

# UNDERSTANDING CURRENT SUSTAINABILITY PERFORMANCE USING A STARS OVERVIEW

## Introduction

The Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) is a program developed by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). STARS is a voluntary, self-reporting program that helps post-secondary institutions measure, understand, and track their sustainability performance by assigning points from sustainability “credits” or initiatives to a rating system. Credits are categorized into four main areas: engagement, operations, planning and administration, and curriculum.

A STARS report is a significant undertaking for any post-secondary institution, requiring time and dedicated staff. For institutions that do not have the ability to complete a STARS report, or would like to check their progress between reporting periods, the following seven areas of emphasis will help provide institutions with a high-level, holistic, and quick, qualitative overview of sustainability performance progress. This process does not require the completion of a STARS report or submission to any reporting body, it is simply a learning tool meant to provide a sustainability performance summary while using already established, sound credits. Areas of emphasis were chosen to ensure all areas of post-secondary sustainability are covered while also taking into consideration the purpose of the Campus Carbon Management Initiative, to help support institution-based greenhouse gas emissions reductions.

For ease of understanding, rating, and comparability, each credit has three options: Reactive, Proactive, and Integrated. Below defines each category:

**Reactive:** Incorporation of the Area of Emphasis is either non-existent or incorporated due to legislation requirements.

**Proactive:** Incorporation of the Area of Emphasis is incorporated to a degree, but is not a primary institutional driver, or the area is only partially complete.

**Integrated:** The Area of Emphasis is a key driver/priority to the institution, and is embedded throughout the institution.

## Task: Sustainability Performance Check-in

Look at the different Areas of Emphasis below, most correspond to a STARS credit. Identify whether the institution would fall under the “Reactive”, “Proactive”, or “Integrated” column for each credit. Highlight or mark each response to help identify areas of success and improvement.

Area of Emphasis	Emphasis Description	Appropriate STARS Credit <sup>1*</sup>	Reactive	Proactive	Integrated
Curriculum	The primary function of post-secondary institutions is to educate students. By training and educating future leaders, institutions are uniquely positioned to prepare students to understand and address sustainability and therefore climate change challenges. Institutions that offer courses and programs covering sustainability issues help equip their students to lead society to a sustainable future <sup>2</sup> .	AC1: Academic Course Assessment <sup>**</sup>	No courses or programs offered where the primary or a secondary focus <sup>***</sup> is sustainability and/or climate change.	Less than 75% combined courses and programs have sustainability and/or climate change included as either a primary or a secondary focus.	Minimum 75% of courses and programs have identified sustainability and/or climate change as a primary or secondary focus.
Sustainability Planning	Planning provides the infrastructure that fosters sustainability within an institution. Sustainability planning affords an institution the opportunity to clarify its vision of a sustainable future, establish priorities, and help guide budgeting and decision making. Staff and other resources help an institution organize, implement, and publicize sustainability initiatives <sup>3</sup> .	PA2: Sustainability Planning	No formal sustainability plan has been developed, or a plan is internal to Sustainability Office/ Department only.	Sustainability plan in place and approved by Senior Leadership Team. The plan should be made available to the public.	Sustainability plan aligns with Institutions strategic goals and plan. Climate Action Plan in place.
Vision and Strategic Plan			Institutions focus and understanding of sustainability relates strictly to economic sustainability.	The three pillars of sustainability (social, environmental, economic) are considered, but are not a main driver/ goal of institutional planning.	Working towards the three pillars of sustainability is a main driver/goal of institutions planning, vision, and strategy.

Sustainability Staff	Employing staff whose primary responsibility is to implement, engage, educate, develop sustainability initiatives, and advocate for integrated sustainability is a critical role within post-secondary institutions. Sustainability specific responsibilities are relatively new within the job market, and these roles help transfer knowledge to staff and stakeholders while sustainability deliverables become embedded within jobs outside the Sustainability Office.	PA1: Sustainability Coordination	No staff employed with designated sustainability role or the positions is part time and/or a contract position.	Staff permanently funded. Primary role comprised of project implementation (administration and support).	Staff permanently funded. Primary role moves away from project implementation to educating, facilitating, and supporting other areas of the institution in implementing their own sustainability projects. Conversely, a typical Sustainability Office may no longer be necessary at this point, if all roles within the institution have transitioned to embedding sustainability deliverables within job description.
Sustainable Funding	Available, dedicated funds for sustainability and emissions mitigation programs and projects is vital for dramatic improvements in sustainability and climate change progress. Decreased reliance on government funding can significantly support this due to the nature of changing Provincial and Federal priorities.	Not Applicable.	Sustainability and/or climate change mitigation funding solely provided by the Provincial and/or Federal government. Funding is sporadic.	Funding provided by a combination of government support and capital funding or partnerships.	Minimal reliance on government funding. Stable funding takes the form of partnerships or innovative grant opportunities.

Emissions Inventory and Target	Climate change continues to grow as an issue on the global stage; post-secondary institutions have a responsibility to their students to not only educate, but also mitigate their emissions footprint to ensure a healthy, sustainable future for their graduates. In order to achieve this, institutions must understand their emissions impact and the initiatives that drive success in their reduction to guide further efforts.	OP1: Greenhouse Gas Inventory	No formal target in place. Emissions inventory completed only to fulfill legislative requirements.	Emissions inventory includes Scope 1, 2, and some Scope 3 emissions. A target is in place that is based on either an intensity or absolute reductions. This target may or may not be approved by Senior Leadership.	Annual emissions inventory including Scope 3 activities outlined within "Recommended Key Reporting Areas for a Post-Secondary Greenhouse Gas Inventory" document. Absolute target meets or exceeds state/provincial goals and is approved by Senior Leadership.
Stakeholder Knowledge	Stakeholder assessments help institutions evaluate the success of their sustainability outreach and education initiatives and help identify knowledge gaps to drive future efforts.	EN6: Assessing Sustainability Culture <sup>^</sup>	No assessment administered to institution stakeholders.	Survey released to a subset or all institution stakeholders at regular intervals.	The same assessment is administered to entire campus (students, staff, and faculty) annually to measure change in knowledge over time.
Focus	This criteria provides a general review of how embedded sustainability is within an institution based upon the above criteria, it summarizes the status on an institution.	NA	No/limited incorporation of sustainability into academics, planning and administration, or engagement. Sustainability progress is driven solely by operations.	Sustainability progress continues to be driven in large part of by operations, including Sustainability staff. Engagement with stakeholders is a priority and effort.	The institution has embraced sustainability as a main driver to progress and has incorporated sustainability deliverables into the planning and administration, operations, engagements, and academics side.

## Notes:

## \*STARS Credit Abbreviations

PA: Planning and Administration

OP: Operations

EN: Engagement

AC: Academics

\*\* Identify the number of individual courses or programs offered that are either "sustainability courses/programming" (primary focus is on sustainability and/or solving one or more sustainability challenges) or "courses that include sustainability" (sustainability as a secondary focus). Continuing education programs and courses are excluded.

\*\*\* "Primary Focus" can be defined as a course or program where the explicit focus is on sustainability and/or understanding or solving one or more major sustainability challenge. "Secondary Focus" can be defined as a course that includes sustainability (such as in a module or project), but the primary learning is on a topic other than sustainability<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>^</sup>Typically, assessments are in the form of a survey.

## Potential Challenges

- Gathering information may require a time commitment, especially the curriculum piece as institutions may not be keeping track effectively of courses offered and those with a sustainability focus.

## Conclusion

This method of completing a sustainability performance “check-in” is expected to require limited effort while providing a high-level overview of current institutional sustainability performance. The above criteria can also serve as a step towards completing and submitting a comprehensive STARS report. It is the hope that completing this simple activity will provide a high-level yet comprehensive analysis used to inform decision makers and drive improvements.

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<sup>1</sup> Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. (2017). STARS technical manual version 2.1. Accessed from <https://stars.aashe.org/pages/about/technical-manual.html>

<sup>2</sup> Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. (2017). STARS technical manual version 2.1. Accessed from <https://stars.aashe.org/pages/about/technical-manual.html>

<sup>3</sup> Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. (2017). STARS technical manual version 2.1. Accessed from <https://stars.aashe.org/pages/about/technical-manual.html>

<sup>4</sup> Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. (2017). STARS technical manual version 2.1. Accessed from <https://stars.aashe.org/pages/about/technical-manual.html>