

# Assessing Sustainability Engagement at Rutgers University

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## Abstract

The Office of Climate Action, Rutgers University, prepares the Rutgers University assessment of sustainability engagement performance on a nationwide reporting system. However, the utilization of this reporting system needs to maintain consistency with other measured universities. The study uses observational research from "The Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) is a transparent, self-reporting framework for colleges and universities to measure their sustainability performance."<sup>1</sup> Many elements were considered in preparing Rutgers University for this national reporting system. Identify the universities to model the reporting style for the upcoming Rutgers University report. The universities were chosen to model after observing demographics, physical size, the number of buildings, enrolled students, etc. Next, benchmarking the engagement data from the STARS system of twenty-eight different chosen universities. After compiling and analyzing the collected engagement data from all twenty-eight universities, the data showed inconsistent ratings by the STARS engagement category measurements. Based on these findings, there is a vast range of engagement with the universities that get rated equally in the STARS assessment system; the challenge is recognizing universities' and colleges' effective and influential sustainability engagement.

## Background

In the spring of 2020, Rutgers University students submitted a request for the University, to divest from fossil fuels. In the request, the students requested an ad hoc committee<sup>2</sup> to advise the joint committee on investments in the divestment of fossil fuel requests. The ad hoc committee on divestment was created and submitted a final report on February 2021 with its findings. With the resolution to divest from fossil fuels, the Rutgers University: Board of Governors and Board of Trustees approved the ad hoc committee's resolution to divest fossil fuels which became known as the Climate Action Plan.<sup>3</sup> The Rutgers University Office of Climate Action was created in the spirit of the sustainability actions that have happened in the past few years. "In 2021, Rutgers adopted a Climate Action Plan calling for the university to mobilize its academic, operational, and economic capacities to advance just, equitable climate solutions and help achieve national net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The community-developed plan recommended Rutgers to establish an Office of Climate Action charged with helping the university work toward (or advance) the following goals related to climate change mitigation, climate change adaptation, and campus culture."<sup>4</sup> The Office of Climate action continues the vital work of sustainability at the Rutgers University campus. Over the 2022 summer, the Office hired Rutgers University student interns to prepare Rutgers University to be submitted for the first time in the national STARS measurement for sustainability performance system, a program through The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE).<sup>5</sup>

## Methods

Many steps went into preparing Rutgers University for the STARS program of AASHE, a national reporting system. Hundreds of universities have a report and ranking in the sustainability STARS system. The first step was identifying the universities to model Rutgers University's reporting style. The factors considered when reviewing past STARS reported universities': demographics, physical size, the number of buildings, enrolled students, etc. Based on the similarities above to Rutgers with the different universities, a decision was made to focus on twenty-eight different universities that fall into these categories: Big Ten Universities; Universities of California System; California State Universities System; Universities with Regional Similarity.

After identification of the outside universities, benchmarking the engagement data from the STARS system of twenty-eight different chosen universities was the following procedure. The STARS questions asked universities about sustainability engagement on/off campus, focusing the data on university sustainability engagement, with approximately 14 different categories of questions with sub-categories underneath. The repetitiveness of the same questions with twenty-eight universities illustrates a pattern with the engagement measurements from STARS. The data patterns point to inconsistent ratings with differing universities' engagement categories from the STARS measurement system.

## Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System Benchmarking Report



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## Results

The results from this research show vast differences in climate and sustainability action with each university. The challenge is recognizing universities' and colleges' effective and influential sustainability engagement. A wide range of activities is awarded the same level of recognition within the STARS program. It is unclear at this point if all those activities indicate the integration of sustainability into engagement practices at these universities. Further research is required to assess the impact of the range of qualifying activities. Learning about these undefined environmental tactics when Rutgers University creates their report makes sure the programs reported to STARS have an actual impact on students.

## Sample of Benchmarking STARS Engagement Questions

- Campus Engagement: [Student Educators Program](#)
  - Name of the student educators program (1st program)
  - A brief description of the student educators program (1st program)
  - A brief description of the student educators program's target audience (1st program)
- Website URL where information about the student educators program is available (1st program)
- Campus Engagement: [Student Orientation](#)
  - A brief description of how sustainability is included prominently in new student orientation
  - Website URL where information about sustainability in student orientation is available
  - Additional documentation to support the submission
- Campus Engagement: [Student Life](#)
  - Name and a brief description of the active student groups focused on sustainability
  - A brief description of the gardens, farms, community supported agriculture (CSA) or fishery programs, and/or urban agriculture projects
  - A brief description of the student-run enterprises
  - A brief description of the sustainable investment funds, green revolving funds or sustainable microfinance initiatives
  - A brief description of the conferences, speaker series, symposia, or similar events focused on sustainability
  - A brief description of the cultural arts events, installations, or performances focused on sustainability
  - A brief description of the wilderness or outdoors programs that follow Leave No Trace principles
  - A brief description of the sustainability-focused themes chosen for themed semesters, years, or first-year experiences

## References

1. <https://stars.aashe.org>
2. <https://www.rutgers.edu/strategy/ad-hoc-divestment-committee>
3. <https://www.rutgers.edu/news/rutgers-divest-fossil-fuels>
4. <https://climateaction.rutgers.edu>
5. <https://www.aashe.org>