

Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS): Research Call Notes (ER Credits 20-26)

October 2nd, 2008

ER Credit 20: Sustainability Research Inventory

A participant asked how other schools are gathering this data. Not all callers had started the data collection process. Those who had were contacting academic departments to gather the information.

A caller asked if it would be acceptable to sample the faculty to estimate the level of sustainability research occurring on campus. AASHE said that would be fine for the pilot project. Others suggested that it would be fine, but to be cautious to avoid a sampling bias. If you rely on faculty to opt in to participate in the survey, there may be a selection bias in which those with sustainability research may be more likely to opt in.

A caller suggested adding a box to the course submission paperwork that professors could check to indicate that their course and/or research is sustainability related.

There was some discussion about how to define sustainability research. A caller said that the process of defining sustainability research is an inherently subjective process. This caller was comfortable using a loose definition of sustainability research because the goal of the credit is to create awareness around the sustainability research occurring on campus, rather than to develop a scientific process for sorting out sustainability research. Another caller commented that she met with a group of faculty members who thought sustainability research should be compared “apples to apples,” which requires a more detailed definition. If you find that the definitions included in the document are not sufficient, please indicate this in the notes area of the credit submission form, and include how you elaborated on the definition or implemented it on your campus.

A caller suggested that the word “all” be removed from the first paragraph.

A caller said that Research and Curriculum inventories become outdated as soon as they are complete and questioned whether they were still worth doing. Callers suggested that it was still valuable to track, in order to get sense of what is happening on campus.

ER Credit 21: Faculty Involved in Sustainability Research

An institution included an inventory of sustainability research in its most recent sustainability assessment, but the inventory focuses on research centers and projects; it does not measure individual faculty members’ research. This caller noted that measuring individual faculty research would be too difficult and detailed at a large research university. Although a higher-level inventory wouldn’t count for the credit as it’s currently written, it’s valuable for AASHE to know what information campuses are gathering currently and what the institution has determined is valuable to gather. AASHE encouraged schools to submit the data they have, even if it wouldn’t qualify for the credit, as the information will help inform revisions of the system.

Callers said the points and associated percentages seem reasonable for this credit.

A caller asked if it was possible to have different thresholds for different types of institutions. It’s possible that this will be incorporated into future versions of STARS. Data gathered through the pilot project will inform this decision and AASHE welcomes further feedback on this issue. The current version of the research section does include an applicability criterion such that the credits don’t apply to schools where research isn’t a core

component of the institution's activities.

A caller asked if the credit covered faculty who are currently doing sustainability research or those who have done sustainability in the past. The timeframe for this credit is the past year. While it would be interesting to look at research that has been done in the past, this would complicate the data gathering and reporting processes significantly.

ER Credit 22: Departments Involved in Sustainability Research

A caller asked why this is important to measure. This credit attempts to measure the breadth of sustainability research occurring at the institution, since all departments have a role to play in advancing sustainability. If, for example, if the only sustainability research at an institution was from the English department, students and faculty in other departments wouldn't get the same level of exposure to sustainability.

A caller suggested that an alternative approach would be to look at the three big areas of sustainability – economic, social, and environmental – and see if institutions have research taking place in each of those three areas.

A caller asked if the granularity of departments is consistent across institutions. It's not perfectly consistent. Data submitted by pilot participants will help inform how widely they range.

A caller asked how to count faculty affiliated with more than one department. Those faculty members can be counted in each department with which they are affiliated.

ER Credit 23: Internal Funding for Sustainability Research

A caller asked what "internal" funding means. Internal funding is funding that comes from within the institution. It does not include grants from external bodies, such as the National Science Foundation, which would be considered "external."

A participant said that her institution often donates services to research projects. She asked if this would count as internal funding. While it may be too hard to quantify, it does fit within the definition of internal funding.

Another caller asked if funding for graduate student researchers count. Stipends for graduate student research are a research expense and would count.

Callers thought the percentages and point thresholds for this credit seemed reasonable.

ER Credit 24: External Funding for Sustainability Research

A caller commented that more than five percent as the top percentage is a bit low.

A caller commented that they are going to be approximating on percentages because exact money amounts are hard to find. Another caller said it was difficult to search through grants even to find how much money is being spent on environmental research; inventorying funding for *sustainability* research will be an even larger challenge. AASHE encouraged participants to include these challenges in the feedback section of the credit reporting forms and welcomes suggestions on how to improve the credits to minimize the data gathering burden.

AASHE asked if, given the difficulties in gathering this data, is it important that this credit is included. Callers responded yes, research is an important way higher education contributes to sustainability. Even if they don't have data now, it gives them something to strive for. Callers noted they hope to get systems in place to measure in the future.

ER Credit 25: Sustainability Research Incentives

Callers noted that this credit is good as a yes/no credit.

ER Credit 26: Interdisciplinary Research in Tenure and Promotion

A caller noted that although this is important to include and fundamental to achieving sustainability, it's a contentious topic that he is not going to broach at his institution.

Many faculty members engaged in interdisciplinary research do so after securing tenure at an institution. A participant suggested that measuring faculty with joint appointments may be an alternative way to approximate this.

Callers noted that this information will be very hard to access. Most institutions have institution-wide policies to guide departments' tenure decisions. Some of these policies include an explicit policy to recognize interdisciplinary research when making tenure and promotion decisions. However, since decisions are made on the departmental level, an institution-wide policy may only provide guidance and may not be a good measure of the extent to which interdisciplinary research is recognized.

AASHE welcomes suggestions on how to improve this credit or otherwise address this issue.