

OPEN LETTER TO SUSTAINABILITY EVALUATING ORGANIZATIONS

July 19, 2010

To Whom It May Concern:

As sustainability officers representing a wide range of institutions of higher education, we enthusiastically support efforts to promote sustainability at colleges and universities around the world. Over the past few years, a number of organizations have taken the initiative to highlight the positive aspects of campus sustainability through the development of sustainability surveys and report cards. These efforts have prompted constructive conversations about campus sustainability, serving as a learning tool for students and administrators, and bringing much-needed attention to underrepresented areas of campus operations.

Today, all of our institutions have ambitious sustainability initiatives that include implementing climate action plans; developing long-range conservation strategies; establishing and expanding environmental research and academic programs; and promoting local economic development, social justice, and public health goals. In these challenging economic times, we believe staff and university resources are best devoted to developing long-term, broad-based, and verifiable responses to the challenges of climate change and resource conservation. We are pleased to say all of our institutions have committed to difficult goals and invested substantial resources toward meeting these goals.

With a strong desire to move boldly and set new, higher standards for sustainability, we look forward to collaborating with independent evaluating organizations who share our high standards of excellence, especially those who facilitate public discourse on sustainability and the environment. Accordingly, we the undersigned pledge to work with evaluating organizations who seek to embody the following fundamental principles:

1. *Be fully transparent.* Evaluating organizations should disclose their process of assigning scores, rankings, or grades, and the underlying assumptions, principles and values upon which benchmarking metrics are based. Also helpful would be disclosure of any science, engineering or financial references used to develop these benchmarks, particularly as this field is fast moving and constantly changing. Finally, organizations should note any individuals with perceived conflicts of interest, such as those who are alumni of schools being evaluated.
2. *Be accountable.* Evaluating organizations should seek to ensure the veracity of their information by verifying it with each school to make certain that it is up to date and accurate.
3. *Disclose professional credentials.* Evaluating organizations should share the technical, financial, and professional sustainability credentials of the personnel involved in their evaluation processes.

4. Embrace diversity. Evaluating organizations should seek to avoid the potential for misleading comparisons that fail to capture significant differences that stem from the unique goals, visions, locations, demographic settings, populations, and backgrounds of different institutions. A “one size fits all” approach is inadequate for comparing progress.
5. Balance process with best practices. Surveys should recognize the balance of results-oriented tactical efforts with long-term strategies. At times campus sustainability professionals must forgo high-visibility short-term projects for less visible long-term sustained planning, which often takes a more comprehensive scope as opposed to one narrow slice of campus sustainability.
6. Use uniform metrics. Questions should be consistent with accepted national survey methodologies that have been openly developed by a broad base of sustainability experts and applied across a wide range of institutional types. Questions should also include sufficient supporting information to ensure consistent interpretation and requirements for data.
7. Reject financial conflicts of interest. Evaluating organizations should not accept any form of financial compensation from the schools being evaluated.
8. Offer an “opt out.” Evaluating organizations should accept that campus sustainability teams reserve the right to prioritize limited resources to maximize progress towards strategic sustainability goals. At times this could include the decision not to participate in certain surveys. It is contrary to the preceding principles to evaluate a school that has expressed a preference not to participate.

In the interest of providing transparency and accurately measuring our progress toward campus sustainability goals, this letter serves as our collective statement that we will assist and support those organizations who adopt the above guiding principles in their survey methodologies.

We recognize the significant societal contributions from evaluating organizations seeking to raise public awareness of our progress toward sustainability, and we believe the principles detailed above will help ensure the long-term credibility of campus sustainability reports and build greater support and understanding of the need for a sustainable future.

Most sincerely,

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