Student 1:

Two of the most helpful contacts I made were the Director of Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability at Campbell Soup Company and the Worldwide Director of Sustainability at Johnson & Johnson. These women are both doing the work that I hope to do in managing sustainability within large companies that have a big impact. It was interesting to discuss waste in the medical field particularly with Sarah from Johnson & Johnson because in Penn’s Eco-Reps we have students working on a project to reduce waste in nursing simulation labs and it is definitely a very relevant issue at Penn where we have so many hospitals, but it is hard to address because health and sterile equipment is incredibly important. She was also very honest about her process getting to where she is now which was great. Megan especially is doing something I am very interested in. She works with domestic and international suppliers all the way down Campbell’s supply chain on issues from environmental sustainability to social responsibility. She said that one shareholder in particular was very interested in making sure the people in the areas the company gets their food from still have access to clean drinking water, which I thought was a really interesting intersection of environmental and social concerns throughout the supply chain. She also talked about how at her first job she was a team of one and now she works as a bigger group where everyone gets to specialize in certain areas of sustainability and how the field is growing like this, which is really exciting for me. I ended up connecting with her on LinkedIn and learned a lot about what it’s like to do the type of work I want to go into.

One energy-related thing I learned was that Eastern Shore Natural Gas is working on biogas technology where they turn agricultural waste and biomass into high quality fuel, and this is a very new idea in this part of the country so part of the work they are doing there is getting people accustomed to this idea. Another thing I learned, which surprised me, was how many people in this industry did not necessarily start out studying sustainability or pursuing it at all, but found it through contacts, experiences in their company, or just a mid-life change in career path and going back to school. Finally, I learned a lot about the carbon footprint of the medical industry and just how enormous it is. Sarah from J&J was saying that if this industry was a country it would have maybe the 7th largest economy in the world and has a carbon footprint that is on par with places like the U.K. I was aware of this to some extent, but had no idea how extreme it was.

Student 2:

I had a long conversation with two employees from Rubicon Global. Rubicon acts as a "broker" between waste producers and repurposing facilities. They divert waste from landfills in nearly every sector of manufacturing and production, but our conversation focused mostly on organic/food waste. We talked about contamination in recycling streams, how to incentivize waste reduction, and how our recycling system has changed after China made the decision to no
longer accept our recycling. We spoke about the roadblocks that many of their customer companies face, such as a restaurant on the 6th floor that is unable to easily transport its compost or a company on a narrow street that trucks are unable to drive down. We also spoke about incentives for consumers and companies alike in reducing waste, and he mentioned China’s “social point” system where people were publicly penalized or shamed for failing to follow recycling standards or for contaminating recycling. One of the challenges facing the recycling industry writ large is the lack of awareness and knowledge when it comes to individual behavior. And the variance and complexity of public recycling infrastructure doesn’t help. Most municipal and city recycling systems are nonuniform. Apparently, California just announced a state wide standard!

I also enjoyed speaking with the representative from Morningstar. This financial firm works to provide information, research, analysis, and credit ratings for certain indexes and securities. I spoke to her about her role in the company, what ESG entails, and how Europe is creating a new social pressure (or standard) in the American finance field. She told me about some emerging markets in the environmental field, such as alternative meats, AI, and renewable energies. She holds the sustainability coordinator position at the company and works to integrate ESG principals in all the indexes and internal operations. I took the opportunity to ask her about fossil fuel divestment, particularly what she thought about fossil fuel stocks carrying higher risks and how investment or divestment may impact the performance of indexes. She said that it’s hard to tell, as the performance is dependent on many other factors aside from whether or not the index includes fossil fuel companies. She also mentioned an online resource that I can use to find information on which specific companies or funds Penn invests in.

As the event came to a close, I was able to chat with a marketing employee from Johnson & Johnson briefly. Most of our discussion centered around how Johnson and Johnson finds ways to creatively communicate data and research. The largest lesson I gained from our conversation was that the key to marketing is storytelling. It’s one thing to know the facts, but it’s another to use and implement those facts in day to day life. A J&J intern working for pharmaceutical research and development spoke about his time on the job, and clearly loved it.

General comment:

Every conversation I had was welcoming and engaging! With each person I spoke to, I felt I left with a better understanding of what working in the environmental field could look like and how jobs in sustainability are changing in response to growing financial tools and technological innovations. The diversity of companies at the event proved the interdisciplinary nature of the environmental field. There is so much to learn and there are so many pathways to take!

Student 3:

During the “Meet & Greet” networking session organized by the Wharton Initiative for Global Environmental Leadership (IGEL) Careers in Sustainability Leadership, I met Libby Bernick, who is the Head of Sustainability at Morning Star. During our conversation, she explained how investment research firms (such as Morningstar), credit rating agencies, and similar financial services providers are making sustainability an increasing important part of their assessment of companies. Morningstar has teams tasked with assessing the sustainability practices of the companies covered by the firm, and with providing investors their views on such practices – so
that investors can make sustainability a factor in their decision-making process of becoming or not shareholders of such companies.

I also spoke with Aaron McGarvey, a Project Manager for American Water. American Water is the largest investor-owned water and wastewater services company in the US. I learned that American Water serves millions of customers mainly in the Midwest, Southeast, Mid-Atlantic, Eastern, and CA & HI. In addition, it was interesting to learn that, according American Water’s assessment, most municipally owned utilities that provide water to residents are behind American Water in terms of quality of the water provided. American Water has a dedicated team of PhDs to address emerging contaminants and water quality issues, and also has a team dedicated to all ESG efforts executed by the firm.

Overall, I thought that the event was very interesting and well organized. The setup made it easier to talk to meet several executives from the different firms presenting. In addition, I believe it is important to have events on campus that value sustainability-related careers. As an improvement for next year, I believe it would be helpful to have a handout with names of the companies present, and where they were located in the room.

Student 4:

I met a lot of great people at the networking event this past week and talked to representatives from many different companies, including Johnson & Johnson, SUEZ, Eastern Shore Natural Gas, and Morning Star. My two most memorable conversations and contacts made were the J&J representative, Sarah, and the Eastern Shore Natural Gas representative, Jackie. Sarah works in the Sustainability group at J&J and focuses on reducing waste for hospital pharmaceutical products. Since I worked at AmerisourceBergen, a pharmaceutical distribution company, we were able to compare our experiences working in the healthcare industry. The company I worked at did not have a separate department dedicated to sustainability, and instead included sustainability under the umbrella of Corporate Social Responsibility. However, since there are many disparities in the healthcare system, sustainability was often not top on the list for that department. Sarah and I talked about the importance of making environmental campaigns business-efficient, and she shared that much of her job is spinning environmental arguments to be financially responsible, cost-saving arguments. The conversation, therefore, was very affirming of my decision to study both economics and sustainability. The other interesting contact I made was Jackie, from Eastern Shore Natural Gas. I wasn’t exactly sure what a natural gas company would have to say about sustainability, but I ended up having a really interesting conversation about the role of natural gas in the transition to green energy. Jackie actually worked in solar installations before having to relocate to the east coast and find a job in a different energy sector. She admitted that she was hesitant to work in natural gas, but was happily surprised to learn that her company actually has a lot of sustainability measures in place. For example, she explained that if a pipeline is going to interfere with the habitat of any special animal species, the company pays the extra cost to reroute the pipeline around that habitat.

I learned a lot from this meeting, but a few really interesting things stick out to me. From talking to the Morningstar representative, I learned more about investing in green markets. She shared that her job is to ensure clients have access to research on green investment options and encourage them to diversify their holdings into green industries. Additionally, she told me that in Europe, governments are passing laws to consider the amount of green investments a company
has when determining their credit ratings for loans. I also learned about SUEZ, a company I hadn’t previously heard of. I learned that they are responsible for many drinking water and wastewater programs around the world. I learned about their improved metering system, which allows the company to get live updates on water usage and detect potential leaks more quickly and efficiently. Finally, I learned from J&J about research that is ongoing to build medical devices that can be sanitized and reused from patient to patient so that less waste gets accumulated per patient.