

Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) – Planning and Sustainability Infrastructure Call Notes

April 15, 2008

Planning Section

Participants discussed each credit individually.

AF Credit 6: Strategic Plan

A participant said this credit was straightforward and easy, and that the documentation components are merited.

Another caller said her institution has three plans that, when taken together, serve as the strategic plan (there are separate plans for academics, student life and learning, and the physical campus). To accommodate situations like this, AASHE should add language to the credit that recognizes schools that, when the strategic plan is comprised of separate plans, sustainability is included as a major component of at least one of the separate plans.

AF Credit 7: Master Plan

A participant asked what it means to be included 'at a high level' and whether this will be defined further. When researching this credit, it appeared that schools have different ways of incorporating sustainability at a high level of the master plan. In some cases it's a chapter, in others it's a guiding goal or principle, and other times it's an amendment. AASHE doesn't want to prescribe how schools go about incorporating sustainability into the plans.

Several callers said that the current version of the credit is too open-ended and vague.

A caller suggested adding a criterion such that plans would count only if they include quantifiable objectives. This way, plans can be audited and would have an additional level of substance. AASHE wouldn't have to prescribe what the measurable outcomes are, just specify that the plan must include something measurable. At the same time, callers noted that master plans may be higher-level guiding documents, while sustainability and climate plans often include more detailed deliverables and quantifiable objectives. These objectives may be more appropriate in those plans.

Participants suggested distinguishing between schools that have included a few things in their plans from those that have included many things.

To resolve these issues moving forward, callers suggested waiting to see what schools report to try to identify what should and should not count.

AF Credit 8: Sustainability Plan

A caller suggested adding a question to the documentation section that asks schools to report on the timeline of the plan. This would help make the resource more useful so other schools will be able to find plans with similar timelines (e.g., plans for the next five years versus plans that cover the next 50 years).

Participants were generally supportive of recognizing formal plans as well as those that haven't been formally adopted.

A caller suggested including a point for having a vision statement, since this is often the starting point for developing the plan.

A participant suggested institutions shouldn't be able to count what is in the climate plan as the deliverable/measurable outcomes and corresponding timelines that are required to earn this credit, since climate planning is covered by AF Credit 9.

AF Credit 9: Climate Plan

While an institution's informal sustainability plan would be sufficient to earn AF Credit 8, as the credit is currently written, the climate plan must be formally adopted in order to earn this credit. Requiring that the climate plan be formal may be a vestige of the previous version of this credit, which was based on being a signatory to the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment (ACUPCC). As a result of the ACUPCC, many schools have been developing formal climate plans, and most schools do not have formal, broad sustainability plans.

Callers expressed mixed opinions about requiring the climate plan to be formally adopted. On one hand, it seems logically inconsistent to allow an informal plan to count for one credit and not for the other. Likewise, the process of preparing climate plan, whether formally adopted or not, defines a road map that can serve institution very well. A caller suggested adding a second point for having the plan adopted formally.

A participant distinguished between policies, which are formally adopted, and plans, which may or may not be. Policies alone would not be sufficient to earn this credit. Early feedback suggested that STARS should focus on outcomes instead of policies. While policies can be helpful tools in motivating changes, they aren't always effective or enforced. Reviewers suggested that STARS should include policies as tier two credits to gather information.

There was some discussion about what emissions sources should be covered by the plan. A caller suggested specifying that the plan must cover at least scope one and scope two emissions.

Sustainability Infrastructure

There was some discussion about how to rename this section, since Infrastructure has connotations that don't make a lot of sense in this context. Suggestions include 'Institutionalizing Sustainability,' 'Sustainability Coordination,' and 'Sustainability Advocacy.' Feel free to send additional suggestions to stars@aeshe.org.

AF Credit 10: Sustainability Officer

A caller suggested creating an additional credit for having a sustainability office. This could be unfair or challenging because schools define 'office' in different ways. An office could be one person or it could be a thriving group of many people. The credit shouldn't be based on having something named an office. A caller noted that having an office or central hub for sustainability sends a message to the community and serves as a beacon; it helps people know where to go to get information about sustainability.

A participant suggested stipulating that, in order to earn credit, the office or hub should have three or more full-time employees. Someone responded that it wouldn't make sense for small schools to have that many sustainability officers. Another caller noted that it would be unfair to penalize schools that have taken a decentralized approach to sustainability staffing by incorporating it into several employees' job descriptions, and having those employees work in departments throughout the institution. Some institutions have found that a decentralized approach helps better institutionalize sustainability since it's infused throughout the staff instead of being the responsibility of one department.

A participant asked if academic departments that have sustainability programs (such as a sustainable agriculture or architecture center) would count as a sustainability office. The credit is focused on an office devoted to campus sustainability, not on sustainability broadly.

A caller noted that many schools have active student participation in sustainability activities, and that some institutions pay students for sustainability work. The previous draft version, STARS 0.4, included a credit for having a student group devoted to sustainability. Reviewers generally felt it wasn't specific enough to merit being a credit. It was difficult to distinguish between active and inactive groups. Callers suggested the following criteria to make the distinction: have group leaders elected; have institutional and/or student government funding; specify that the group has made a meaningful contribution to the institution's sustainability efforts. The third criterion was the most popular.

The credit about student groups is currently included in the Co-Curricular Education section. There were differences of opinion as to whether it would better fit in this section.

A caller asked if a combination of multiple people working on campus sustainability, who altogether add up to one full-time position would count for this credit. Since the intent of this credit is to have at least one staff dedicated to sustainability full-time, the current version of this credit would not allow this.

A participant suggested that schools should be able to earn more points for having additional people/hours contributed to sustainability. Hours contributed should be normalized by student or campus population.

For earning the highest level of points, the credit includes a criterion that the sustainability officer reports to a president, vice president, or equivalent. A caller suggested adding provost and chancellor to the list, as those would be considered equivalent. The thinking behind this criterion is that, while reporting to a high-ranking staff member doesn't guarantee effectiveness, officers will be more likely to have wider influence if they do report at a high level.

AF Credit 11: Sustainability Recognition Program

There were some questions about what types of awards would count for this credit. Reviewers of previous versions of STARS, and those involved in developing this credit expressed a desire to leave the credit flexible and avoid prescribing prizes, formality, and other attributes of the recognition program.

The major criteria for the recognition program are:

- Should be focused on sustainability (can't be something for which sustainability could be a winner)
- Should apply to all of the school (an award at the department level wouldn't count)