



stars

A Sustainability Assessment and Rating System for Colleges and Universities

What's the best defense against charges of "greenwashing?" It's measurement, of course: accurate, verifiable assessments provide evidence that an institution is "walking the walk" in its efforts to operate more sustainably.

— Jeff McIntire-Strasburg, senior editor & content director at Green Options Media, a network of environmentally-focused blogs.

Such a system would address all the dimensions of sustainability (social, economic, and ecological) and all the functions of a campus, from curriculum and research to operations and community outreach. It would also need to recognize that even the most accomplished colleges and universities may still have a long way to go before achieving comprehensive sustainability. Despite the challenges, development of such a system is now underway.

Given the rapid growth of sustainability initiatives at institutions of higher education in the United States, measuring and assessing progress toward sustainability goals has become increasingly important. While many institutions have undertaken campus-wide assessments of their progress toward sustainability, and while a variety of sustainability assessment tools and frameworks are available, there is currently no system that assesses and compares a large number of campuses in terms of overall level of sustainability achievement.

By Judy Walton, Ph.D.



Elements of the Rating System

Proposed basic features include:

- **Standardized “checklist” and documentation.** To be submitted by participating institutions, with different levels of achievement based on one’s score.
- **Categories.** STARS is divided into three broad categories of credits: Education and Research, Operations, and Administration and Finance.
- **Weighting.** Indicators will be weighted by point values, enabling numerical summation of data. Also, categories may be weighted and/or scores combined using an algorithm.
- **Updates.** AASHE will undertake periodic updates of the system, to be released as new versions.
- **Voluntary.** Institutions can decide whether to participate. Since an institution’s level of achievement will be known after completing the report, it may decide at that time not to submit the data for posting. Because the system is voluntary, the process is intended to be relatively streamlined and cost-effective, and the benefit of gathering and reporting data should be readily apparent to the institution.
- **Public reporting.** Completed reports and supportive information will be posted on a central site hosted by AASHE and open to the public, allowing for questions about an institution’s submitted data.

CURRENT STATE OF CAMPUS SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT

Campuses have been measuring their progress toward environmental and sustainability goals for many years, using a variety of different instruments and formats. One of the best collections of these reports was compiled by the Campus Sustainability Assessment Project at Western Michigan University between 1999 and 2003. It includes a searchable database of over 1,200 campus sustainability assessments, with details on the assessment framework employed for select projects. (<http://csap.envs.wmich.edu>)

In 2006, the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) compiled a list of assessment frameworks developed for use by multiple institutions regionally, nationally, and internationally. Fewer than a dozen could be found at that time, and of those, only one was intended as a “rating system” (i.e., offering aggregate scores for comparison purposes). However, these assessment frameworks focused on academic programs rather than institutions. Several environmental and sustainability



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assessments were developed for *regional* use—under the assumption that institutions within a region share common constraints and opportunities—but these either were not meant to be rating systems with distinct levels of achievement, or are not very comprehensive.

In 2006, a number of elements came together, creating a renewed interest in the development of a rating system. First, AASHE was established, offering a potential organizing entity for the project. Second, over a dozen key higher education associations established the Higher Education Associations Sustainability Consortium (HEASC), and one of its first acts was to issue a call for a sustainability assessment and rating system for higher education. Finally, wide support for creating a rating system developed from within the community via discussion lists and AASHE-led workshops at

campus sustainability conferences. The next step was to begin development of the system. Toward that end, AASHE convened key stakeholders in a two-year collaborative process by the higher education community to develop a pilot version of the system, called STARS (Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System).

GOALS OF A RATING SYSTEM

A widely-used, standardized rating system accomplishes a number of important objectives toward rapidly advancing sustainability in higher education. The goals of STARS include:

1. Provide a guide for advancing sustainability in all sectors of higher education, from governance and operations, to academics and community engagement.
2. Enable meaningful comparisons over time and across institutions by establishing a common standard of measurement for sustainability in higher education.
3. Create incentives for continual improvement toward sustainability.
4. Facilitate information sharing about higher education sustainability practices and performance.
5. Build a stronger, more diverse campus sustainability community, and promote a comprehensive understanding of sustainability that includes its social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

WHY "RATING" VS. "RANKING"?

STARS offers institutions recognition for their absolute level of achievement (their rating). STARS is not a ranking system, in which institutions are ranked in relation to their peers, rather than by absolute achievement. It is a self-administered system and the methodology for achieving a STARS rating is fully transparent, unlike some rating systems and most ranking systems. Advantages of a rating system include:

- A rating system offers beginner levels of achievement, which give even novice schools something to work toward. In contrast, a ranking system offers only schools that expect to be in the top grouping an incentive to participate.
- A rating system can be self-sustaining through a small

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submission fee while a ranking system requires significant outside funding each time for the third party to perform its work.

- A rating system provides a clear road map for a campus to reach a benchmark level at any time. In contrast, a ranking system provides no clear target (a campus can't know in advance where it will end up in the rankings).
- A rating system offers a friendly way of promoting change, as institutions strive toward the highest level of achievement rather than focusing on getting ahead of other institutions. With a ranking system, an institution may wind up at the top just by virtue of being ahead of the rest—even if it's still far from achieving sustainability—while in a rating system, the top classification could be empty for many years while schools work toward it.
- Rating systems give only positive recognition via levels of achievement, while ranking systems also provide negative recognition (i.e., being “bottom of the heap”) and can generate bad feelings. Ranking systems may lead to

invidious competition between schools closely ranked in order, which creates incentives to “game the system.”

- In a rating system, campuses generally participate in anticipation of receiving positive recognition, and are therefore more motivated to respond to a thorough survey with some complex questions. A ranking system, in contrast, generally requires filling out a survey for a third party, which means the survey must be fairly short and easy to complete so institutions will respond.

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WHAT ABOUT THIRD-PARTY CERTIFICATION?

Due to added costs, complexity, and time, third-party certification will not be required in the initial release of the rating system. Instead, the system will rely on openness, public oversight, and institutional integrity. At some point in the future, as the need arises, third-party verification may be instituted.

Meanwhile, institutions that choose to pursue voluntary certification may be rewarded with additional points or other special recognition. If there is sufficient interest, AASHE may even create a system for peer review of STARS submissions.

STARS has several strategies to ensure that the information institutions submit is accurate (without requiring third-party verification). First, for each credit, a responsible party from the institution must provide a statement attesting to the accuracy of information

submitted. Second, submissions must be accompanied by a letter from the president or chancellor verifying the integrity of the report. Finally, the entire system—weighting, scoring process, criteria for fulfilling credits—is designed to be transparent. Completed reports and supporting documentation will be posted on a central site open to the public, allowing for any questions about an institution's submitted data. AASHE will host and maintain the site.

COMMITTEE STRUCTURE AND DELIBERATIVE PROCESS

The development of the rating system has been a collaborative and transparent process, with stakeholders from higher education, government, business, and NGOs. It is being guided by a small steering committee charged with overall management and direction.

In addition, two advisory committees are supporting and shaping the initiative. Members of the Strategic Advisory Committee, representing over 25 higher education associations, advise on the purpose, vision, goals of the project, and strategies

for its successful development. The Technical Advisory Committee consists of over 100 individuals with expertise in the many areas covered by the rating system. Their job is to review proposed credits and make recommendations. A list of committee members is on the STARS website.

TIMELINE AND MORE INFORMATION

The pilot phase of STARS was launched in early February, 2008 with more than 90 participating campuses. Following the year-long pilot phase, the official 1.0 version of STARS is scheduled for release in spring 2009. For more information, visit www.aashe.org/stars. 

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