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Introduction

Let’s build a sustainable future – together. This plan articulates the mission, vision, values, guiding goals, and core strategies for the next five-year chapter of the University of Minnesota’s Institute on the Environment (IonE). We will use this plan to guide programs and operations, as well as our engagement with and service to the University community and our partners across the state, region, and world.

Why IonE?

As part of a public research university, IonE exists to catalyze sustainability outcomes – driving environmental impact and innovation. It is a boundary-spanning, externally oriented organization, embedded within the University of Minnesota (UMN) and explicitly charged with forging connections across and beyond academia – on a local, regional, and global scale.

This is because the environmental challenges we face are not only urgent, they are also vast and complex – and they will not be solved by any one discipline or sector working alone. As engines of research, education, and engagement, public research universities have critical strengths to contribute, if they can be integrated across fields and connected to the broader world. Since 2007, IonE has accelerated this capacity at the UMN, demonstrating its impact and earning its reputation as an innovator and leader among peer institutions.

Process & Participation

In developing this plan, we did a careful evaluation of IonE’s first strategic plan (2019), inviting our staff; our network of affiliated faculty, researchers, and practitioners; our project and program partners; our advisory boards and councils; and other trusted advisors to reflect on the achievements under that plan, the ambitions that remained, how the world (including higher ed) has changed – and, critically, what is needed now.

Through a series of conversations, focus groups, and written reflections, we sought to better understand the priorities and desires of the IonE community (e.g., our core network of staff, affiliates, program participants, and collaborators). During 2023, we also worked on our next diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) action plan, a community-driven process resulting in a detailed operational roadmap, which served as another input into this overarching plan.

Descriptions of our strategic planning steps and methods, including summaries of our findings and a reference outline of our DEIJ action plan, are in Appendices A–E.

In early fall 2023, our director and leadership team embarked on sensemaking with this array of strategic input – first focusing on strategic imperatives, the most critical changes and conditions to which this strategic plan responds. From these imperatives, the team developed overarching objectives and strategies, seeking counsel and feedback from external and internal advisors. We integrated this feedback, making final rounds of revisions to both concepts and strategy – and ultimately, drafting this document.
To be effective in its work, a cross-cutting organization like IonE needs to be as clear about what it is and where it is going – as it is about what it isn’t, what is best left to others, and where to follow rather than lead. It needs to see and make sense of the world, in order to stay focused on its most relevant contributions to advancing sustainability. It is our sincerest hope that this renewed plan fulfills all of those needs – and more.

2024 Plan Highlights

● The next evolution of our IonE Impact Goals platform, expanding access to this catalytic grantmaking program and diversifying the domains in which IonE will fund and steward outcomes-driven projects

● Discussion of IonE’s DEIJ action plan, which will be implemented in conjunction with this plan, as the Institute strives to advance a just, sustainable transition for all

● IonE’s ambitions in the emerging field of public interest communications – which combines the best of strategic and science communication, journalism, and storytelling toward outcomes that transcend the interests of any one organization or individual

● Clarified definitions of “community” for IonE that embrace a broad meaning of interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and co-production; that recognizes IonE shares its mission with many people and organizations; and that many of its levers of action lie outside the University. Therefore, how we collaborate is critical to IonE’s effectiveness.

While it’s natural to get excited about the new, some of the most important parts of this plan are, in fact, not new. In our feedback, ideation, and planning, we received strong affirmations of many of the ways the Institute is already working – both conceptually and in practice. This carry-forward includes:

● An enduring vision and mission – our overarching commitment to and focus on building a future where people and planet prosper together

● Our institutional commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, across our operations, programming, allocation of resources, and engagement with partners

● The values that hold our community together, including our commitment to innovation; to inclusion and belonging; to being open-minded, inquisitive, and curious; and to our rigorous focus on transformative outcomes, including well-reasoned risk-taking and openness to working with all people and organizations pursuing sustainability

And, still to come, in summer 2024:

● An updated visualization of IonE’s theory of change — a simplified view of the ecosystem in which IonE operates and the ways we achieve our intended effect — to provide a more sophisticated view of what it means to collaborate and interact with partners outside the University (to be completed in June 2024).
Mission, Vision, Values

Mission, vision, and values are at the heart of any organization, guiding not only what but also how work is pursued. In this plan, we reaffirm the mission and vision that have guided the Institute, offering some refinements in their framing and fresh context for how we see these statements coming alive within our 21st century landscape.

We also revisit the language/expression of our organizational values – and share some of the new articulations of values that surfaced in our planning process.

Mission
To build a future where people and planet prosper together

In our mission, we are explicitly future-oriented, expressing our commitment to and role in driving systems-level change. By linking people and planet, we celebrate and acknowledge the connections between human wellbeing and what we think of as the “environment” including ecosystem services and the cultural and spiritual values that nature provides.

Vision
Our vision describes a world where the knowledge needed to build a sustainable future is abundant and accessible; where the people leading this work at every level are supported and connected to one another; and the stories that inspire action and make sustainability solutions come alive are widely shared, driving progress at scale, for the benefit of all.

Put another way, we envision sustainable and thriving communities – locally and globally – equipped to rapidly, collectively, and effectively overcome the environmental challenges of both today and tomorrow.

Values
Since 2016, IonE has championed a set of values called “the IonE Way,” incorporated into onboarding, goal-setting, and other organizational activities. These values said we embrace: Taking risks; practicing leadership; collaborating and communicating; embracing teamwork and diversity; measuring what matters; and honoring varied paths.
Our strategic and DEIJ action planning processes have surfaced questions about new values – and new ways of expressing them, as well as a desire across our extended network to revisit and reframe our values together. That collective, community-based process, as described in our DEIJ action plan (Appendix B), will take place during this strategic plan’s term; here, we share some of the emerging themes from those planning and feedback sessions.

- **Curiosity** – As a community of people, IonE is open-minded, inquisitive, and curious, always seeking to share ideas and learn new things.
- **Collaboration** – IonE strives to be a good partner, on an individual and collective level, to organizations, groups, and people inside and outside the university; we work across disciplines, geographies, sectors, and ideologies.
- **Diversity** – IonE seeks to empower all people working to build a sustainable future, and in so doing, recognizes its responsibility to center the voices and perspectives of those most affected and challenge systems and structures that have excluded and continue to exclude both individuals and groups from the decision-making table.
- **Inclusivity and welcoming** – IonE is accepting of all people and ways of knowing; we strive to be generous with our ideas and spirit and flexible in our approaches.
- **Innovation and ambition** – IonE is tangible and specific in its ambition, while open to new ways to achieve shared goals.
- **Strategic orientation** – Good strategy is more than good intentions, and outcomes matter; we endorse risk-taking and learning from successes and failures.
Mandates and Capabilities

Organizational mandates are part of the strategic landscape; they can be thought of as externally imposed operating parameters, whether formal (such as regulations and policies) or informal (such as community expectations).

As part of the UMN, IonE has a responsibility – and in this way is mandated – to serve the University, the state of Minnesota and its 11 Tribal nations, the Midwest region, and the broader world, through enabling and supporting people associated with the University, including supporting relationships and partnerships with external/non-University organizations and individuals.

Therefore, part of the IonE community lies within the University system:

- University-based affiliates are members of the UMN community (faculty, researchers, and practitioners) who have chosen to formally affiliate with IonE – and who participate in our community and its collective work, including outcomes-oriented projects
- Students, including undergraduate and graduate students, who are engaged in our programming, as well as our student staff and research assistants
- IonE staff, including administrative and operational team members, postdocs, program managers, public-interest communicators, and researchers, who carry out and shape the core activities of the Institute, building relationships and contributing their wide range of topical leadership and domain expertise.

And an equally important part of the IonE community is outside of University system:

- External affiliates, like our UMN-based affiliates, are practitioners and professionals who have elected to formally affiliate with IonE – reflecting an ongoing commitment to engaging with our community and its collective work
- Collaborators, who may or may not be formally affiliated, in government agencies, the private sector, communities, nonprofits and NGOs, and Tribal nations, as well as other universities, who are partners on projects and programs, and who are often in a position to make decisions and implement new approaches, based on the outputs of projects
- Participants in our programming and activities, including convening and network-building platforms, as well as users of IonE-generated tools or insights, in Minnesota and around the world, who may be formally affiliated or not
Bridging academia and the broader world is an essential role for IonE. As described in the introduction, the environmental challenges our world faces are urgent and complex – and they will not be solved by any one discipline or sector working alone. Carrying a mandate as part of the UMN system, IonE exists to facilitate this necessary connectivity.

Importantly, this also tells us some things about what IonE is not – and how it fits into the University and the broader network of environmental actors. Institutionally, we seek to augment and enhance other structures at the University. We do not need (or seek) to duplicate degree conferral or the disciplinary excellence of colleges, for example.

We also seek to put the strengths of a university to bear in a way that does not duplicate the role of government or other, non-governmental institutions. In this way, it is the responsibility of IonE to bring the superpowers of higher education into a broader sustainability ecosystem.

The Institute is therefore responsible for prioritizing its distinctive offerings, and this can be understood as a framework in which IonE prioritizes three core programmatic capabilities:

| Producing and co-creating knowledge and new solutions – through outcomes-oriented research activities, grantmaking, and other collaborative projects | Network- and capacity-building – across our University community, through leadership and professional development activities and educational offerings | Scaling and enabling collective impact – through our public-interest communications activities, inspiring and connecting audiences with relevant knowledge |

These “pillars” of IonE were identified as essential in the 2019 plan and were affirmed in our 2023 planning process. Each of them is an essential component of our theory of change, which is currently under redesign – to be re-visualized – and released in summer 2024.
Strategic Imperatives

Through our planning process, as we took stock of changes and shifts in the world and our strengths as an Institute, four insights rose to prominence – as the internal and external factors most important for IonE to respond to within this next strategic term, in order to strengthen its position and grow its impact. Here, we present these four driving insights, along with the calls to action that follow from each one – and shape our five-year plan.

| We’re in a new era – no longer fighting for attention or making the case for action. We have entered an era of mainstream attention and widespread motivation. | • Relentlessly focus on our role and distinctive offerings within this dynamic, accelerated, and broader ecosystem of actors  
• Prioritize actions that strengthen our ability, as a nonpartisan convener, to collaborate and catalyze collective impact |
| --- | --- |
| There is a clear call from our community to not only to pursue outcomes-oriented interdisciplinary work, but also to better track and report on outcomes and impact. | • Strengthen infrastructure that supports an outcomes/impact orientation  
• Bolster our ability to drive outcomes via our public-interest communications  
• Invest in our ability to define, track, evaluate, and report on outcomes and impact |
| Our work demands clarity about reciprocity in partnerships and authenticity in relationships, anchored in organizational values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. | • Sustain our commitments and steward our relationships  
• Commit to meaningful, deep engagement with our partners and communities  
• Challenge systems, structures, and ideas through these lenses |
| We share our Research and Innovation Office’s vision of the U of M as a powerhouse public research university – in service to a regional and global public good. | • Transition toward organizational structures that support scaling  
• Foster strong networks and build robust relationships, supporting both near-term and longer-range research ambitions |
2024–29 STRATEGIES

Here we present the heart of our plan: a set of nine strategies that the Institute will pursue during this strategic term, grouped into three themes: growing impact; investing in excellence; and cultivating our community.

Each strategy includes a description of how this action (or set of actions) will advance sustainability outcomes, strengthen IonE as a form of enabling infrastructure for this work, and respond to the strategic imperatives, as previously discussed. We also include expected activities and key results; IonE leadership and staff are charged with developing detailed annual action and work plans that advance these goals and objectives.

Theme One: GROWING IMPACT

In 2019, IonE introduced “Impact Goals,” conceived of as globally significant sustainability challenges that are limited by a lack of knowledge and/or leaders. The original goals were envisioned as specific outcomes, collectively achieved. (An example: “Minnesota achieves carbon neutrality.”) This framing was designed to inspire collaborators to take up work with the potential to contribute toward achieving the goal. And it worked: Impact Goals spurred focus in programs and activities, provided an organizing principle for grantmaking, and strengthened our understanding of how IonE can catalyze outcomes and collective impact. With this plan, we introduce three key strategies to strengthen and evolve the Impact Goals framework – moving toward greater impact and alignment with our values.

Strategy 1A: Expand Impact Goals

A significant limitation of our 2019 Impact Goals model was the emphasis, in effect, on three topics, even though goals themselves were audacious in scale. With this plan, we introduce 10 interconnected domains where new knowledge, capable collaborators, and public-interest communications can contribute to catalyzing sustainability outcomes.

This domain approach (listed in Figure 1) will support a more dynamic, diversified portfolio of programmatic activities and funded projects, and, importantly (per our mandate), better reflects the range of expertise among UMN researchers, practitioners, and educators who are eager to collaborate in outcomes-driven, community-engaged work.
By expressing our priorities as domains and not specific, pre-defined outcomes, we are also moving goal-setting to the project level. Why does this matter? IonE strives to value multiple ways of knowing and is committed to centering the perspectives and expertise of those most affected by challenges we seek to overcome. With this shift, we are operationalizing our values and making way for our project teams – those who are closest to the challenges – to be the ones who define meaningful outcomes.

Our role as an interdisciplinary, University-based institute remains the same: to support and catalyze this critical work; to track and help report on outcomes; and to steward our portfolio of investments (e.g., projects, programs, and initiatives) toward the greatest possible impact for our state, region, and world.

We expect this strategy to materially shape our grantmaking programs and requests for proposals; the types of projects we fund; as well as how we track and report on outcomes – and, more broadly, to influence activity across IonE programs, from network-building and professional development to communications activities and content strategy.

Figure 1: Expanded domains for impact grant-making and other activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adaptation</th>
<th>Mitigation</th>
<th>Biodiversity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clean Energy</td>
<td>Water and Land</td>
<td>Food Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planetary Health</td>
<td>Environmental Justice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Capital</td>
<td>Decision Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The projects and activities we enable will help ensure that communities, organizations, and governments have research-based solutions and knowledge to address their specific environmental challenges. Through storytelling and reporting mechanisms, we will amplify what is working (and not), so that others can adopt and adapt solutions to their own contexts and cultures, because we believe widely adopted – scaled – solutions contribute to transformative progress on regional and global sustainability and climate challenges. Each of our domains lends itself to a range of opportunities and visions of success. A few examples:

- Adaptation to climate change
- Mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions
- Biodiversity – both conservation and restoration
- Clean energy – and the transition to a clean energy economy
- Water and land – integrated, cross-cutting stewardship
- Food systems – and advancing sustainable agricultural economies
- Planetary health – a systems approach to human health and all life on Earth
- Environmental justice – recentering vulnerable and marginalized communities
- Natural capital – and the recognition of the broad value of healthy ecosystems
- Decision support – informing and enabling sustainable solutions, at any scale
Strategy 1B: Strengthen portfolio tracking & reporting

“And what happened as a result?” We heard an unequivocal call in our planning process to strengthen our institutional reporting structures, focusing not only on activities and outputs but also outcomes and longer-range impact. During this term, IonE will therefore invest in developing an integrated capability to more effectively track and report on the outcomes and impact of our programs and initiatives, including the Impact Goal portfolio.

In early 2024, the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities identified strengthening reporting as a critical strategic action for institutions seeking to modernize scholarship for the public good: “Tracking and reporting on outcomes and impacts are powerful mechanisms that enable institutions to set strategic goals, evaluate progress, and incentivize change as necessary. Most successful data and outcome tracking and reporting efforts exist in a unit structure that has a clear strategic charge and dedicated capacity for evaluation and assessment, usually in central university administration.”

We expect our action plan in this area to include evaluating current capabilities, practices, and UMN infrastructure; identifying opportunities to align with external metrics (such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals); developing staff roles and responsibilities; and investing in new systems/platforms, as needed, to support our integrated approach.

Strategy 1C: Lead in public-interest communications

With this evolution in strategy (1A) and the enabling condition of enhanced reporting (1B), IonE will have a significant opportunity during this term to leverage its significant strengths in journalism and communications by more directly integrating public interest communications activities into its Impact Goal portfolio and programming.

Traditional communications programs seek to advance organizational (or individual) goals. Public interest communications is an emerging field of practice that leverages the science, tools, and strategy of traditional communications in service of outcomes that transcend the interests/goals of any one organization. The alignment with public impact scholarship is clear. As the saying goes: Something is only useful if it is used. Communications initiatives that seek to benefit a broader public – through driving change in attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviors – are an essential component of striving toward outcomes, if and when our research outputs are knowledge, insights, and tools that – if put into practice – would advance a public good.

During this plan term, we envision restructuring and leveraging our communications program area to advance measurable societal outcomes, aligned with our domains and, on a pilot basis, at the individual project level, through activities including but not limited to publications, new streams of content, and other campaigns and communications activities designed to support collaboratively identified, public interest environmental outcomes.

We expect our action plan to include evaluating current capabilities, strengths, and infrastructure; aligning roles and responsibilities toward this capability; developing an advisory structure; and launching a reimagined public interest communications lab as a hub for innovation and home for public-interest projects and campaigns.
Theme Two: INVESTING IN EXCELLENCE

During the last strategic term, IonE’s approach to grantmaking and reputation for excellence in both operations and programming attracted interest in leveraging its infrastructure, creating opportunities to diversify, expand, and scale the work. Answering the imperative that speaks to UMN ambition to scale its research enterprise (page 7), this section of our plan focuses on three critical strategies to support growth by scaling the enabling infrastructure of IonE.

Strategy 2A: Refine operations to support growth
IonE is widely regarded as an operational model for other cross-cutting, partnership-based, outcomes-oriented institutes. This has attracted additional streams of recurring, philanthropic, and sponsored funding, as well as resulted in a successful bid to serve as the host institution for the Midwest Climate Adaptation Science Center, the first center hosted within IonE.

During this plan term, we see a strategic need to align our operational capabilities to this growth, as well as to prepare for future growth. Specifically, we expect our action plan to include an institute-wide review of roles and responsibilities, to enable a proactive and effective staffing plan; strengthening our internal ability to coordinate goals and work plans (across divisions and programs); and developing our capacity for evaluation both centrally and at the program/project level, a tactic related to strategy 1B (strengthening portfolio tracking).

Strategy 2B: Further develop strategic grants management
Our ability to track and report on outcomes (1B), as well as support funded teams in pursuing those outcomes (1A, 3C), is dependent on the quality and capacity of our grants program coordination, stewardship, and strategy. Relatedly, our reputation for quality in this domain is a significant driver of investment in our funding portfolio.

During this plan term, we expect to implement a greater diversity of funding mechanisms, including stage-gates for scaling work that is demonstrating the potential for greater impact; which we expect to result in a refined concept of our grantmaking ecosystem. We also expect our action plan to include continuing to develop our stewardship and support to funded teams, and, as described in strategy (1B), strengthening our reporting of impact metrics.

Strategy 2C: Strengthen network infrastructure
Critical to IonE’s theory of change is the concept of network-building – connecting UMN scholars and staff, and the communities that the University serves, across both disciplines and sectors, creating spaces and opportunities to build relationships, co-define challenges, and seed collaboration on solutions. This networked quality of IonE is also what makes the Institute an attractive host for centers and other cross-cutting initiatives – now and in the future.
IonE has the beginning of the infrastructure necessary to support and scale this work; during this term we expect to further invest in network-building platforms, as well as models for community and multi-sector engagement, such as our Midwest Carbon Leadership Project, our affiliates network and its connectivity to our Impact Goals grantmaking program, and other long-standing and emerging programs/platforms that foster connections and collaboration. Alongside this work, we expect to develop governance structures and scale the capacity to house programs and initiatives, including new externally funded centers, within IonE.

**Theme Three: CULTIVATING COMMUNITY**

As described earlier, part of the way IonE fulfills its responsibility to serve the University, the state of Minnesota, the Midwest region, and the broader world – *in effecting change* – is through enabling people associated with the University, including supporting relationships and partnerships with external/non-University organizations and individuals.

Part of the IonE community lies within the University system; an equally important part lies beyond the University system – because, as we have affirmed throughout this plan, our environmental challenges require collaboration among skilled, empowered people in meaningful relationship with one another. With these next strategies, we underscore the importance of our work to support and enable this community/network, through strengthening its connectivity and offering both leadership and professional development opportunities.

**Strategy 3A: Strengthening our affiliate network**

Institute affiliates are faculty, researchers, practitioners, professionals, and community members from within and outside of the UMN who have elected to voluntarily affiliate with the Institute, to participate in its scholarly community, and to engage in outcomes-oriented sustainability work. One of IonE’s founding charges was to foster interdisciplinary connections across the University, which we consider essential to our theory of change.

During the last strategic plan term, our affiliate network has significantly grown – resulting in new opportunities and emergent needs. During this plan term, we expect to further align programming and resources available based on affiliate feedback; continue to support
the development of hubs of activity on all system campuses; develop a strategy balancing in-person, hybrid, and virtual programming; and continue to cultivate a culture of inclusion, as supported by strategies in our DEIJ action plan (Appendix B).

**Strategy 3B: Deepen community and partner engagement**

Collaborative processes of engagement are central to IonE’s theory of change. During this plan term, we expect to also prioritize external community engagement, including welcoming a broader set of partners to the table; intentionally recognizing diverse ways of knowing and learning; investing in more sophisticated mechanisms to steward key relationships; and to leverage key engagement platforms to strengthen our partnership and collaboration capacity.

During this plan term, we expect to prioritize external community engagement; to invest in more sophisticated mechanisms to steward key relationships; and to better integrate and thus strengthen our coordinated capacity for partnership and engagement. A key action in this strategy will be *expanding the voices IonE listens to*, as described in our DEIJ Action Plan (outlined in Appendix B). IonE engages diverse sectors and communities in a number of ways; however, there is an opportunity to develop our efforts to engage local and global communities in ways that clarify blind spots, enrich epistemological perspectives, deepen community engagement, and adopt additional decolonizing approaches.

**Strategy 3C: Develop distinctive learning/professional opportunities**

One of the complementary roles IonE plays within the University ecosystem is developing impactful, unique learning experiences and professional development opportunities – across all stages of learning, at the nexus of their expertise and sustainability/environment. Our vision describes people leading sustainability work at every level, feeling supported and connected to one another, resulting in expanded perspectives on both systems and challenges, as well as possible technological or policy solutions. One of the ways IonE makes this possible is through innovative cohort-based programming and advancing sustainability pedagogy.

During this plan term, we expect to further refine cohort-based programming across diverse stages of learning, from affiliates, professionals, and practitioners, to postdoctoral scholars, to graduate and undergraduate students – and we expect to offer new professional development opportunities that advance IonE’s approach to research, leadership, and communications.

We additionally plan to build on the successful pilot year(s) of our Postdoctoral Fellows program, which enabled a unique cluster hire of early-career researchers, and expand our Speaking Science platform, which provides science communication skills, thought leadership, and networking opportunities.
Implementation and Evaluation Plans

IonE leadership and staff are responsible for developing annual action/work plans, at a tactical level, to implement the above strategies and advance this plan. That work – and our evaluation of process against this plan – includes some key qualities and rhythms, described here.

First: Within the University, IonE is both agent and enabler. In other words, it both directly pursues interdisciplinary research, public-interest communications, and leadership/professional development and educational activities and provides infrastructure, support, encouragement, and resources for a broader University community to effectively pursue these activities and their associated sustainability outcomes.

Therefore, the impact we seek to generate through this plan does not happen, as it might in a more traditional organization, primarily (or even only) through the actions and activities of staff. Success over the strategic term looks like engaging, supporting, and enabling the participation of the U of M community – and the communities and people the institution serves. To this end, our staff hold responsibilities for implementing innovative network- and community-building activities; catalytic funding opportunities; and the integrated tracking and reporting functions that enable this broader, collective impact.

In implementing this plan, our work planning process will align with the academic year – and integrate the activities and actions our community developed and detailed as part of our DEIJ action plan. Each year we will set IonE-wide objectives and key results, to advance the strategies and goals described in these plans. Our key results will include milestones as well as quantifiable measures – or indicators – of our progress over time.

This process will be the foundation of our metrics and biennial reporting cycle, beginning in 2025 with the release of an initial integrated framework, tracking our progress on this plan and our DEIJ objectives; continuing in 2027 with a major mid-plan review; and concluding in 2029 with a final evaluation and report out of activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact.
Gratitude and Appreciation

This plan would not have been possible without the contributions of numerous individuals and groups, who deserve recognition for the ideas, insights, feedback, and advice they generously shared. In alphabetical order, we want to thank:

- **Our Affiliate network** – with members spanning our University’s five campuses and numerous organizations in the broader world – who continuously challenge, inspire, and motivate us to build a better, more meaningful IonE
- **Our External Advisory Board**, including Sam Grant, Alan Holt, and Maha Tahiri, who served on our strategic planning subcommittee, as well as the rest of our EAB members who gave us their encouragement and candid counsel
- **Our Faculty Leadership Council members**, including Snigdhasu Chatterjee, Kathy Draeger, Brett McDonnell, and Shailey Prasad, who served during this period on the organizational stewardship working group, as well as the other members of the FLC, who contributed ideas, clarified meanings, and affirmed our direction
- **Our Research and Innovation Office colleagues**, whose own vision for the University of Minnesota’s capacity to serve a greater public good helped inform and inspire our own – and who have been consistent champions of IonE within this ecosystem
- **Staff of the Institute**, who embarked on many rounds of reflection, introspection, and review, discussing achievements under the previous plan; what changed; and what still needs to be carried forward – and who will be important stewards and champions of executing this new strategic plan
- **Strategic Diversity Initiatives**, and our DEIJ Action Plan goal-writing teams, as well as the broader IonE DEIJ committee members and others who contributed to the parallel development of our new operational plan for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice – and continuously advocated for the relationship between these two documents
- **University of Minnesota supporters**, too numerous to be named, who have served as champions of the Institute, who have supported its growth and evolution, who have contributed to its success, and who have been a part of this journey

Last but not least, we want to also acknowledge our many friends and colleagues at other universities and interdisciplinary institutes who shared their own experiences about strategy and who wished our institute well on this strategic planning journey.

**We are frequently asked – and are happy to answer – what makes the UMN Institute on the Environment special or distinctive among peer organizations and institutions?** The answers are numerous, but on a foundational level, it is the idea that striving for impact together – through smart strategy shared by all – has the power to lift all boats: all universities, colleges, and schools; all faculty, practitioners, researchers, and teachers; all students; all nations and states; and all like-minded thinkers all around the world.
Appendices

Appendix A: Strategic Review Overview
- Focus groups
- Programmatic evaluation
- Landscape scan
- DEIJ/Climate assessment
- Knowledge Inventory

Appendix B: 2024 DEIJ Action Plan Overview
Appendix C: Focus group results (detailed data)
Appendix D: Programmatic review (detailed data)
Appendix E: Landscape scan (detailed data)
Appendix A
STRATEGIC REVIEW

In 2023, the institute conducted a strategic review involving information collected from both the internal and external IonE community. The review involved a flow of key inputs and considerations, flowing like water through a watershed and culminating in the production and distribution of a new strategic plan that carries the institute for five years, into 2028. Findings from each of these stages of flow, described below, are summarized on the following pages.

- In the tributaries of the watershed are the people and programs that make up IonE. Information on the opinions and experiences of affiliates, staff, and students were collected in focus groups. A review of IonE’s current portfolio of programming against the previous strategic plan and future opportunities was conducted by IonE staff and collated into an overall program evaluation.

- The tributaries of IonE gather into a common stream, and that stream must be responsive to the broader world, a world striving – and sometimes struggling – to achieve sustainability. A landscape scan of broader socio-economic, technological, and ecological trends was conducted with insights from the IonE External Advisory Board.

- As the stream builds momentum and becomes a river, the IonE community becomes increasingly whole and shares common features, including a commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ). Thus, we conducted a DEIJ assessment of priorities, work products, and culture.

- Finally, as the river builds steam it passes over a landscape of past knowledge, lessons learned, and previous experiments and accomplishments. A knowledge inventory in the form of key archival material including past program evaluations, founding documents that identify who and what the institute must serve, external reviews, and other enduring insights continue to inform strategy development.

Focus groups

Staying connected to IonE’s, affiliates, students, and key participants in the IonE community is mission-critical because these individuals are the “agents” who produce the impact we seek to cause in the world – in effect, they achieve our mission. To seek input of these individuals on the IonE strategic plan, we conducted five virtual discussions that attracted 80 participants. Responding to a common set of prompts, discussion groups went in slightly different directions, but five themes emerged. Additional detail is provided in Appendix C.
Five themes emerging from focus groups:

1. **A Vital Hub.** We heard that IonE fills a distinctive role, anchored in interdisciplinarity, convening, and collaboration – and serving as a hub for alignment around common issues and themes.

2. **Operationalize DEIJ.** We heard a clear call to further integrate diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) in operations, programming, and engagement, as well as to strengthen relationships with Tribal nations.

3. **Expand Impact Goals.** There was energy around creating more inclusive, expansive Impact Goals – with an emphasis on changes, needs, and opportunities in the world at large, such as the Inflation Reduction Act.

4. **Increase Specificity.** We heard a call for increased tangibility and specificity – more detail, especially with respect to IonE’s programming areas and goals.

5. **Strengthen Metrics.** We heard interest in strengthening the next plan’s evaluation and metrics – and discussion about the nuances of tracking, measuring, and communicating complexity.

**Programmatic evaluation**

To evaluate progress against the 2019 strategic plan and seek input on how the strategy and tactics of IonE should evolve for the 2024 plan, IonE staff pursued individual-, group-, and institute-level reflections. This was a qualitative input process, eliciting rounds of data and insights on questions such as: *How much progress did we make toward our vision? Where progress was made, what enabled it – and where not, what factors contributed to these challenges?*

These rounds of review and new ideation revealed a depth of accomplishment and alignment across the institute’s people and programs. As expressed by a staff member who worked at IonE under the 2019 plan and without a plan (pre-2019): “*For those part of the prior strategic planning process, the experience of shaping the mission and strategy of the institute provided the knowledge and confidence to craft new programs that ultimately achieve the intended objectives.*”

A strategic plan is only as good as the people who carry it out everyday, and the people responsible for stewarding the institute, its people and activities rose to challenges laid out in the 2019 plan.
The following are highlights of accomplishment, priorities that were identified under the 2019 plan and achieved by staff individually and in groups across IonE:

- Successful launch on the Impact Goal strategy with broad alignment and engagement across institute in specific goals and the philosophy of goals, including alignment of externally funded research projects, classroom and co-curricular programming, and events.

- Improvements in grant reporting with improved techniques for measure impact and increased effort to manage grants as integrated portfolio with attention to Impact Goals.

- Annual process of strategic budgeting conducted by program managers within each IonE unit and coordinated among directors of Knowledge Initiatives (KI), Public Interest Communications (Comms), Leadership and Education (L&E), and Institute Administration (Admin).

- The development of new protocols for inclusive hiring; clarification around pathways for promotion, more regular updating of job descriptions, and institute-wide use of compa-ratios; improved methods of onboarding; strategic use of bridge funding to promote stability among staff reliant on grant support; and clarification and organizational alignment of professional titles.

- Implementing new organizational structure for the institute, including new units (Admin, L&E, Comms, KI, and Advisory Boards) and leaders of these units.

- A new and refreshed brand for the institute, including style guides, unified IonE branding and simplified templates.

- Completed items on IonE's 1st DEIJ Action Plan, including a new granting criteria and a DEIJ mini-grant program, anti-racism and equity statements for the institute; DEIJ embraced in education programming, events, and grant applications.

- Deployed a suite of experimental approaches to meet aspects of the strategic plan, e.g., workshops to facilitate relationship-building during COVID, creation of a new, virtual seminar series, and creation of a new, interdisciplinary and cohort-based postdoctoral program.

- Developed cohorts as an engagement approach across the institute, from undergraduate experiential learning to professional development of affiliates.

- Used the 2019 strategic plan in service to the University, as a platform for helping to create and then serve MNtersections under MPACT 2025 (university strategic plan).
Still, more work is needed.

Some priorities in the 2019 plan remain to be completed, because the plan was ambitious and because unexpected challenges occurred including the COVID-19 pandemic. Other priorities have emerged as the world continues to evolve and change, and institute personnel gained understanding and skill conducting principles under the last strategic plan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highlights of features identified by IonE staff for the next strategic plan:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● <strong>A strategy for adopting new Impact Goals</strong>: transitioning from existing impact goals or evolving them in new directions, as well as making them more topically inclusive; improving our understanding of what it means to serve both our state and the world through Impact Goals; and new or improved methods for incentivizing participation in shared goals and outcomes with clearer definitions of success and strategic management of our grant portfolio and stage-gating of programming and events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● <strong>Strengthening engagement with external communities</strong>: through improvement methods of relationship management, integrated tactics for co-production in research and education, new ways for community participants to become part of the IonE community, and increased skill and capacity to match community needs with capacity within IonE and across the University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● <strong>Greater achievement for diversity, equity, inclusion and justice</strong>: clearer articulation of the institute's commitment to the intersection of environment/sustainability and other issues of social justice and commitment to new DEIJ action plan (Appendix D) through sufficient resourcing and accountability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● <strong>Staying nimble and explore new structural innovations</strong>: continuing to make space for institutional innovation, future structures, and programmatic growth including new ways that people can lead programs and activities that connect to IonE; pursue new lines of programming that advance the institute’s core strategy such as innovations in the future of education and greater scale of need for sustainability information and engagement across the University and the broader community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● <strong>Prioritize connection and service</strong>: creative ways to foster the connection of affiliates to IonE, which feels particularly important after isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● <strong>Measure what matters</strong>: increased emphasis on evaluation across IonE programming and activities so that resources directed to impactful programs and tactics can be adjusted to improve impact over time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>● <strong>Foster co-strategizing among staff</strong>: Enable IonE staff and work groups to communicate priorities to another to encourage personnel to value, endorse, and take up one another's priorities, and enable this is a flexible work environment that is both remote and in-person.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Additional detail is provided in Appendix D.
Landscape Scan

Academic and societal notions of “environment” have expanded from planetary conservation to “sustainability” that emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and environmental flourishing and seeks to steward, protect, restore, and nourish those systems so that future generations live in peace and prosperity. There have been many discoveries, innovations, and re-imaginations that make a sustainable future increasingly feasible, economically viable, and culturally appropriate.

Sustainability is no longer striving for attention. The field has moved well beyond an argument for relevance and significance. The era of simple climate denial is over. Society’s ability to hide environmental injustices is over. Notions of simple resource extraction without proper valuation and respect for nature, without restoration, and contributions to decarbonization have been shelved by the communities, political leaders, and corporate executives.

Yet, the need for sustainability is greater than ever. We are still creating strategies for deep decarbonization, for example, in technology, policy, economics, and culture. We are learning to build justice into all the disciplines of sustainability science so that new approaches lift up and center people and communities that have been historically and presently marginalized rather than perpetuate inequalities. And we are detecting and measuring our world in new ways with potential for greater focus and accountability in sustainable outcomes.

The scale of need for sustainable solutions is massive. We must build out an entire clean energy economy; we need orders of magnitude of growth in the sustainability workforce; and we need to bring financially viable sustainability solutions to every community in Minnesota and around the world. This scale of need is made even larger recognizing that some communities have been marginalized, maligned, neglected, or ignored in the past. They bear a disproportionate burden of environmental contaminants historically and a greater risk of hazards from a changing climate. Many people and communities lack access to the education, capital, and other essential resources essential to the transition to a sustainable future due to historic underinvestment.

When we survey the broader landscape in which we seek to meet the scale of sustainability need, we identify factors associated with technology, the economy, and global markets, with workforce and the need to develop capable sustainability “actors,” and the evolving sources of funding and sustainability supporters in the public and private sectors. These are described in greater detail in Appendix E.

From this landscape scan, we see an essential role for cross-sector collaboration, from communities to corporations, that accelerates innovation and application in cost-effective ways that promote access, equity, and justice. With its nimbleness and diverse relationships, IonE can attract funding from a wide range of sources and in support of a wide range of stakeholders and rightsholders. Through collaboration that leads to positive outcomes, we believe that IonE can be a restorative force for trust in higher education and work to overcome past injustices. And we continue to see a distinct role for higher education – and innovators such as IonE within higher education – to fill essential gaps in creating a sustainable future.
**DEIJ/Climate Assessment**

In January 2022, Strategic Diversity Initiatives partnered with IonE to conduct an initial survey of climate, culture, concerns, pain points, and accomplishments with respect to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. SDI then facilitated two half-day strategic planning sessions open to all participants in the IonE community.

Together, this strategic planning process provided a comprehensive approach to analyzing IonE’s programs, policies, systems, structures, and practices that may cause barriers to inclusion or access, reinforce systemic discrimination, or perpetuate disparities. Five thematic areas were identified, where specific tactics, outcomes, and methods of accountability were developed by writing teams, leading toward IonE’s 2nd DEIJ Action Plan described in Appendix B.

Areas identified for DEIJ “actions” to be pursued and tracked at IonE:

1. Reimagining the norms of knowledge and knowledge production and the role of community in science and research
2. Operationalize IonE’s DEIJ work
3. Develop an integrated communications strategy around DEIJ
4. Create a more welcoming, inclusive, and diverse culture
5. Increase accessibility of events, programming, and products

**Knowledge Inventory**

The 2024 strategic plan carries forward a number of priorities designed to address key insights from a “knowledge inventory” conducted in 2018.

Several important insights from that inventory include: that IonE can identify and adopt sustainability topics, with the potential to recruit and align community members on common goals; IonE develops tools to support community members in analytical decision-making and implementation; IonE creates collaboration and induce partnerships in the community; IonE creates collaboration between policy, practice, and technology; and IonE scales outcomes through communication for awareness, replication, and community cultivation. IonE is strongest when it draws upon and complements the work of colleges and collaborates with other translation-oriented units within the UMN.
Information for that plan affirmed that IonE is an innovation within the University, operating across colleges and disciplines and facing outward, oriented toward pressing sustainability problems in the broader world. It demonstrated strong interest among non-University stakeholders in partnering with the University on actionable solutions to tangible problems, but suggested that techniques for partnering effectively and efficiently has not been consistently realized across the University – a key niche to fill. It revealed that partners and members of IonE seek venues to gain insights, share expertise, overcome disciplinary silos, and contribute to larger, shared, and tangible goals. Specifically, we discovered that IonE’s ability to broker connections and convene people animated by a common purpose, resonates within and outside the University walls, necessitating that IonE enabled members of its community while also connecting them toward shared purpose and greater impact.

Viewing these data holistically, IonE committed in its 2019 plan to show up and support its community members as an archetypical “innovator,” an organization with the savvy to set big, audacious goals and then effectively convene and inspire teams to chase down those ideas.1 We carry forward this innovator archetype into our 2024 strategy, now enlivened in new ways.

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1 See Carol S. Pearson, Archetypal Branding. The innovator is a distinct subset of the “magician” archetype, which thrives on change and makes unexpected connections that shift the status quo, pondering big, audacious thoughts, championing new ideas and inspiring teams to chase them.
APPENDIX B: DEIJ ACTION PLAN OVERVIEW

The Institute on the Environment’s next DEIJ Action plan, to be finalized and released in summer 2024, represents a year of engagement, reflection, and significant contributions from across the IonE community – including its affiliates, staff, students, partners, and other stakeholders. The output of this work is a wide-ranging five-year plan, building on our first plan, and introducing new strategies and tactics to further integrate diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in the Institute’s work and workplace.

IonE began the process to develop this new plan in 2022, bringing on an external consultant, Strategic Diversity Initiatives, to guide the process. IonE staff worked with SDI to develop a survey of the IonE community; SDI then helped coordinate focus groups and two retreats open to all in early 2023. The question guiding these sessions was: What must IonE do now in order to become more anti-racist and inclusive? Drawing on this community input, SDI provided IonE with a summary and analysis of themes, which were organized into four goal areas.

Using an expression of interest survey, staff and affiliates then joined four “writing teams” charged with developing, organizing, and refining the possible strategies, tactics, resources, and timelines within each goal area. The writing teams spent a significant amount of time over the summer and fall of 2023 to develop these strategies, tactics, and expected results. What follows here is an excerpted summary of the draft plan, to be updated upon its release.

**Goal 1: Reimagining norms of knowledge and community in education and research**

IonE was created to be different and operate differently than the academy-as-usual. We learn and grow as a community that, through words and actions, supports and models a way of practicing education and research to accelerate just transformations for a sustainable future. Yet, we do not operate in a vacuum. We acknowledge that we, along with our partners and relationships, are deeply embedded in social contexts governed by norms that carry the legacy of colonialism and varied forms of oppression (“isms”) – a legacy that has no place in the present and future we strive to create. These norms are “the rules of the game” and set shared expectations and prescriptions of acceptable ways of thinking, embodying, and acting in a particular community and time. IonE should serve as a conduit through which the expertise, values, and – most importantly – voices of marginalized and affected communities can shape solutions, strategies, and policy related to the environment and sustainability. Our strategies to begin this work are to:

**Strategy 1: Expand the voices IonE listens to**

IonE engages diverse sectors and communities in a number of ways; however, there is an opportunity to both expand and deepen our efforts to engage local and global communities in ways that clarify blind spots, enrich epistemological perspectives, deepen community engagement, and adopt additional decolonizing approaches.

- Tactic: Develop a process to audit the non-HR policies, strategies, and activities
- Tactic: Audit implementation
- Tactic: Develop & implement co-creation approaches
Strategy 2: Examine ourselves
Within academia, we are good at examining issues and at IonE we take pride in its ability to do that across disciplines and sectors. We can leverage that capacity to examine our own ways of knowing and doing, including ways that we do indeed acknowledge and integrate diverse ways of knowing and doing, and where we have blindspots.

- Tactic: Dialogues Series
- Tactic: Implement and evaluate the series of dialogues

Strategy 3: Build the skills of the IonE community to think and work across diverse ways of knowing and doing
The success of integrating insights from the above strategies, such as the audit and the dialogue series, will be dependent on the skills of the IonE community to understand the issues and apply their understanding to their work. We must understand what our community’s needs are for skill development and offer, or refer for, appropriate training.

- Tactic: Assessment
- Tactic: Mentorship & training
- Tactic: Cultivating Community Grants

Goal 2: Operationalize IonE’s DEIJ Work
IonE is committed to integrating the values of DEIJ into our organizational practices; this plan offers four key strategies to further integrate DEIJ tactics into IonE’s operations over the next 3-5 years. These strategies include:

Strategy 1: DEIJ Leadership Capacity at IonE
When considering ways to increase DEIJ capacity at IonE, two key components are important to assess and study: 1) The potential hire of a DEIJ director or coordinator; and 2) DEIJ distributed leadership models. The recommendation is to assess both of these components together to determine the best course of action for DEIJ leadership capacity.

- Tactic: Research/assess DEIJ leadership models

Strategy 2: DEIJ integrated into each position
DEIJ goals in position descriptions, annual work plans, and performance evaluations ensure that IonE is both distributing DEIJ work across the organization and holding teams accountable to make progress on the goals we set in our work plans and goals. Including DEIJ goals in the work plans and annual goals of all employees also demonstrates a visible commitment, as an organization, to DEIJ as fundamental to how we do our work.

- Tactic: Alignment of position descriptions and work plans with DEIJ initiatives
Strategy 3: Onboarding and Hiring Processes

DEIJ goals in onboarding and hiring are intended to attract and retain a diverse workforce from marginalized communities through an antiracist and equitable lens. It is important to embed DEIJ practices from the start and bring implicit biases to the forefront because implicit biases, exclusive hiring practices, and narrow recruitment can create barriers to entry for people from marginalized communities. Some of the below tactics are already in place but are not being done consistently across the organization.

- Tactic: Implicit bias training
- Tactic: Job postings and new positions

Strategy 4: Facilities & Space Accessibility

The full incorporation of DEIJ into IonE’s protocols and processes necessitates both 1) physical and virtual working environments that enable employee health, success, and wellbeing and 2) individual and communal gathering spaces that foster a welcoming atmosphere supportive of our diversity of needs and practices. To be successful, inclusive facilities, accessible spaces, and individual accommodations must be considered within Goal 2 and across other Goals (e.g., Communication and Culture).

- Tactic: Reference guide
- Tactic: Off-campus reference guide
- Tactic: Accessible Virtual Design

Goal 3: Develop an integrated diversity, equity, inclusion and justice (DEIJ) communications approach

Communication is inextricably connected to what we call DEIJ work. As a social phenomenon, communication enables exchange of ideas, connection among people, and expression of needs and values. As a professional practice, communications is a commitment to conscious and continuous decision-making, an active process of considering each choice – from language and tone to visual format and channel – in light of what it signals and how it might shape changes in attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors (and to what end). Communication – and all the choices it entails – simultaneously reflects culture(s) and systems and shapes them. In this way, consciously communicating is a form of DEIJ work itself.

The strategies below reflect this range of functions, describing how the Institute on the Environment (IonE) can strengthen and leverage individual, programmatic, and organizational communications in service of our DEIJ objectives. This integrated approach is essential, because all members of an organization inescapably and powerfully share in shaping its voice – and thus influence communications-driven outcomes and impacts. Focusing on only one sphere of communication – or operating without alignment – is at best incoherent, at worst counterproductive. Our interdependent strategies and tactics include:
Strategy 1: Strengthen our organizational foundations for doing this work
Through tactics such as enhancing access to communications resources and integrating assessment of strengths and individualized skills-building into onboarding plans.

- Tactic: Audit DEIJ communications resources and tools
- Tactic: Enhance access to DEIJ communications resources and tools
- Tactic: Integrate resources, tools, and skills-evaluating/building into onboarding
- Tactic: Develop a plan for accessible, skills-building trainings or workshops
- Tactic: Develop a common, shared language for DEIJ communications
- Tactic: Audit accessibility of core IonE platforms and cross-functional practices

Strategy 2: Assist IonE leadership with an internal communications plan
Including evaluating sentiment and understanding, and identifying opportunities to leverage channels. Tactics include:

- Tactic: Research understanding of IonE's DEIJ values, goals, and work to date
- Tactic: Based on this research, establish our internal communications goal
- Tactic: Support IonE and DEIJ leadership in developing an internal plan

Strategy 3: Create an external comms plan supporting our DEIJ work
Beginning with an assessment of organizational and staff communications, prioritizing external needs, perspectives, and knowledge.

- Tactic: Assess perceptions of IonE communications related to DEIJ
- Tactic: Based on this research, establish external communications goals
- Tactic: Collaborate cross-functionally to fully draft the external strategy

Strategy 4: Leverage our existing channels and content creation program to advance our broader DEIJ goals
In recognition that IonE contributes to shaping narratives and advancing public-interest goals at the intersection of DEIJ and sustainability, environment, and climate.

- Tactic: Evaluate opportunities to advance new narratives, build engagement, and drive progress in service of our broader DEIJ values and objectives
- Tactic: Leverage our content creation program to advance narrative change and DEIJ objectives

Strategy 5: Strengthen cross-functional accountability
Establishing structures that support the adoption of new practices and patterns, as well as external input and evaluation.

- Tactic: Strengthen internal accountability around consistent practices and standards
- Tactic: Research and propose structures for external evaluation and assessment
**Goal 4: Create a more welcoming, inclusive, and diverse culture at IonE**

A welcoming and inclusive environment that supports a diverse IonE community. Intentionally creating this culture requires contributions across the entire organization and actions that demonstrate inclusivity. The strategies were gleaned from the DEIJ action plan conversations to identify priorities and tactics that the community believes are actionable and would advance a more welcoming, inclusive, and diverse community and culture within IonE. These tactics are intended to be evaluated regularly to assess the effectiveness of the portfolio of tactics towards this goal; adaptive management should be deployed to continue to refine the use and implementation of tactics towards the goal outcomes.

**Strategy 1: Creating an IonE DEIJ Community of Practice**

*Transitioning our current DEIJ committee into a community of practice, a learning community focused on self-education of DEIJ and integration of best practices with one’s own work.*

- Tactic: Identify co-leads within IonE to develop, define a new structure for, and launch the IonE DEIJ Community of Practice (CoP)
- Tactic: Develop and share DEIJ resources and trainings
- Tactic: Support active and voluntary engagement of IonE staff and student employees in the IonE DEIJ community of practice
- Tactic: Encourage and welcome IonE Affiliates and others who are connected to IonE to be part of the IonE DEIJ CoP and engage in the ways that are most meaningful to them

**Strategy 2: Continuing a culture of welcoming and community**

*This strategy set proposes tactics that create the structure to allow IonE members to welcome, meet, and engage with others in our community.*

- Tactic: Fostering IonE staff relationship building across IonE through “Welcome Buddies”
- Tactic: Assessment of the effectiveness of current IonE relationship-building activities (across IonE organizational units), including who we are not reaching
- Tactic: Integrate best practices for integrating relationship building into IonE programming
- Tactic: Provide funding and staff support to establish IonE affinity groups

**Strategy 3: Next generation of IonE’s shared values**

*Building on the research conducted as part of Goal 3 Strategy 4, revisit (and update as useful) the IonE Way and integrate values into IonE’s culture through our work.*

- Tactic: Revisit the “IonE Way” – a public facing declaration of our shared values
- Tactic: Given next generation IonE Way, integrate values into our staff work
- Tactic: Given next generation IonE Way, integrate values into IonE’s programming
APPENDIX C

Detailed results from evaluation of 2019-2023 strategic plan with focus groups

Five virtual discussions January 9 – 17, 2023. 80 participants in mixed (staff/affiliate/student) discussion groups. Open to all IonE affiliates, staff, and students. Notetakers recorded responses, participants added to Google docs. Invited reflection and response to our current strategic plan (2019-23), in response to three prompts:

- How do the central vision and principles of the 2019-2023 plan resonate with you?
- What strengths or capacities of IonE and/or the University of Minnesota does the 2019-2023 plan build or draw upon?
- How can IonE’s next strategic plan adapt to meet emerging/new needs?

Theme 1: A Vital Hub

We heard that IonE fills a distinctive role, anchored in interdisciplinarity, convening, and collaboration – and serving as a hub for alignment around common issues and themes.

- “IonE’s interdisciplinary work is one of the relatively few that brings people together from very different backgrounds, this is the most valuable aspect of the plan and IonE’s role.”
- “I think IonE and the University are uniquely positioned to promote curiosity, build rising leaders, support new research, and give back to the larger community and world.”
- “We have a federation of colleges, the things that connect us are critical. IonE is one of few institutions that can do this.”

Theme 2: Operationalize DEIJ

We heard a clear call to further integrate diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) in operations, programming, and engagement, as well as to strengthen relationships with Tribal nations.

- “DEIJ should be central to everything we do – and it should be reflected in our everyday practices and programming.”
- “I feel environmental and climate justice needs to more clearly a top priority throughout our next plan.”
- “I agree with others in my group that working with Tribal nations and prioritizing Indigenous ways of knowing as well as leadership within IonE is important.”
### Theme 3: Expand Impact Goals

There was energy around creating more inclusive, expansive Impact Goals – with an emphasis on changes, needs, and opportunities in the world at large, such as the Inflation Reduction Act.

- “Rethink the Impact Goals to better emphasize the social sciences and humanities by being more explicit about how solutions related to sustainability might be more effectively implemented and also frame impacts in terms that emphasize impacts on people and communities in addition to the environment.”
- “A focus on conservation and biodiversity is important. We’re seeing more social science going into natural resource management.”
- “How might IonE’s Impact Goals intersect with the Inflation Reduction Act to help facilitate the ambitious application of its incentives?”

### Theme 4: Increase Specificity

We also heard a call for increased tangibility and specificity – more detail, especially with respect to IonE’s programming areas and goals.

- “Aspiration is good for vision and mission. Goals need to be more tangible, so progress towards goals can be measured.”
- “We must specify ‘sustainability for whom’ if we want to make the strategic objectives more concrete…. Additionally, we must define our scales, such as local vs. worldwide.”
- “Ask ourselves for the next strategic plan, ‘what does success look like?’ in addition to ‘what is our theory of change?’”

### Theme 5: Strengthen Metrics

We also heard interest in strengthening the next plan’s evaluation and metrics – and discussion about the nuances of tracking, measuring, and communicating complexity.

- “How do we assess whether we are making impact or hone our ability to make impact?”
- “How do we describe the impact we’ve made this far?”
- “How to be more targeted AND leave room for innovation and magic of bringing people together?”
APPENDIX D

Detailed results from staff programmatic review and projections

Between February 13 and April 13, IonE staff pursued individual-, group-, and collective-level reflection on the strategic plan. This was a qualitative input process, eliciting rounds of data and insights on questions such as: How much progress did we make toward our vision? Where progress was made, what enabled it – and where not, what factors contributed to these challenges?

The following document includes levels of synthesis: key take-aways summarized from all feedback; notes from cross-group discussions at the April 2023 staff meeting; and organizational and group/team synthesis notes. Key takeaways are given below.

ACHIEVEMENTS / OBSERVATIONS FROM CURRENT PLAN

- Improvements in grant reporting; enabling to measure impact; managing grants as integrated portfolio
- Strategic budgeting
- Inclusive hiring; promotional pathways; onboarding; deployed use of compa-ratios; articulated goals & deployment of “cake layers”; bridge funding; transparency in pay bands
- Remote work / survived pandemic
- Three clear pillars of theory of change; taking a scholarly approach to achieve ToC and initial examples of integration across IonE (e.g., L&E become increasingly engaged with strategic learning, deploying pedagogy strategy); ToC as a “how” not just an impact goal “what”
- Scaling impact and cultivating belonging provided new guidestars for comms work, now unified public-interest capacity
- New/refreshed brand, style guides and visual updates; unified IonE branding and simplified and unified templates
- New units of IonE; brought in leaders that identify with and support programmatic areas of emphasis; creation of leadership team
- New impact goal strategy with broad alignment and engagement across institute
- Integrated public interest comms and education into granting program, greater opportunities to better and creatively integrate humanities and arts in various programs and activities
• Strides in DEIJ across all units and activities of IonE; anti-racism statement; new granting criteria, inclusive hiring, DEIJ Action Plan 1.0 and 2.0; IonE equity statement
• Various platforms for IonE community-driven programming, data collection, learning; new community engagement coordinator position
• Variety of culture changes; has taken time but has been consistently felt and embraced across IonE; changes to program branding to enable collaboration and new activities
• Aligned external grants (and significantly greater $ and multiyear) with impact goals & other core strat plan features / philosophy
• Brought in grants and new funding that flows to affiliates, non-academic community members, and students across all five campuses (CIROH, CASC, MNtersections, Ecolab, Gabbert)
• Partnership with RSDP, accelerate impact in greater MN, alignment of RSDP strategic plan with impact goals
• Deployed various tactics and emphasis on relationship-building and recognized that time to pursue, sustain relationships; some of these relationships are held individually & some held institutionally; use of O&M to prioritize
• Deployed experimental approaches to meet aspects of strat plan, e.g., workshops and RFPs to facilitate relationship-building during COVID, virtual People and Planets
• Deployed other innovations such as postdoc program
• Impact goals and equity / DEIJ emphasis embraced in coursework, other education programming
• Implemented cohort strategy (“special sauce”)
• Deployed systems thinking across all groups/units
• Expanded our networks and improved our reputation (e.g., comms relationships with other parts of the U, new affiliates)
• Showing up for the University; carrying forward central university priorities, e.g. MNtersections and MPACT2025
• Strategic risk taking; e.g., within our IonE community via granting criteria and priorities on relationship building instead of academic product oriented and increased multi-year external grants given IG prioritization
• Improving clarity on professional expectations, e.g., more regularly updating of job descriptions
• Clarification and organizational alignment of titles, e.g., PI promotion tracks in KI
FOR NEXT PLAN

- Strategy for adopting new impact goals – how vs. what; how to transition existing impact goals or evolve them in new directions; how to make impact goals topically more inclusive; explain impact goal relationship to SDGs

- Reimagining / rearticulation of “in MN for the world”; internationalizing; impact at scale

- Strengthen key areas of expertise, e.g., energy transitions staffing not sufficient to take advantage of new federal energy funding opportunities; support of student social ventures

- Strengthening (external) community engagement, including diverse ways of knowing & learning; also, shared and prioritized relationship management, co-production, collaboration, including individual relationships being institutionalized / institutional memory (e.g., via community engagement coordinator); other ways for external partners to be part of IonE community; variety of ways to engage with partners & matching form of engagement with partner need & capacity

- New website

- Reinforce a whole host of issues in current plan, e.g., impact goal orientation, key pillars of ToC; DEIJ

- Clear articulation of anti-racist organization & operationalize DEIJ action plan including resourcing to ensure its prioritization and success

- Staying innovative; supporting strategic risk taking

- Align IonE-based research with affiliate-driven research (e.g., LTER, ASCEND)

- Affiliate connection to IonE – continue to strengthen, especially post-pandemic

- Cultivate collaborative communities to pursue grants; increased attention to external funding; strategic deployment of programming as “broader impacts”

- Future of education – mid-career, Climate School or other Sust Ed 2.0, cross-campus curricula revisions, next-gen LE requirements, future of GCC; greater scale of ed. impact

- Sustain cohorts but also expand / identify opportunities that are open / inclusive to all (lean into Priya Parker); new fellows programming, including cohort model for fellows; though downside to cohorts is that can feel exclusionary

- Growing emphasis on program evaluation

- Deploy new campus hubs and (further) strengthen systemwide programming
• Make space for innovative, future structures & growth; ways that people can lead programs & activities that connect to IonE, e.g., centers?

• Evergreen case for IonE; next capital campaign / campaign priorities; innovative ways to talk about IonE work (not NGO, not “academia as usual”)

• Having a distinctive knowledge basis and scholarly capacity across all pillars

• More celebrating achievement and celebrating objectives or activities that conclude successfully or evolve into something new

• Integration of mini-grants and other external facing funding sources as part of a larger IG grant strategy

• OKRs and shared goals/targets as “magnets” that attract programs and behaviors of staff, affiliates and students towards shared outcomes

• OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE (OE): Future of work; balance of remote working; “understanding virtual”; distributed workforce; reimagining our space; returning to vibrant in-office, diverse & abundant use of IonE space, in-person programming

• OE: **Enable IonE staff and work groups to communicate priorities to another (and value / endorse / take up one another’s priorities); monthly planning to identify shared priorities; “sandbox”; how do people know one another’s priorities? Could be addressed by *flipping* the process, co-creating objectives and key results upstream – sharing priorities in a balanced scorecard + OKRs?

• OE: What does “proactive” mean?? Strat plan should answer

• OE: Top-down drives bottom-up in annual goal setting, budgeting, strategic hiring

• OE: Culture of grace & appreciation for good / important work that others are doing

• OE: Extend and/or clarify promotion pathways where possible (like in KI)

• OE: Continue / extend / improve excellence in hiring, onboarding, cultivation of societally impactful professionals, strategic budgeting (and burndown table planning), and shared, annual priority setting

• OE: Define / clarify staff roles related to impact goals; responsibilities for conducting impact goal activities (more than just adopting and aligning as achieved under first strategic plan)

• OE: Continued emphasis on managing grants as integrated portfolio, including stage gating and growing sophistication in stewardship, reporting and impact metrics/quantification

• OE: Infrastructure for metrics and accountability & other shareable resources, e.g., searchable database of affiliates, external partnerships, alumni
APPENDIX E

Results from landscape scan

IonE’s External Advisory Board conducted small group discussions and a plenary conversation focused on landscape that identified the following features, factors, and considerations relevant to the practice of sustainability, and the conduct of higher ed related to sustainability, in 2023.

Regarding technology, economy, and the market —

- ECONOMY: Rising interest rates, a possible recession, and state-sanctioned warfare are making the economy uncertain, in the US and around the world. The international economy is trending toward competition among countries and nationalistic concerns.

- PRIVATE SECTOR: Corporate accountability for environmental risk and causing environmental harms is sometimes controversial but steadily increasing, including in the form of shareholder advocacy and massive growth in remote sensing and other large-scale, independent data.

- INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY: Society is undergoing a revolution in the ability to collect and generate data about people and the world around us. These data offer opportunities to discover transformative solutions and move them from the laboratory to private markets and public communities. They also raise transformative issues of privacy, differential access, and bias.

- INNOVATION: Innovators continue to design and improve new technologies to address sustainability issues. Many of these technologies are becoming financially viable and are rapidly expanding, but others are underfunded or fail to attract private investment because they are early-stage.

Regarding the international context —

- INTERNATIONAL POLICY: There is growing demand to account for “loss and damage” of climate change, biodiversity loss, and other environmental harms that are caused, primarily, by developed countries.

Regarding the capacity and interests of people —

- WORKFORCE: The sustainability workforce is experiencing strong growth and is expected to expand and diversify further. This workforce demand increases the need for certification and standardization.

- ENGAGEMENT: A growing body of research shows the importance of storytelling to
build shared values, avoid political tropes, and give context to empirical evidence on sustainability themes. Successful storytelling is as much about engagement, multi-way dialog, and diverse communication platforms as it is skillful explanation.

- PUBLIC OPINION: Public awareness and concern for climate action has steadily grown, across both political parties. There is also growing awareness of social inequality associated with race, education, and income that is associated with environmental risk and opportunity. This concern is strong among university students and other young people.

- TRUST IN EXPERTS: Science is experiencing a crisis of legitimacy, and trust in social institutions including higher education has recently declined. Approaches to enable greater participation in and awareness of research, reduce the cost and increase the accessibility of education, and foster greater transparency and intellectual openness are essential to the future of higher education.

Regarding resources to pursue sustainability research and practice —

- FUNDING, PRIVATE: Many funders in the sustainability sector are quite siloed and specialized, while sustainability issues are interconnected and require integrated ways of knowing.

- FUNDING, PUBLIC: The climate for government funding in sustainability is strong, but in Minnesota and the US, support for the two political parties are nearly perfectly divided and this suggests that control of government is likely to fluctuate between parties over time and space.