

# Proposal for a Campus Sustainability Rating System

## Proposal

This proposal is to develop – through a collaborative process involving key stakeholders - a formal classification system for campus sustainability, with guidelines by which institutions may measure themselves and qualify for different levels of recognition of accomplishment. The project responds to the need as expressed by stakeholders for a standard rating system that compares campuses in the U.S. on progress toward sustainability. Participation in this system will not preclude a school from using other assessment instruments for particular purposes.

## Background/Rationale

Given the 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 would allow a large number of campuses to compare their overall level of sustainability achievement with other institutions.

Such a system would address all the dimensions of sustainability (health, social, economic and ecological) and all the functions of a campus, from curriculum and research to facilities and operations, to community outreach and partnerships. A widely-used, standard rating system would accomplish a number of important objectives toward rapidly advancing sustainability in higher education. These goals include:

1. Provide campuses with a road map for moving in a more sustainable direction, with a common set of benchmarks and goals.
2. Promote continuous improvement toward sustainability at individual institutions and across the higher education sector.
3. Provide consistency from year to year in assessing progress toward sustainability.
4. Enable meaningful comparisons across institutions.
5. Help identify best practices and promote information exchange
6. Provide incentives for institutions to advance sustainability in all sectors.
7. Support campus efforts to assess how well they are meeting their goals and values.
8. Allow current and prospective students, faculty, administrators, funders, and employers to identify campus sustainability leaders and innovators.

## 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 about 2003. It includes a searchable database of over 1,200 campus sustainability assessments, with details on the assessment framework employed for select projects. See <http://csap.envs.wmich.edu/>.

In 2006, AASHE compiled a list of assessment frameworks that were specifically developed for use by multiple institutions (regionally, nationally, and internationally). It found fewer than a dozen, although others may exist. Only one, however – AISHE – was intended to serve as a “rating system,” i.e., a means of objectively comparing inter-institutional progress based on a comprehensive score. AISEH however was focused on academic programs, not institutions.

There are a few examples of sustainability or environmental assessments intended for *regional* use (based on the assumption that institutions within a region share common constraints and opportunities), but these too were not intended as rating systems in which campuses attain various levels of achievement, or they fall short on comprehensiveness.

In 2006 a number of elements came together to create a renewed interest in developing a rating system. First, AASHE was established, offering a potential organizing entity for the project. Second, over a dozen key higher education associations came together to form the Higher Education Associations Sustainability Consortium, and one of HEASC’s first acts was to issue a “call” for the development of a sustainability rating system. Finally,

wide support for creating a rating system developed from within the campus community, via a discussion list and a Roundtable on the topic at AASHE's inaugural conference (October 2006). The next step was the development of this proposal.

## **Elements of the Rating System**

### ***Proposed Features***

The rating system would consist of a standardized assessment instrument to be filled out by participating institutions (specific format and content to be determined). Based on their scores, institutions would attain different levels of achievement (levels to be determined).

Other proposed features include:

- Modules/Categories – these may be independently scored, with a total score determined by combining module scores according to an algorithm. Proposed modules include operations, curriculum, governance & institutionalization, social equity & justice (and maybe research).
- Weighting - indicators would be weighted by point values, enabling data to be summarized numerically.
- Periodic Updates – AASHE will undertake periodic updates of the checklist, released as new versions.
- Voluntary – it will be up to an institution to decide whether to participate. Since an institution's level of achievement will be apparent after completing the checklist, it may decide at that time not to submit the data for posting. Because the system is voluntary, the process must be relatively streamlined and cost-effective, and institutions must readily see the benefit of gathering and reporting data.
- Central, Public Posting – completed checklists, contact information, and related data will be posted on a single site open to inspection by the public. Anyone therefore can question an institution's submitted data. AASHE will host and maintain the site.

### ***Why a "Rating System" vs. a "Ranking System"?***

As proposed by this project, a rating system refers to a self-reporting system, with broad levels of achievement. A ranking system in contrast refers to a survey performed by a 3<sup>rd</sup> party, with campuses ranked from best to worst. AASHE prefers a rating system for the following reasons:

- In a ranking system, only schools that expect to be in the top grouping would have an incentive to respond, since schools that are not yet very far along may look bad. In contrast, a rating system can have introductory levels that give even "beginner" schools something to work toward.
- A rating system can be self-sustaining through a submission fee while a ranking system would require significant outside funding each time for the 3<sup>rd</sup> party to perform its work.
- A rating system provides a clear "road map" of what one needs to do to reach a certain level of sustainability at any point in time. In contrast, a ranking system provides no clear "target" (you don't know where you'll end up in the rankings each year).
- In a ranking system, institutions may end up at the top just by virtue of being ahead of the rest – even if they're still far from achieving sustainability – while in a rating system the top classification could be empty for many years while campuses work toward it. Thus a rating system is better at promoting change as institutions strive to achieve the highest rating, rather than simply trying to get ahead of other institutions.
- Rating systems give positive recognition only through their levels of "achievement," while ranking systems also provide negative recognition, and therefore can generate bad feelings. Rating systems may also lead to invidious competitions between schools closely ranked in order, which creates incentives to "game the system."
- Since a ranking system depends upon institutions filling out a survey for a 3<sup>rd</sup> party, the survey must be fairly easy to complete so that institutions will respond. In contrast, since those submitting an application to a rating system generally do so in anticipation of receiving positive recognition, a rating system has somewhat greater ability to ask more complex questions.

### ***What about Third Party Certification?***

Due to added costs, complexity, and time, this version will not include third party certification. 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.

## Methodology

### ***Committee Structure and Deliberative Process***

The development of the rating system will be as collaborative as possible, with stakeholders from higher education, government, business, and NGOs. It will be guided by a 5- or 7-person Steering Committee charged with the project's overall management and direction, including assimilation of elements proposed by the advisory committees into a coherent system. The process will be highly deliberative, iterative, and interactive, with each of the committees fully informed about the work of other committees. Decisions within all committees will be made by consensus, with the Steering Committee having ultimate authority to approve decisions and to resolve any differences. As the Timeline shows, there will be multiple occasions for input and revision in the development of the rating system.

Committees will be established as follows:

#### Steering Committee

- Pursue funding, create budget
- Overall management and direction of project
- Compile ideas brought forward by advisory committees into a coherent CSRS
- Oversee launch, dissemination, and use of beta version of CSRS
- Organize and implement improvements to CSRS

#### Strategic Planning Advisory Committee

- Advise on purpose, vision, and goals of project
- Articulate benefits for higher education
- Identify potential partners and participants
- Advise on strategy for successful development of CSRS
- Review technical committee suggestions and offer input on process
- Estimate resource needs for managing and continually improving a rating system
- Identify potential funding and outline benefits to funders
- Assist with promotion and publicity

#### Technical Advisory Committee

- Review and recommend metrics appropriate for the CSRS (consider factors such as ease of use, technical rigor or accuracy, scale and boundaries, and materiality or relevance).
- Assign potential point values to indicators, and possible weightings to categories.
- Compile and organize proposed metrics into a multi-category CSRS, taking into account different institutional types and regional variations.
- Identify thresholds and classifications for the CSRS.

### ***Issues to be Addressed***

Specific methodological issues that will be addressed and resolved by committees include:

- Development of metrics and indicators
- Deciding on point values (weighting) - implicit and explicit, including dynamic weighing and user-defined weights that promote adaptive learning.
- Normalization strategies
- Challenges of multi-criteria problem solving – how to make different categories commensurate, avoiding biases against specific institutional types, etc.
- Aggregating data within and among categories or modules.
- Gathering data - who gathers data on each campus and how
- Identification of modules/categories – and potential use of modules for independent rating rather than single comprehensive score
- Role of partnering organizations (SCUP, NACUBO, APPA, HEASC, etc)

## Timeline

Date	Accomplishment
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Jan 15	Draft proposal for "Campus Sustainability Rating System - Beta version", describing goals and mechanics of system, issues in need of resolution, and deliberative process and structure.
Feb 1	Committee comments on draft proposal due.
Feb 16	Steering committee will review and incorporate comments and prepare next draft of proposal as well as a working draft of the rating system. The working draft will be sent to all advisory committees and interested others.
Feb 21-23	Roundtable to discuss working draft at the Rocky Mountain Sustainability Summit - <a href="http://ecenter.colorado.edu/rmss2007/">http://ecenter.colorado.edu/rmss2007/</a> . Feedback and comments will be solicited from multiple stakeholders.
Mar 15	Expanded, revised working draft will be prepared by Steering Committee and sent to all advisory committees and other stakeholders.
Apr 18-19	Another Roundtable to discuss working draft at the Smart & Sustainable Campus Conference - <a href="http://www.nacubo.org/x8528.xml">http://www.nacubo.org/x8528.xml</a> ).
Aug 30	Steering Committee will complete the beta version of a Campus Sustainability Rating System (or portion thereof).
Sep 6-8	Rollout of beta version at Greening of the Campus Conference – <a href="http://www.bsu.edu/greening">www.bsu.edu/greening</a>
Jan 2008	Final revisions to beta version incorporated; pilot program begins.