

OPEN LETTER TO SUSTAINABILITY EVALUATING ORGANIZATIONS

FAQs

What are sustainability evaluation organizations?

Over the past few years, a number of organizations have developed rankings systems to grade, evaluate, or compare how various schools are performing in terms of sustainability efforts. These organizations attempt to provide an unbiased, third-party assessment of sustainability performance similar to the ranking that *US News and World Report* does with its annual edition of “America’s Best Colleges.”

Why is there a need for a letter like this?

There is a genuine need for independent third-party organizations to evaluate the effectiveness of sustainability programs in colleges and universities. These types of organizations provide a benchmark for self-evaluation and introspection, and can facilitate broader internal discussions of sustainability goals and vision.

Given that, there is a growing sense that some surveys provide incomplete pictures of campus sustainability efforts and therefore are not fulfilling their potential as a valuable resource that could be used by schools, students, and other interested partners.

The guiding principles in the letter are offered in response to the sincere questions and interest from some evaluating organizations that have sought input from sustainability professionals about how to make these evaluations more meaningful.

What is this letter hoping to accomplish?

Each school that signed this letter places a strong emphasis on the high quality and standards of their sustainability operations. They are pledging to work closely with evaluation organizations to meet these same high standards.

Why did the schools sign?

They believe that organizations that develop green school rankings sincerely want to play a positive role advancing sustainability in higher education—and are seeking the collective guidance from higher education as to how best to proceed. The schools that signed this letter agree that there is a valuable role for sustainability evaluation organizations and are offering to support them if they commit to reaching for a higher standard.

Are sustainability programs really that different?

Absolutely. Rural schools may take a very different approach to addressing sustainability issues than urban schools. Regional location, climate, size of school, research intensity, teaching philosophy, and ability to collaborate with other local schools all influence how sustainability decisions are prioritized. There is no “one size fits all” approach to campus sustainability.

Will (our school) boycott ranking organizations that refuse to sign on to this pledge?

Not necessarily. Schools that sign the letter retain the option of participating in any survey they feel fits within their overall mission, regardless of whether the ranking organization meets all of the guiding principles.

How will these universities assess the groups' compliance with these fundamental principals?

In many ways the principles are self regulating. For example, the only way an organization can claim it is being fully transparent is for it to actually demonstrate that transparency. To comply with all of the principles, the schools expect each organization to detail the measures they are taking to address each point.

Does this mean we will end up supporting organizations we disagree with?

The schools believe that any organization that puts in the significant time and effort to adopt the guiding principles is one that is genuinely committed to advancing sustainability on college campuses. Even if there is a situation where our school disagrees with the philosophy or mission of a particular organization, we can still support their efforts to meet the guiding principles.

What else will be done to advance these principles?

We believe this conversation is an important part of creating a sustainable future because we can only work toward outcomes that can be credibly measured. As such, we pledge to continue this conversation nationally in meetings, articles, and forums provided by our professional organizations, regional partnerships, and so forth.

What if a campus wishes to add its support to these principles in the future?

The letter and the conversation we hope to help stimulate will reside in full view on the AASHE Discussion Forums website at www.aashe.org/forums.

We hope to foster a robust dialogue among campus sustainability professionals, evaluating organizations, the media, and any other stakeholders as we continuously refine and review our approach to creating a sustainable future.