CREATING A HIGH LEVEL SUSTAINABILITY PLAN AND VISION

Introduction

A high-level sustainability plan will provide structure and begin the discussion of tangible goals to work towards, while also delegating responsibility to increase accountability. The plan's overarching end goals and targets need to align with the institutions overall strategic priorities. The plan should act as a tool, in conjunction with the baseline, to gather feedback from Senior Leadership regarding support for a more detailed action plan. Ideally, sustainability would be included as an institutional priority.

This document provides a process to develop a sustainability vision statement and identifies high-level sustainability plan components that can be presented to Senior Leadership for feedback and approval.

Working to Create a High Level Plan

There are four steps to help support the development of a sustainability plan and vision:

Step 1: Defining sustainability as it applies to the institution.

Step 2: Creating a sustainability vision statement and end goal.

Step 3: Understanding the key areas of improvement.

Step 4: Finalizing plan components.

Step 1: Defining Sustainability

Before creating sustainability-based targets, it is important to first clearly define sustainability. This can be a challenge, as there are many definitions of sustainability that range from vague to detailed. The document "Defining Sustainability in Canadian Higher Education" within Milestone 2 summarizes Canada's post-secondary institutions definitions of sustainability as well as a word bubble that identifies commonly used sustainability definition terms to help guide your definition. Keep in mind this is no easy task, as there is no one accepted definition of sustainability.

As a starting point, it may help to consider what the institution is looking to sustain. This can be from the perspective of all three pillars of sustainability (environmental, social, and economic) or any single pillar. For example:

- A stable local environment
- Biodiversity
- Clean water
- Employable students
- Equal opportunities for graduates
- Healthy planet
- Landfill space
- Local greenspace
- Mental health and happiness of students
- Productivity
- Satisfied students

- Utility and facilities costs
- Others

Step 2: Creating a Sustainability Vision Statement and End Goal

At this point, the institution has developed a definition of sustainability and perhaps looked into specific areas of interest. It is now time to think about creating a vision statement. A vision is an anchor point for any plan, as it outlines what an institution would like to achieve in the long term[1]. It's aspirational. Sustainability vision statements should be influenced or built off of the strategic goals to ensure they both align, as this will make sustainability buy-in easier.

Use the links below to learn more about working towards a sustainability vision:

Article: What is a Vision Statement?

Video: Components of a Vision Statement

Article: Vision Statement Development Process

It may also be relevant to consider the answers to these questions to kick off a brainstorming session:

- What are our hopes and dreams regarding sustainability?
- What problems are we solving for the greater good?
- Who and what are we inspiring to change?

Step 3: Understanding the Key Areas of Improvement

It's now time to set goals and rough dates for deliverables that support the definition of sustainability and work to attain the vision statement. The main question to consider is, "what would the institution look like in a sustainable future, based on the identified vision?" Goals can focus strictly on the environmental pillar, or all three pillars of sustainability. Below are some environmental pillar examples:

Goal Examples	Example Goal Date
STARS Gold Rating	2030
Reduce total greenhouse gas emissions by 50% vs 2017 baseline	2035
Increase organics waste diverted from landfill by 25% vs 2016 baseline	2025
Increase carpooling by 5% vs 2015 baseline	2025
Sustainability learning outcomes in all academic programs	2022

Remember, goals need to be SMART:

Specific: Goals must be well defined and clear to the audience. A complete goal should cover whom, what, and when, at a minimum. A lack of detail will lead to difficulties in achievement, as success hasn't been defined.

Measureable: Understand if the goal is attainable. Progress must be able to be tracked and needs to answer, "How will we know when we have achieved the goal?"

Achievable/Agreed Upon: All stakeholders are aware of the goals and relevant stakeholders agree it is not only achievable, but also achievable within the given timeframe.

Realistic: The goal should be attainable within the availability of resources, knowledge, and time. It is key to ensure that the goal is something within your control.

Timely: Enough time has been allotted to achieve the goal. Short-term deliverables within each goal with their own deadline will help provide motivation and momentum.

Step 4: Finalizing Plan Components

The high-level planning and brainstorming can be summarized in a slightly more formal manner. This does not, and should not, be lengthy or complicated and is meant to supplement baseline findings or progress made to date. To add extra strength to the plan, brainstorm rough strategies and ideas that will support achieving each goal. See the table below for an example of how to lay out the initial plan.

Goal	Goal Completion Date	Responsible Department and Position	Alignment with Strategic Plan	Preliminary Strategy for Goal Achievement
STARS Gold Rating	2030	Office of Sustainability, Manager	Priority 3, Goal 4	• Complete baseline STARS rating and submit for evaluation. Identify greatest area for improvement based on evaluation; work with corresponding institutional department to establish practices for future evaluation improvements.
Reduce total greenhouse gas emissions by 50% vs 2017 baseline	2035	Facilities, Director	Priority 1, Goal 2	• Work with Energy Manager and Facilities to identify high savings greenhouse gas emission reduction measures based on quantitative energy efficiency software, such as RETScreen Expert.
Increase organics waste diverted from landfill by 25% vs 2016 baseline	2025	Facilities, Grounds	Priority 3, Goal 2	• Complete thorough review of annual waste audit to identify areas with high levels of organics contamination and large amounts of waste accumulation. • Pilot organics bins in corresponding areas.

Increase carpooling by 5% vs 2015 baseline	2025	Parking and Office of Sustainability, Managers	Priority 3, Goal 4	• Complete transportation audit to understand main commuters locations and work to provide a third party ride-sharing service to encourage carpooling. • Provide carpool parking spots at desired locations on campus.
Sustainability learning outcomes (SLO's) in all academic programs	2022	Academic, Vice President	Priority 1, Goal 5	• Use the information gained in the STARS report to understand academic areas with SLO's. Collaborate with a faculty champion and academic champion to work towards learning outcomes in specific academic courses or programs that should have SLO's, but do not.
Sustainability as priority in strategic plan	2021	Office of Sustainability, Manager, and Strategic Planning Committee	None	• Create and launch a sustainability survey for all institutional stakeholders in order to understand their sustainability concerns and opinions regarding the institutions responsibility towards improved sustainability performance and ecological impact. Use results as support when engaging Senior Leadership. • Identify how the sustainability goals align with the current strategic plan.

Potential Challenges

- Finalizing a sustainability definition can feel especially daunting if the Sustainability Committee does not feel particularly confident with their knowledge of sustainability. Ensure that someone with a clear understanding can guide others.

- Limiting the number of goals.

- This is a very high-level plan; do not worry about giving too much detail.

Conclusion

Many educational institutions may find the development of a high-level sustainability plan helpful to provide structure and guidance when speaking to Senior Leadership. Though this type of plan is not a mandatory component it will serve as a good starting point to gather critical leadership feedback. You can then create a robust plan that all decision makers are on board with, therefore making implementation easier.

[1] Cascade. (2018). How to Write a Good Vision Statement. Accessed from https://www.executestrategy.net/blog/write-good-vision-statement/