

# Sierra Youth Coalition

[www.syc-cjs.org](http://www.syc-cjs.org)  
National

## **WHO THEY ARE**

The Sierra Youth Coalition (SYC) is a national, youth-driven, and diverse non-profit organization working in Canada. Through grassroots action, SYC aims to address globalization, consumption, and climate change through a solutions-based approach of promoting education for sustainability, bioregionalism, sustainable communities, and lifestyle simplicity. The Sierra Youth Coalition strives to:

- Involve: empower youth in Canada to become active members of their community
- Educate: create a widespread understanding that all things are connected
- Change: challenge unjust and unsustainable systems by using a solutions-based approach
- Invoke Seven Generations: ensure that the voices of future generations are clearly heard by decision-makers

## **WHAT DO THEY DO?**

Their Sustainable Campuses Initiative is one of a kind in Canada, as they've managed to carve out a niche for themselves among the post-secondary youth demographic. The Sierra Club has a good reputation, as does the Sierra Youth Coalition. They've been able to unite almost 50% of all universities across Canada to promote sustainability policy. They've hosted a listserv where youth can post information and questions regarding a whole slew of issues and get responses from across the country.

About 5 years ago, they started developing an assessment that would be, ideally, country-wide where students could assess campus sustainability, and provide hands-on learning opportunities. They want campus communities to be models of sustainability, where people come together to discuss the issues.

Through these assessments, they've managed to set up an indicator set that qualitatively measures campus sustainability that looks at the campus as an entire community. This helps identify the means and the direction that the campus needs to take in order to achieve a higher level of sustainability.

## **WHO DO THEY ENGAGE?**

SYC focuses 50 to 60 percent of time and energy on forming multi-stakeholder groups. Though the SYC is mainly composed of environmentally-oriented youth, they recognize the importance of attracting a variety of students. The SYC engages many people from all faculties and is thus able to bring forward many different ideas and innovative approaches to improving sustainability on campus.

They do a great job at upholding the second of the five principles for intergenerational partnerships, which is to encourage creativity and difference. They acknowledge the power and potential of a diversity of views and backgrounds of the students that consider joining the SYC. The Youth Friendly Guide stresses this importance.

One critical aspect of the SYC is the engagement of first-year university students, every year. They really focus on having younger, new students involved. Otherwise, they could inadvertently adopt the look of a clique that is closed to new joiners.

**“We stay away from forming a clique and make sure that young and new students feel welcome in joining. Even if they’re quiet, and they often are! Many stay on, but in a couple of years they step off. It’s critical that we engage young people to learn, get mentored, and eventually take over. That’s what a lot of organizations know but don’t actively do. We make it easy for people to participate and become engaged.”**

- Lindsay Telfer, Former Director

## **HOW DO THEY ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE?**

Once again, levels of autonomy and empowerment to youth are very important. When the SYC approaches youth, they don’t simply tell them what they’re about and assign them a project. They sit down with them and inquire as to how they can work together and create something meaningful that will make a difference to things they care about.

**“You can’t have meaningful youth engagement that’s not youth-run and youth-led. The experience of making your own decisions and living by them, as well as learning from mistakes, are super-important. The space to do that lies within a youth-led organization.”**

-Lindsay Telfer, Former Director

## **WHAT THE YOUTH FRIENDLY GUIDE SAYS**

The Youth Friendly Guide also values the importance of youth autonomy through its Ladder of Participation. It defines youth participation as where youth are invested with real responsibility, which fosters feelings of trust across intergenerational lines, puts young people in touch with the consequences of their choices, and cultivates an empowering feeling of stewardship over their future.

## **WHAT ADVICE DO THEY GIVE:**

**“Avoid lecturing young people, as most of the time, 90% will check out. Always have a component that will engage them in an activity or exercise. It may be difficult to get youth to participate in the beginning. But if you persevere throughout your presentation, even those who sleep at the beginning might jump at the opportunity to participate in an interactive workshop. While being educational and inspiring, give them something that’s different from the everyday classroom environment.”**

- Lindsay Telfer, Former Director