



Andrew van Baal - [Student Sustainability Coalition \(SSC\)](#) + [Student Carbon Neutrality Network \(SCANN\)](#) - STUDENT

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Editor's Note: Cherish and Andrew met at a coffee shop for this interview. The Team found it charming that he brought his own mug for the baristas to make his drink in. (Caught green-handed!)

Andrew: [Referring to a travel mug he has with him] It comes with me everywhere.

Cherish: Now I've also got my own today, though I got this when I started the job.

Andrew: You've got some nice LSA Merch, you're repping.

Cherish: Yeah, no today, I kind of joke it's like business casual in the office, but it's sort of like you can stretch that a little bit if you're wearing the Michigan gear, but also I'm an LSA grad myself, so it's nice.

Andrew: Okay, nice. So you just work for them now?

Cherish: Yeah, I do. I work in the Dean's office. So that's where I'm in this one year position, actually. And I was a '22 grad.

Before He Went Blue

Cherish: One of the first things I usually like to ask is still, if you could just introduce yourself, say your name and spell it for the record.

Andrew: Yeah. My name is Andrew. A N D, R E, W, V, as in Victor, A-N, B as in boy, double A-L, use he/him pronouns.

Cherish: And I use she/her. Now you can proceed to the national scripps spelling bee.

Andrew: [Laughter] Literally.

Cherish: So the first question I usually like, leading in with, I feel like it seems a little bit silly for the student angle, but you guys still have options as students, so do you think you could tell me a little bit about yourself and how you came to be at the University?

Andrew: For sure. Yeah.

Um, I'm a lifelong Michigander. I grew up along Lake Michigan, and that I think, definitely formed my interest in environmental stuff. But also just like, I grew up being a Michigan fan. And spending--spending time along Lake Michigan and just being there with my family. And growing up knowing this was a really great University for a lot of reasons. It was, it's always been my first choice. And it was my first choice. When I got in, I was super excited to be able to come and be a part of this community. And also just super passionate about being in places...like not being extractive in places? Like I like to be in the state that I'm still in. And I think that was a factor as well as I didn't want to jump out of state and do work somewhere else when my home was Michigan and it will be for a while. So yeah.

Cherish: Yeah. I wanted to mention like growing up along the Great Lakes and kind of being uh, just outdoorsy in that sense. Were you involved in environmental activism or things along these lines before you came to Michigan?

Andrew: Um...not in like the most robust sense than I was here. It was definitely like, a more passive appreciation for it that I then realized, I'm like, I want to do environmental stuff here.

My involvement, I would say before, was a little bit. Like I was in an environmental club in my High School. And then just kind of also interested in the idea of thinking about, like, how do we make things sustainable in different contexts? And again, I didn't realize it was a super huge passion until I got here and got plugged into the work that was happening here and I started as a political science student, because again, I didn't know that that's what I wanted to do right away. And then as I kind of realized, the community here that is doing environmental activism, both on and off campus in this Ann Arbor community. That was kind of a turning point for me and really wanting to get involved and in joining SSC.

Cherish: Okay, and you mentioned you started as a political science student. So it sounds like you're not anymore--

Andrew: I am a Program in the Environment major now. So.

Cherish: Okay, do you think you might still do anything in the Poli Sci area or full pivot?

Andrew: I do like environmental policy, I still think that's like a meaningful avenue to explore. I'm planning on entering an accelerated Master's at SEAS next fall. And they have an environmental policy and planning track that I'm interested in. I still see policy as a huge lever for change, especially with climate change happening and policies need to be created to make change. But right now, I'm definitely trying to get all that environmental knowledge to do it effectively.

Cherish: Yeah, yeah. So program in the environment--Great place to start. I actually just spoke with the director yesterday.

Andrew: Amazing. Sara Soderstrom?

Cherish: Yeah!

Andrew: She's awesome. Yeah, I'm in the ERB fellowship¹ too, and she's doing amazing stuff.

His Tie to Sustainability

Cherish: Well, maybe then I might ask you more about the ERB fellows in a little bit, but like I said before, I reached out to you because of your involvement in that student sustainability coalition. So do you think you could tell me a little bit more about that organization and your position within it?

Andrew: For sure. Yeah. So it's, it's an office or it's a student group. Underneath the Office of Student Life sustainability. They have a few different offices, or a few different student groups that focus on different things. Student sustainability coalition's goal is to kind of be a connector between students and administration, elevating the needs of students around sustainability and what we're hearing and being able to activate student ideas and also elevate when necessary to the administration. My position in particular, we're about a group of 12. And we're advised by a program manager who is staffed there. We're all paid employees, which is really awesome that the university is paying us for this work. But this is my second year being part of it now. I'm part of our strategy sub team, which basically looks at long term visioning of how we build strategic partnerships with different university collaborators. And how we can be the most effective amplifier of student needs. So, looking at what--what other, like activism movements are happening on campus, and how can we support those in the best way possible, and just being really...being really strategic in how we're meeting with administration, making sure we're using that time wisely. It's a lot of thinking. We have a lot of other sub teams like communications doing our kind of external stuff. We have a coalition who's doing a lot of work like, actually meeting with organizations and facilitating our student carbon neutrality network, all that great stuff. And then we have....what's our last sub team...that's a great question. It's not coming to me at the moment.

¹ [Erb Fellows](#) is a program for undergraduate students in Ross BBA and Program in the Environment, to explore the intersections of business and sustainability through education, community, and co-curriculars.

Cherish: Okay. It's okay if it comes to you later.

Andrew: Yeah.

Cherish: Maybe I think you might have mentioned it a bit in there or some things that came up with the coalition aspect. I presume you're also involved with SCANN.

Andrew: Yes, yes.

Cherish: Could you tell me a little bit about how the SSC kind of fits in there?

Andrew: For sure. Yeah. So SSC operates under the collective impact framework, which is basically like, I don't know if you've heard of collective impact but it's like it's, broadly organizing under some shared unified like goals and visions, like how we want to do activism on campus. So that looks like writing a common agenda that we asked all our organizations to sign on to, in regards to SCANN. SCANN is an activation of collective impact through a program that SSC run; it was started by former SSC members in early 2022. And it's a network of environmental student organizations across campus that come together to discuss carbon neutrality and how we can advocate it. So SSC does like the facilitation and formation. It's like meeting agendas, and like coordinating all of that stuff like the backbone support. So members in those meetings can be really intentional. And we're able to get speakers there. And I think our first kind of big push as a network was the hiring of a new president. That was kind of the time that our activism really started. We were going to regents meetings, preparing kind of like statements for people to amplify the messages and what we were looking for in a president. And when the President was selected, and when Ono was selected. Seeing his passion for sustainability and working with him as far as we see that is like our first kind of big win as a network.

Cherish: Yeah.

Andrew: And now we've continued to progress. We've done a lot of work now like the campus plan 2050, and the vision 2034. Been super involved with that for like, since the beginning of 2023. And we continue to come together and share different advocacy areas that our member organizations are working on. Because it's a broad range, like natural science, social science focuses.

Cherish: Yeah

Andrew: And we support all of those projects there. But it's a really cool space, we've got a solid attendance of about 30 people at this point, every meeting, which is like 20 to 30, student orgs, it's really great. And we're able to have guest speakers come in and kind of pilots and stuff going on as well.

Cherish: Yeah, well thanks for explaining that a little bit more for me, and congratulations on a big win. Right?

Andrew: Yeah, we don't celebrate ourselves enough. Yeah, definitely.

Cherish: There, I just was reading about a Be Kind, Be Well initiative, you've got to congratulate and acknowledge people. I'm curious about that: do you think there will be a similar initiative with Dean Curzan moving on soon?

Andrew: Yeah, I think that's gonna be a really, really interesting role. Um, another thing that we got to be involved in within LSA, which I was super excited that LSA hired the carbon neutrality program manager, Caitlin Jacobs, I don't know if you've met her, she's--

Cherish: That's actually who I'm partnering with on this project.

Andrew: And she's ..She's so awesome. And we got to first touch base with her over the summer, and, and we were actually invited members of SCANN to participate on her hiring committee. So we got to be involved in that process. I think we had a good experience working with the LSA hiring teams. I'm really, really optimistic that they were able to do something like that, again, when Dean Curzan is stepping down and really advocating for a strong focus on sustainability. Excited to see this project, but it's a year and obviously, we want to keep it going. It doesn't--Sustainability doesn't fit into one year. But really excited this project is happening and hope we get to do that,

Cherish: Which, I will add on that point from my understanding with partnering with Caitlin. The idea is that the year will be, like, this is going to be a launchpad.

Andrew: Okay.

Cherish: it's definitely not intended to be like yep, we did a year. Goodbye. No. Definitely intended to continue on.

Andrew: Cool.

Personal History with Climate Change

Cherish: Now, maybe kind of like, pivot from talking about sort of this ongoing work and like history leading up to it. Something I've been wanting to ask everybody is, if you recall, maybe a sort of personal tipping point concerning climate change, in your life.

Andrew: Yeah. I think that...as...Coming in as a political science student, I started to kind of like, like, you hear bad things are happening. And then you like, study and read things. And you're like, Oh, this is actually really bad and no one's hearing about it. I think a huge catalyst for that was the Trump presidency and policies that were just steamrolled. A bunch of

environmental regulations pulled back, a lot of which were behind the curtains and people didn't get to see like, yeah, we're scaling renewables, but we're scaling fossil fuel permits at an incomparable level. And I think just actually digging in and seeing that happening from like, the policy perspective, was a turning point for me. And I was, I was realizing like, from wanting to go into kind of like, electoral politics. I'm like, I understand that but there's, there's a huge gap in like the policy understanding of kind of what's going on with the environment and how we can kind of do the things we need to do for climate change, because the data is there, and it's really great that it's there, and people are doing that research, but it's not being activated. So I think that that was a huge tipping point for me seeing that, like, polarization has gone like this. And like, our government is not as productive as it should be on these issues. And, and we really need to continue to amplify it and continue to be heard. And I think that was a tipping point when I started to get more and more involved here at Michigan.

Cherish: So if I can just like reiterate, then, and feel free to correct me, but it sounds like still coming from a poli-sci background, and just seeing the angles and recognizing what environmental policy and like initiatives and things that are out there or are available, you began to recognize how that was drawn back and you're still kind of seeing that gap and wondering how to get there?

Andrew: For sure. And great things have happened since obviously. But there's still so much work to be done. And once you get plugged in, like you have that little spark and you get plugged in, you get sucked in. And there's so much to work on. And there's so many amazing people to work with. But yeah, that was definitely, I think, the initial real spark for me.

Cherish: That's where, you know, so you said that was a moment you got plugged in?

Andrew: Yeah.

Cherish: Do you remember kind of how it felt going down that? I don't know. Maybe that rabbit hole?

Andrew: I guess it was like, Okay, I have this idea. I wasn't really sure about, I don't know, climate change sustainability activism, like the framework here at Michigan. So I obviously started to do some research, I found the Office of Student Life sustainability. SSC was under the Graham Sustainability Institute at the time. But I found that the organization and I submitted an application. I started looking at more environmental classes so I think, while I was making this realization, I was always also taking a really, really great ecological issues class at PitE, that opened my eyes to like all of these things as well. And then once you like, start talking to people and different organizations, and I got to meet the people that were in with SSC and go to a first couple of meetings, and just like, observe what they have been working on for the entire year, which one of those things that first meeting was like SCANN, I'm like, Whoa, what is this super cool. Like, it's, it's been a blur ever since. And we're obviously doing really, really process-focused work. But it's, you get sucked in. And you really have the opportunity to make an impact in so many ways. And I hope that that is what a project like this can do. And what SSC

can also continue to do is like, there's room for everyone to get involved, no matter what level or discipline.

Future Activism

Cherish: It sounds like a really great group of people. I'm really excited about this and that I've been able to talk to people like yourself and I'm wondering if, kind of building on that or going forward with that, if I could ask you a question also looking forward to future activism.

And that's, you know, if you could get everyone on board with like, one specific thing, around climate change—what would that be? I also want to add one caveat, which I've noticed when I've been asking people this, which is consider if there would be a difference between if you're thinking everyone in the world, versus everyone on campus.

Andrew: Are you thinking on campus?

Cherish: I'm kind of asking both.

Andrew: Okay, okay—

Cherish: To see does that answer sound the same? Is it different?

Andrew: Yeah, that's great. Um, I think that like, from an on campus standpoint, like and also broadly, like, it affects everyone in different ways. There are obviously regions that are way more vulnerable, like, the South is like very much around with the flooding and extreme heat and stuff like that. But it's going to affect everyone on a different level. And I think that that is always corresponding to wealth inequality like those, like, where there is more wealth, there will be less impacts. Typically. It's not the case everywhere. But I think that I want everyone to know that, like, it's not a separate entity from whatever you're working on, or whatever passion you have, like, it fits so well, with every discipline like business engineering, like natural science, like there's, there's room for it to be incorporated into, into everything. And I also think that, like, I want people to know that, like, the guilt should not be on the individual level, because we are giant systems that are really, really hard to shift and change that that we cannot directly control. Now I think that the biggest thing for me has been getting involved locally, I think it is the best place to start. And that's why I wanted to be in a group that's like serving campus and serving this campus community. Because there's a lot that needs to be done here. That needs to be done everywhere. But I think that, like, realizing that the changes you can make no matter what scale are not like, are not counterproductive to large systems that are daunting, like, we can't stop pumping fossil fuels and pumping oil and gas today. But we can get involved with our communities and we can make an impact and change a policy on the city level or make something a focus point of the university or something like that. I think that like it's going to affect everyone and like we should find the right areas for us to get involved remembering the global context, but also putting effort in at that level because if we all do it at that level, then it's going to be a lot more impactful

Cherish: Yeah, no, it's just like you've got to start small.

Andrew: Yeah.

Cherish: And everything...Hopefully it'll be like a domino effect.

Andrew: Yes. For sure.

Cherish: Okay. Thank you again for leading in with that. I also appreciate your note around the inequity in how it'll affect people.

Andrew: Yeah.

Cherish: It's very true. And now, I just want to take a quick time check to see where we're at. So here, it'll give you a chance to drink your coffee.

I've also been thinking of this throughout, but yeah, I think that actually building on that and maybe too, with the ongoing work that you're doing: what's something you're hopeful about?

Andrew: Yeah, that's a great, great question. I'm hopeful that, kind of building off of that last point, that everyone on this campus has the opportunity to be involved in some kind of sustainability mechanism, a project we've been working on is sustainability education requirement, who knows what that will look like. But that has gained momentum over the last year. And I think that it's going to be a really great way. And when it's hopefully implemented, that students can really see how sustainability is related to their discipline and how they can work on sustainability and also work on the things that they're doing. I'm also really, really hopeful and optimistic after meeting the new associate vice president of campus sustainability, Shana Weber, she is a brilliant, amazing person. And I think she's going to do really awesome work. And she's already mapping out kind of all of the players, it's really complex to tackle issues at scale. It's such a large, decentralized university. But I think that she's already mentioned that she wants to get students involved as much as possible. And in my role, it's very like students first is like, we want to provide students with opportunities and, and resources. And we're seeing sustainability interest in projects exponentially grow, like hiring has increased in like, within our office, we run a grants program that we have gotten so many more applicants for them usually do, the interest is growing. And we're hoping to do that by continuing to be supported by these new great hires that they're making and the progress that's happening. But I'm really hopeful after being...I've never been in spaces with people in power, like I have been here that have been so respectful and so willing to listen, and so ready to get involved with students and listen to our ideas. And that makes me hopeful that we're going to go in the right direction and make this kind of a student centric initiative.

Cherish: I'm really glad to hear that.

Andrew: Yeah, it's been good

Cherish: It sounds like it's been much more of a sincere commitment.

Andrew: For sure.

Wild Card Response

Cherish: Well, then, going off of that, and wanting to be respectful of your time...Is there anything else that you'd like to share, or that you expected me to ask about? Free-reign.

Andrew: Yeah, um, I would just say that SSC is a body that wants to serve students. So in whatever capacity, this thing is published online, like connecting students to resources, like our biggest thing, and we want to make sure that in every, we want to make sure every place that SSC has talked about, we're providing for students as much as possible. So we have a super robust grant program with \$100,000, to the university to activate students sustainability projects, we want to continue to see more applications from that. So we're going to continue to elevate that and in every place possible. And also just to like, students should feel comfortable reaching out to like, like, we are trying to establish ourselves kind of as the go-to group for higher level administration and decision makers to go to for student inputs on sustainability. So I would ask that there's a call for students to continue to come and share your ideas with SSC and just come talk to us we run like a very informal coffee chats program, where we just invite people, we get them a cup of coffee, and we will just talk about whatever they want and get them plugged in into different areas. We had one yesterday and it was a super great way to connect people with different fellowships in different organizations doing specific work they're interested in. So I would just continue to elevate the SSC as a group that's here for students. And we hope that that continues, and students continue to utilize us more as a resource.

Cherish: Okay, I appreciate you building on that.

Andrew: Yeah.

Bonus: ERB Fellowship Breakdown

Cherish: And I'm gonna have to sneak in one more question, because you mentioned fellowships there. And I realized I wanted to ask you a little more about the ERB Fellows.

Andrew: Yes, I can talk about that a little bit. I think that's an awesome activation of an interdisciplinary sustainability approach. It's been something like, I haven't seen anything like this at any other school. And it's, like, super interesting. And I still have like, sustainable kind of business interests, because it's like corporations doing the most wrong; they have the possibility to do the most right. So it's an amazing two year fellowship for undergrads. Based on the ERB dual MBA/MS degree. In two years you take like 12 courses from this list. It's open to like, business major or minor or PitE major or minor. And you basically take one intro class, I took

my business and the environmental with Sara Soderstrom then you apply and and it just unlocks a whole world of the ability to just learn I'm not in Ross and I get to take an amazing economic sustainability Ross class this semester, and it's opened My eyes and possibilities in that space. But also like there's a community that they're being really intentional and fostering. There's, there's so many community events for the fellows and professional networking, They bring in speakers from all over the world to talk to us and inspire us. And it's a really cool program. And it fits, it fits, I think pretty well into my schedule. And I think it's not a huge workload, but you get connected in ways that you typically wouldn't. And like business sustainability is like a space that's rapidly growing, and they need people that are experienced, and I'm super, super happy with that Sara Soderstrom and the other people within Urb are really taking the initiative and recognizing that need and because so many students, like the student population has, like, doubled in the program like amount of applicants because people are interested in and I think it's going to continue to grow and be a really great opportunity to get more sustainable minded business folk out in the world.

Cherish: Yeah.

Cherish: Thank you for elaborating. Especially after I was like, hey, end the interview and then actually one more thing, but that actually would be my questions for now. So once again, thank you for talking with me. And also, you know, it's really so exciting here, like seeing so many commonalities across the things people have been saying, and it's been really great. Thank you again.

- This concludes the interview transcript. -

This interview was conducted in November 2023.

LSA Dean's Fellow Cherish Dean can be reached at cherishd@umich.edu. To contact the LSA Year of Sustainability Team as a whole, please contact sustainable-lsa@umich.edu.