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The OU Sustainability Forum brings together  
academics and industry leaders from around the world

NORMAN, Okla. – The 2024 OU Sustainability Forum focused on identifying ways in which community, industry and academia can collaborate to overcome the current technological, socioeconomic and scientific hurdles at the intersection between energy and materials science.

The second annual research forum took place on Jan. 26-27, 2024, on the OU campus and featured one poster session, three panels, and one keynote presentation with leading industry and academia experts. The forum offered unique perspectives on economic challenges, pathways to an equitable future, and robust discussions of environmental constraints and contingencies. The event offered valuable connections and allowed participants to discover potential projects to engage collaboratively with students, faculty members, and industry leaders from around the world.

Forum participants highlighted interdisciplinary sustainability approaches and pointed out the value of the event that brought together over 80 participants, including tribal representatives, industry leaders, and researchers based in the USA, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Oman, and Singapore. Framed within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the Forum's many discussions focused on synergy-centered opportunities to work across disciplines to transform not only the way sustainability is achieved but also the way the local and global communities perceive and understand the need for sustainability.

Panelist Dr. Jimmy Faria Albanese, professor at the Department of Chemical Engineering at the University of Twente, The Netherlands, and OU alumnus, described the importance of addressing sustainability because it highlights real-life challenges. Though projects to harness energy are innovative and exceptional on paper, they need to be scalable, long-lasting, profitable, environmentally friendly, and socially responsible.

“What I see as the critical component [for the next five years] is energy consumption,” Faria said. “How can we de-carbonize production goods and how can we de-carbonize the energy that we need? For me, the de-carbonization of chemicals and energy is the most critical thing we need to pay attention to.”

Dozens of students, from undergraduate to post-doctoral, attended the forum. They had the chance to interact with leading experts in a friendly and open setting. Several students from the OU online MS program in Sustainability: Energy & Materials Management visited the OU campus in person for the first time to take part in the forum. Many were inspired to hear from leaders about what and where the future research should be going within energy, economics,

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sustainability, and trans-global agency efforts. Laura Sarmiento, a Chemical Engineering doctoral student at the OU Gallogly College of Engineering, said she was excited to hear from executive leaders about their research and development and what the future holds for global companies looking to make a difference.

“Right now, our world is facing so many challenges when it comes to energy and sustainability. So, forums like this have been great because it allows us to see how different departments across campus are coming together alongside these big companies to answer some of those challenges from a research perspective,” Sarmiento said.

Alberto Fidi, a visiting prospective doctoral student from the University of Florence in Italy, appreciated the transparency of discussions about obstacles faculty members face when they introduce sustainability programs.

“I think the people that work in this field aren’t aware of everything that could be happening on the academic and industry side of things when it comes to research and sustainability,” Fidi said. “So, it’s been really great and an honor to be invited and hear from people who are doing the work and vision right now.”

“These events are crucial,” Dr. James Collard, Director of Planning and Economic Development for the Citizen Potawatomi Nation said. “If we don’t communicate with each other and share information, we aren’t going to get very far in anything. Being able to air out our differences and knowledge is super important because no one knows everything. This is a gathering of people who have one thing in common: a thirst for knowledge. We all come from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, but our goal is still the same: enhance the human condition.”

Prof. Bhavik Bakshi, the Wrigley Professor at Arizona State University and author of the book “Sustainable Engineering” delivered a concluding keynote presentation. Bakshi offered an upbeat perspective on the future of sustainability research. According to Bakshi, as academia, industry, and government organizations start working together, new approaches develop, including investigations of how it might be possible to work *together* with nature to achieve sustainable development at the intersection between energy and materials.

The forum was sponsored by the OU Mewbourne College of Earth and Energy, OU Institute for Resilient Environmental and Energy Systems (IREES), OU Institute for Community and Society Transformation (ICAST), OU Gallogly College of Engineering School of Sustainable Chemical, Biological, and Materials Engineering, and the Asahi Glass Chair. The OU NSF Growing Convergence Research (GCR) project *tRANsition to Green Energy in gas-producing regions (RANGE)* sponsored the forum’s poster session.

OU Sustainability Forum organizers agreed to continue working together on connecting scholars, community advocates, and innovative leaders to increase sustainability, energy, and environmental research.

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