know, and our audience know, how did the Sustainable Spelman initiative begin at the college? And in that beginning, obviously there were going to be challenges — what were the challenges that had to be overcome to make Sustainable Spelman a reality and make it a focus for the institution?

Iesha Baldwin: Yes. I wasn't there, but from what I hear, Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, who was president at the time, was the one who really put the seed in the ground around sustainability being a concept Spelman could grow into. In one of her convocation addresses, she talked about sustainability and environmental awareness, and how every Spelman student, staff member, and faculty member has a place in sustainability. That was part of her message of "a choice to change the world" — we all need to play a part in making our world more environmentally friendly.

She gave that speech years ago, around 2010, as you mentioned, and from there they started the Sustainable Spelman Initiative. Over the years we've had Sustainable Spelman interns, students, faculty, and staff who've put so much time and dedication into making sure sustainability is present on our campus. I'm not sure of the exact challenges they faced while building Sustainable Spelman, but I'll say — if you have the support of your president —

Eriqah Vincent: Right.

Iesha Baldwin: — the president leading that charge is incredibly powerful. Over the years, some of the challenges we've had is helping people see themselves in sustainability. What does sustainability look like within community engagement? What does it look like in the arts? What does it look like in computer science? That's one of the challenges we've had at Spelman. We're now at a point where we're moving that needle forward, having more people across campus feel

comfortable being a part of Sustainable Spelman, not just seeing what Sustainable Spelman does.

Eriqah Vincent: Right, yes — shout-out to Art Frazier, who's been at Spelman for many years as the Facilities Director, and was championing Sustainable Spelman long before, from the very beginning when Dr. Tatum first started talking about it. She did start talking about it while I was there, between 2006 and 2010. That was a huge part of her platform, and she talked about it all the time. So we've talked about the past — tell us more about what Spelman is focusing on right now, specifically in terms of climate-related work. What initiatives is Sustainable Spelman currently working on?

Ilesha Baldwin: Yeah, so we're at a point now where we're able to focus on what the future of sustainability at Spelman looks like, and thankfully we've had really great partners helping us figure that out. There have been reports — I know UNCF worked on one — to visualize what HBCU leadership looks like in climate action. Building on that momentum, we're ready to see what could be done in the future for sustainability at Spelman.

We've launched some really cool pilots within the past year. One is the Building Improvement Toolkit, in partnership with Southface and Sustain Our Future. That's an amazing initiative that will help us as a campus make building improvements around energy efficiency, but it also serves as a way to train our students in the built environment — what does a career in the built environment look like, what does a green career look like? We had our launch party yesterday, and this semester we're really taking that on, having students walk around our buildings to see what improvements can be made, and learning more about energy efficiency, water conservation, and storytelling — because we all know we need storytellers, since a lot of us work with data that most people can't digest, or don't have the desire to digest. Who wants to look at numbers all day?

So that's one initiative, the Building Improvement Toolkit. Then there's our food waste and composting initiative, which has been happening for the past several years — I believe that one started around 2020, if not a little before. With the Food Waste Initiative, we're reducing our food waste, but we're also composting the food waste we can't reduce, and figuring out how to get students more involved in that initiative as well.

That work has been largely invisible to students and faculty, because it sits within facilities. But we want people to be more aware of what's been going on on campus and in the community, and our overall impact on agriculture, growing, farmers, and small gardeners within the state of Georgia and throughout the Southeast — because that food waste gets turned into compost, and it's local compost. Organizations don't have to go out and get compost from who knows where. It's local, and it helps with the overall environment.

With our food waste and composting initiative, we partner with — it's been a process, and a lot of it has been invisible to our students and our overall community, because it sits a lot within operations. But even our choice to partner with Bon Appétit as our food service provider was a decision we made as an institution that has made it significantly easier to reduce our food waste and to compost. They're a great partner — they also cater our events, and the food left over afterward gets taken to the compost bin. Those invisible processes are already there, we just don't see them because they're doing the operational work, but they're a really great partner, and we have conversations about how we can improve and reduce our food waste at Spelman. They're spearheading those conversations too.

So when your ecosystem cares about food waste, cares about climate action, cares about making sure food doesn't go to the landfill and instead gets composted so we can give that compost to local gardeners and farmers — that's a process Spelman leadership has put time and effort into building. Now we're at a stage where we can fully communicate that to our community and let them know: this started years ago, but we're here, and from here we can keep growing, keep building, and get people excited, because we've made a lot of progress around sustainability and climate action. Now we're at a time where we can actually have a zero food waste event.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah.

Ilesha Baldwin: And within those events, have conversations about what the future of sustainability at Spelman looks like.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah, thank you for that answer. I remember when we first started having conversations with Spelman — after I graduated, I started working in campus sustainability at a nonprofit, and I remember those early conversations with Spelman about the operations side of sustainability. Spelman switched food service providers in order to be more sustainable. I don't claim to know all the reasons why it was switched, but I do know one of the attractive points was that the new provider would be more receptive to sustainable food systems — students were demanding not only healthier choices, like vegetarian or vegan options, but also wanted to know where the food was coming from and where the food waste was going once they finished. Because when you're thinking about feeding — I don't claim to know the ins and outs of college operations, but Spelman is a small liberal arts institution, so I can only imagine what the bigger colleges and universities are doing when it comes to food waste, food service, and sustainable food service. It's a dance. I'm really glad to hear those systems are continuing, because I remember those conversations over a decade ago, across the Atlanta University Center, about what sustainable food systems look like, what our food service provider could do, and what they couldn't.

Ilesha Baldwin: Mm-hmm.

Eriqah Vincent: I do know that was one of the attractive points of switching providers — the next one needed to be more receptive to that idea, and it was a new idea at the time, across the food service industry. The providers were just catching up themselves. When students came to them asking for this, they were saying, "We haven't even figured out what that looks like." I was having a conversation with someone recently about farm-to-table — not just whether we can grow food on campus, but where food needs to come from in order to be up to code, thinking about health and safety and everything else. So thank you for highlighting that, because I can speak a bit more to the history, having been present when all that was happening, and it's really encouraging to hear it's flourishing now. Spelman students were very instrumental in demanding that happen on campus, and I think Spelman was a great example for some of the other smaller colleges and HBCUs that wanted to make that happen too.

Spelman was also one of the first HBCUs with a Climate Action Plan. I've been out of that world for some time, but I remember when each of us having a Climate Action Plan was a big deal, and Spelman was one of the first HBCUs to have one. Could you introduce our audience to what a Climate Action Plan is, if they're not aware, and talk about Spelman's Climate Action Plan and some of the other things — you touched a little on energy efficiency, and we talked about food

systems at length, but there's also solar, and a whole retrofit piece when it comes to buildings. Could you talk a bit about the Climate Action Plan at Spelman as well?

Ilesha Baldwin: Yeah, so our Climate Action Plan, which was developed under Dr. Tatum's presidency —

Eriqah Vincent: Mm-hmm.

Ilesha Baldwin: — around 2011, 2012, and we're updating it, hopefully this year, crossing our fingers, with the support of Southface, WSP, and Sustain Our Future. We're working on updating it this year, which is really exciting, because it's time. A Climate Action Plan is essentially a document created to show how an institution can reduce its carbon emissions, and what that overall looks like. As we mentioned before, a lot of the biggest wins within carbon emissions are on the facilities side — the built environment. There's a lot of emissions created through the built environment, construction, and operations in general. But all of that starts with behavior and culture, and the reason Spelman has had so many wins is because our Facilities Director cares about sustainability.

Eriqah Vincent: Right?

Ilesha Baldwin: Art Frazier cares about sustainability, and that's his mindset. So anytime we're talking about buildings, or discussing what the cafeteria composting system looks like, it's not a second thought — it's foundational.

Eriqah Vincent: Not an afterthought.

Ilesha Baldwin: Right, it's not an afterthought. That helps so much, because a lot of times we can spend so much time trying to convince people and lose out on sustainability progress because of that.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah.

Ilesha Baldwin: So our Climate Action Plan lays out how we can, as an institution, reduce our carbon emissions, what types of classes we can potentially teach to train the next leaders in climate leadership, and other things as well. It goes into great detail about what it looks like for Spelman to reach our goal of climate neutrality.

Eriqah Vincent: Thank you so much for that, because I know all those terms can get confusing if you're not deeply seated in academia and the facilities side of it. I know people have questions around that, so thank you. Let's take a bit of a deeper dive into the sustainability initiatives around energy efficiency — I'd love to dig more into those pieces, especially for folks in academia thinking about how their school is becoming more sustainable. I also want to hear more from you about the student engagement piece. I think that's really important — you already talked about how students get involved in the built environment piece. I know Spelman's done a ton of work on building retrofits and new buildings — the Beverly Daniel Tatum Suites, for example. I stayed in those suites, I was one of the first people in my room — I loved the suites — and those suites were built with energy efficiency in mind. I believe they were built to LEED Gold standard, because of Dr. Tatum and her championing of sustainability. All the buildings on campus from then on are built to a certain standard because of her leadership. So when Ilesha says it's not an afterthought but foundational, she's absolutely right — it permeates everything when it comes to facilities, but it's also become deeply woven into how students approach

campus, with new academic subjects. We didn't have all the environmental subjects and sustainability majors and minors when I was there, so folks are really lucky to have that opportunity now.

I can talk about that all day, but I wanted to dig more into the energy efficiency piece. Just to reiterate — I remember when I was still working in campus sustainability, what a big deal it was that Spelman's Board of Trustees passed a resolution to build and retrofit all buildings from then forward to LEED Gold standard, if I'm not mistaken. That was a big deal — a big deal for a small liberal arts college, a big deal for a college in the South, a big deal for HBCUs. When that passed, I think there were articles written about it — it was a very big deal. So when it comes to the retrofit piece, how are you all deciding which buildings to retrofit, and are there any metrics or screening tools you're using? Could you tell us more about that?

Ilesha Baldwin: Yeah, I love the history you just gave. I also want to add one more thing — it's a mindset piece, and the teamwork aspect of all of this with energy efficiency. Art — I keep bringing him up because he's the man when it comes to all of this —

Eriqah Vincent: He really is.

Ilesha Baldwin: — loves to say that the building is just part of it. How we build is just part of it. How we live and operate within these buildings is the other half. If we're not living to a certain standard, it defeats the purpose. When we talk about — I grew up as a student athlete, so I use those references when I talk about teamwork and what it actually takes to win. For Spelman to win in that space of having our buildings operate efficiently, reduce waste, be energy efficient, and conserve water, it takes everyone who steps into that building, who lives there, who has a meeting there, who does anything in that building, to have that mindset of, "When I leave, I'm going to turn off the lights."

Eriqah Vincent: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Ilesha Baldwin: We've all heard that from our grandparents — "You better make sure you turn off the lights, don't be wasting my energy." That's a mindset we're not necessarily bad at, but we can improve on as an institution — we all can, in general, as Americans, I feel like we take energy for granted.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah.

Ilesha Baldwin: And we can definitely improve on that, but it starts with more of a teamwork mindset. It takes a team to make sure a building is energy efficient — we can only do so much. We can put in the LED lights, but we're not living in those buildings.

Eriqah Vincent: Gotcha.

Ilesha Baldwin: So we need the students, staff, and faculty who live and work in those buildings to think that way too, and a lot of them do. I wanted to put that piece in there.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah, and quite a few of those retrofits have been dorms, which is a completely different conversation from academic buildings when it comes to retrofits and metrics — those are two different conversations. To your point, Ilesha, about whether you're living in the building or just there for class — those are two different conversations around retrofits. So, again, how

are you deciding which buildings to retrofit, and what screening tools are you using? I imagine retrofitting a dorm versus retrofitting the science center could look very different.

Ilesha Baldwin: Exactly. Because we're a higher-ed institution, but we're here to serve our students, and we want them to have the best experience, we know — because we graduated from Spelman — that the dorm conversation is important to students. I believe our leadership tries to prioritize that, making sure students have better living environments.

Eriqah Vincent: Right.

Ilesha Baldwin: So that's important to our leadership, and to us as well, so I believe it gets prioritized that way. Then, from the assessments, we have really good partners who do the assessments and bring that information back to our team so we can decide how to best move forward.

Eriqah Vincent: Great. So you talked about the right partners, working with Southface — we've interviewed Southface on this show, and many entities have used their audits. I don't know if that's what Spelman is using, but is there anything else you want to say about the energy assessment or audit you're running, and what organizations perform those? Is it Southface, or another organization you're using to run the assessments for the retrofit piece?

Ilesha Baldwin: Yes, so we went through a long process of finding partners for energy assessments. I know Siemens is one, and Walker-Miller is another.

Eriqah Vincent: Got it, great. So what I'm really interested in is the challenges and the peaks and valleys of this retrofit conversation, and the conversation around energy efficiency. What would you tell other campuses similar in size to Spelman, or with similar profiles — mistakes or surprises you wish you had anticipated? What would you tell other campuses about the built environment piece that might help them in their retrofit journey?

Ilesha Baldwin: Yeah, one of the things we try to do as an institution is make sure that when we have capital projects — big projects — we include the energy efficiency piece within that, and we try to stay away from smaller projects. There are a few reasons for that. One is just overall organization, making sure we know a building is going to still be there 20, 50 years from now.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely.

Ilesha Baldwin: We don't want to do a project and then, the next year, decide we're doing a new building or going in a different direction. I'd say working closely with facilities, if you're in a sustainability office, and being part of the team that handles capital projects, helps ensure that your energy efficiency project has a long lifecycle.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely, thank you for that, that's very helpful. Buildings are a totally different animal, because you have to have a conversation about whether it's a dorm or an academic building, and how it's being utilized. Dorms are obviously more utilized, because people are living in them all day, 24 hours a day, for about nine months depending on the school year.

Ilesha Baldwin: Mm-hmm.

Eriqah Vincent: Whereas academic buildings can somewhat shut down at a certain hour, or use less energy at certain times, based on time of day. I know there have been motion sensors and

other things implemented, not just at Spelman but at other institutions, to reduce energy so you don't have all the lights on all night in a building that's definitely not being used all night.

So let's switch gears and talk about food waste, because that's also something that touches people every day, all day long — specifically at certain hours, whether we're serving meals or dealing with a standing food situation like snacks that schools might have available all day. Do you know how you all first quantified food waste in dining operations, and what tools or methods you've used to measure it — not just how much was being wasted, but now how much is being saved?

Ilesha Baldwin: Mm-hmm, yeah. So during the time we had our previous food service provider, who cared less about food waste, I'm not sure if we measured it then. And if so, we weren't using CompostNow, which is our beloved partner in our Food Waste Initiative, because they're a really good partner in helping us turn our food waste into compost, and without them, we wouldn't be able to do that. We have a great food service provider, Bon Appétit, for whom food reduction is part of their values as a company, and being mindful of that. Because of that, they also train their staff on how to compost. Without those partnerships, it would be very difficult to do composting and reduce our food waste. Our partnership with CompostNow started around 2020, 2021, and because we have partners who care deeply about food waste and composting, they have tools to measure it. Bon Appétit has a tool to measure food waste, and we receive reports on food waste per month. For composting, it's the same — our composting partners measure the amount of food waste they receive from our institution, and the amount of compost created from it. They have their own methods for those calculations, but it's because of their leadership and their care about sustainability and climate action that we're able to make that happen as an institution.

Eriqah Vincent: Wonderful, great. We've had Bon Appétit for some time now — I remember when it changed over from the former food systems process. You may or may not be privy to this, but I want to know about operational changes in dining — menu planning, portion sizes, tray sizing. I remember when the trays were taken away, that was back in the day. Are you aware of which practices or changes in the serving system helped with the reduction of, maybe, water conservation too, if we're talking about trays and dishes, but also food waste? Is there anything you can speak to about what practices or operational changes have made the biggest dent in plate and kitchen waste?

Ilesha Baldwin: Yeah, Spelman students have cared about food waste for years, and because of that, they've advocated for different initiatives within the institution. I know one of them was the trays — and I know Maya, who now works at Spelman in our events office, was a part of that change.

Eriqah Vincent: I know Maya.

Ilesha Baldwin: Over the years, progress has been made — a couple of years ago, Spelman students advocated for reusable takeout trays, so they could take their food to their dorms instead of using disposable ones. That's another way we've been mindful about how we operate in the cafeteria, reducing the amount of disposable plates we use.

Eriqah Vincent: Right, right.

Ilesha Baldwin: That plays a role in the overall environmental sustainability thinking at our institution. Spelman students have been asking a lot about our composting and food waste

efforts — they want to see more of it, and by that I mean have it communicated better, so they're aware of what's going on. We're launching a comms initiative this semester, and we should see some interesting behavioral changes because of that, and get a sense of what else students want to see, since we're already composting — what other ideas are out there around food waste reduction. And because our campus food service provider, Bon Appétit, thinks in terms of waste reduction, I know they try to be mindful of that when they're serving too.

Eriqah Vincent: I was going to ask about the student piece — how is it being communicated to students, what the savings are? It's great that you're launching an initiative to be more forward-facing about that. So who handles the compost side of things, and how did it get started? Obviously you have Bon Appétit as the food service provider, and then you have CompostNow — who's your partner in getting the compost where it needs to go? How does that partnership work? I think our audience would be interested in that order of operations, if you don't mind.

Ilesha Baldwin: Right, and again, that's why I'd say sustainability is really a team sport — without our campus partners, we wouldn't be able to compost or reduce our food waste at the rate we are. What that looks like is: our Spelman team — facilities, operations — put our money where our mouth is and said, "We care about food waste, we want to reduce it, let's get composting bins." We also thought really hard about what composting should look like at Spelman, because we visited institutions with composting bins all throughout campus, but sometimes that doesn't work as efficiently — because then you get high contamination rates.

Eriqah Vincent: Right?

Ilesha Baldwin: So our team thought really hard about how we could ensure we're actually composting, how we could keep contamination rates low, and how we could train specific people to have that mindset around food waste reduction and composting. Because our food service provider is Bon Appétit, and they also care about environmental sustainability and food waste, we gave them compost bins so they can compost in the back of the cafeteria. That's where our composting bins live — in the back, which is why people sometimes ask, "Why aren't we composting?" when we actually are — it's just handled on the invisible side of campus.

Eriqah Vincent: Got it.

Ilesha Baldwin: And because of that, we have really low contamination rates, and pretty much everything we put into every bin that CompostNow picks up from Spelman is able to be turned into compost, because the contamination rate is so low. That process was created by a really good team of people who knew a lot about logistics but who also cared about composting.

Eriqah Vincent: Mm-hmm.

Ilesha Baldwin: Because, unfortunately, we're not at a time in the state of Georgia where composting makes sense economically, it's an investment in what this could look like in the future — how we're all in this together, on the same team, trying to build something that makes sense for the long term. We can't just keep putting food in the landfill — one, because landfills are filling up, and two, because at the end of the day, that's a resource we're just throwing into trash cans. Food waste gets turned into compost, which can become a nutrient that growers use, and it can also be turned into other things, like energy.

Eriqah Vincent: Right. So the CompostNow bins that Bon Appétit uses — does CompostNow come and collect it? Is the compost utilized on campus, or do you know where it's utilized beyond Spelman's campus? I'm curious about the specifics of how it's processed.

Iesha Baldwin: So the way it works is: Spelman has CompostNow bins that sit in the back of our cafeteria with our food service provider, Bon Appétit. CompostNow comes to pick those up —

Eriqah Vincent: Okay.

Iesha Baldwin: — I think once a week, and then they turn that food waste into compost.

Eriqah Vincent: Got it.

Iesha Baldwin: So that's an entire process that happens every single day — it's happening right now. Students are eating in the cafeteria, staff put the leftover food on a conveyor belt, and then staff take that food and dump it into the composting bin. From there, CompostNow comes and picks it up once a week.

Eriqah Vincent: Got it.

Iesha Baldwin: So that's what the process looks like, and it involves a lot of different people — there are a lot of moving parts. At the moment, we've seen that it does benefit us — we've created over 30,000 pounds of compost since 2021. We're very grateful to be able to do that in partnership with CompostNow.

Eriqah Vincent: Right, wonderful. Thank you so much for walking us through both of those pieces — the retrofit and built environment piece, and the food piece. For campuses, those are two really important pieces to consider when thinking about sustainable practices.

So now let's talk a bit about your job in a macro sense — you've been on the job a few years now. What's some of the best advice you have for sustainability managers or coordinators at smaller, less-resourced institutions trying to implement similar programs? If they're just starting out, where should they start, how should they start, and how would you recommend they prioritize this work?

Iesha Baldwin: Yeah, I've been at Spelman for two years now, and I'd say it's really important — it's a little different for me, since I graduated from Spelman too —

Eriqah Vincent: Sure.

Iesha Baldwin: — so I had an understanding of some of the cultural aspects. At the end of the day, the sustainability movement is a cultural movement, it's a culture change. I also didn't want to bring anything new to people, because they already have a lot on their plate — they're not looking to take on new initiatives, it's just a lot. The piece I really wanted to make sure happened was the question I asked myself: how can we make people feel that they have a place within sustainability on campus?

Eriqah Vincent: Mm-hmm.

Iesha Baldwin: You can build a beautiful sustainability team, but if that team isn't integrated into the culture of the institution, it doesn't matter if you have one person or ten. If they aren't integrated within the institution, it's pointless. So it's about figuring out what people are already

working on at your institution, and how you can tie sustainability to their existing projects. That was the mindset, and it's still the mindset. Thankfully, Spelman has been open to some of the smaller initiatives I've put forward — one being the Student Sustainability Fund, a small pool of money that lets students pursue ideas at the intersection of sustainability and innovation. That also shows people that sustainability isn't just environmental sustainability, isn't just about reducing waste, but also about using technology — what does the next innovation look like, so composting can become more affordable, both to the everyday person and to institutions? That's innovation. We have student teams working on different initiatives — one was a food waste management app, and another was an energy project. We have students who care deeply about sustainability, and now they're building technology to solve some of these issues. But that buy-in comes with deep trust, and deep curiosity, to know what people are working on and how you can be involved in their existing projects.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah, absolutely, and I can tell you, for our audience, when Ilesha talks about whole-campus integration, that's not hyperbole and it's not an exaggeration, it can't be minimized. When I worked in campus sustainability for six or seven years, I saw the effects of schools that had one professor interested in sustainability — schools in Georgia, I won't name names, but schools with just one professor interested in sustainability who thought the campus should switch over — and the uphill climb it took to get those campuses interested and to see it as a priority, and to get anything done, because they spent most of their time trying to convince the president's office, faculty, and facilities that this was important. So not as much got done, because of relying on just that one professor. I think, to your point, Ilesha, about where sustainability falls — it falls under facilities at Spelman, if I'm not mistaken, but at other schools it falls under student services, so you get different priorities depending on where the sustainability office or team is housed. If it's in facilities, priorities can be different — although I think Art does a good job of balancing that, showing it's not just important for facilities, but for students too.

Ilesha Baldwin: Absolutely. And we had a really great framework at Spelman because of how it started — that seed planted years ago with Sustainable Spelman, our campus-wide sustainability initiative. Although I'm the first person to actually manage it as a full-time job —

Eriqah Vincent: Right.

Ilesha Baldwin: — it wasn't necessarily Art's job to do that, because he's the Director of Facilities. So Art and Dr. Shafi probably were only able to dedicate maybe ten percent of their time to it, because they had so many other things going on. But the beauty is that we, as an institution, laid the groundwork years ago with Dr. Tatum, and Art has continued moving us forward as an institution. We have a really strong foundation, and part of that was the development of the Sustainable Spelman Committee. That's another recommendation I'd have for other institutions — if you don't already have a committee of people dedicated to sustainability on your campus, create one. Ours has existed for quite some time, and it's made up of people from across campus — we have people from the arts, from the sciences, and we also have alumnae who are part of it. It's a great way to keep moving the needle forward. And try to make it fun — not just meetings, but community building. Have lunch with your team.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you so much, Ilesha, for all of this information. I really appreciate the connection, being able to ask those questions not only as an alumna but also as someone who sees the importance of sustainability on campus, and the importance of the environment and climate to our academic institutions and institutions of higher learning.

I'm going to ask you the last question, my favorite question, which we ask all of our interviewees on the series: what is giving you hope around climate in Georgia?

Iesha Baldwin: That's such a good one. Well, for one, conversations like this — the fact that Drawdown Georgia exists, that ecosystem is there, and resources are being allocated toward energy efficiency projects and food waste projects. That gives me hope. It's not a theory, it's not something we just think about and hope can happen — if you have an idea, you can apply for it, and that doesn't exist in a lot of places.

Eriqah Vincent: Right.

Iesha Baldwin: So that gives me hope. I'm very aware there are so many people across the ecosystem putting their time and energy into making sure we keep moving the needle forward, as an ecosystem. It takes a team — part of that team is Spelman people, but also our other partners, like Southface, CompostNow, and the City of Atlanta. There are so many institutions helping us move the needle forward at Spelman.

Eriqah Vincent: Wonderful, thank you so much once again for coming to talk to us about Spelman's initiatives. I could talk about Spelman all day, in so many different capacities, for obvious reasons, but I really appreciate you coming on. Congratulations again on being Spelman's first — this being your whole job, what you're dedicated to doing every day — and thank you for the service you're providing to our alma mater. I think it's really important, and I appreciate you taking up that mantle and having your finger on the pulse of what's going on around campus when it comes to sustainability. Thank you again, and thank you all for joining us once again for this Georgia Climate Digest interview series from Drawdown Georgia. We'll see you next time.