

Getting Started with STARS

An Introduction to the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System™

The Basics

The Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) is a transparent, self-reporting framework for colleges and universities to measure their sustainability performance. A program of The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), STARS is intended to engage and recognize the full spectrum of higher education institutions, from community colleges to research universities.



First Steps

Any college or university in the world may participate in STARS. Other types of educational institutions are also welcome. If your institution is not currently an active participant, you will need to [register](#) to gain access to the STARS Reporting Tool. Not sure if your institution is active or eligible? Email us at stars@aaashe.org and we will help you get started.

Subscription Options

There are two levels of access available. You can move between the two as the needs of your institution change.

Basic Access

Use the free basic access option that comes with registration to track progress and manage data.

- Includes the option to share data publicly and earn public recognition as a [STARS Reporter](#).
- Publicly reported data are included in the [STARS Data Displays](#) for benchmarking. STARS Reporters in the U.S. and Canada are also eligible for inclusion in The Princeton Review's Guide to Green Colleges.

Full Access

Purchase a full access subscription to earn a [STARS Bronze, Silver, Gold or Platinum rating](#).

- Includes data sharing and benchmarking opportunities, automated scoring, AASHE staff support to help ensure data accuracy, and a STARS rating that is valid for up to three years.
- Rated institutions are featured in the [Sustainable Campus Index](#), an annual publication that highlights top performers and high-impact initiatives. Rated institutions in the U.S. and Canada are also eligible for the green rankings published by *Sierra* and The Princeton Review..

[Learn more about program benefits and fees on the STARS website](#). Although AASHE membership is not required to participate in STARS, AASHE members receive a significant discount on program fees. [Learn more about AASHE membership](#).

Key Resources

[One Page Overview](#) - share basic information about STARS with campus stakeholders.

[Credit Checklist](#) - explore program content and basic reporting requirements.

[Technical Manual](#) - dig deeper into reporting criteria, definitions, and scoring.

[Reporting Tool](#) - log in to record data, access resources, and manage users and subscriptions.

[Knowledge Base](#) - get answers to frequently asked questions.

[STARS Update newsletter](#) - subscribe to receive quarterly news and tips by email.

Terminology

Sustainability

AASHE defines sustainability in a pluralistic and inclusive way, encompassing human and ecological health, social justice, secure livelihoods, and a better world for all generations. STARS attempts to translate this broad view of sustainability to measurable objectives at the campus level. Thus, it includes indicators related to an institution's environmental, social, and economic performance. [Learn more.](#)

Technical Manual

The STARS Technical Manual is the definitive guide to STARS and provides detailed information about reporting requirements and credits. It is freely available as a [standalone reference document](#), as well as online in the STARS Reporting Tool.

STARS Liaison

An institution's STARS Liaison is its primary point of contact in regard to STARS and the person who will receive notifications at critical stages in the reporting process. Each participating institution is asked to name a liaison and may update that information at any time.

Reporting Tool

Program participants enter information into the [STARS Reporting Tool](#), a secure online management system for storing and sharing your institution's sustainability data.

Reports

STARS participants can submit the information they have saved in the online Reporting Tool to AASHE in the form of a STARS report. Each submitted report is published on the STARS website and is the mechanism by which an institution can earn a STARS rating.

Categories and Subcategories

STARS is organized into four main categories - Academics (AC), Engagement (EN), Operations (OP) and Planning & Administration (PA) - and an optional “bonus” category: Innovation & Leadership (IN). Each category contains two or more subcategories, which define specific sustainability impact areas. For example, the Academics category contains the Curriculum and Research subcategories.



Credits

Credits are the heart of STARS. Each subcategory includes two or more credits. The text of each credit ([available in PDF format](#), as well as online in the Reporting Tool) defines the specific reporting and performance requirements that must be met to earn points and also provides definitions, measurement guidance, and examples.

Recognition & Scoring

Through participating in STARS, your institution can earn points toward a STARS Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum rating, or earn the STARS Reporter designation. STARS only provides positive recognition. Each STARS seal represents significant sustainability leadership.



To earn recognition, you will need to publicly share your institution’s current sustainability information as documented in the STARS Reporting Tool.

STARS Reporter

If your institution does not want to pursue a rating or make its scores public, you can submit as a STARS Reporter to share your accomplishments and have your institution’s data included in the STARS Data Displays for benchmarking purposes. STARS Reporter designation is available at no cost.

STARS Ratings

The table below summarizes the minimum overall score required for each STARS rating:

Bronze.....	25
Silver.....	45
Gold.....	65
Platinum.....	85

An institution's STARS score is based on the percentage of points it earns by pursuing relevant credits across the four main categories (AC, EN, OP, PA).

In addition, institutions may earn up to four Innovation & Leadership points for exemplary and path-breaking initiatives that are not covered by other STARS credits or that exceed the highest criterion of a standard credit. To earn these "bonus points", you can choose from a [catalog of exemplary practice credits](#) and/or pursue open-ended innovation credits.

Scoring Example

Model Community College earned 90 points out of a total of 180 points available. Therefore, the percentage of available points earned is 50.

The college also claimed 2 Innovation & Leadership points, which are added to the percentage of points earned.

The college's overall STARS score is 52, making it eligible for a Silver rating.



Timeframes

Once submitted, your institution's report and any rating associated with it will be valid for up to three years. However, you can re-submit as often as once a year to ensure that your institution's public data is current and potentially earn a different level of recognition.

When three years have passed, the report and rating will be marked as "expired" on the [STARS website](#). If your institution has not made a more recent submission, its STARS seal will be removed.

Sustainable Campus Index

STARS-rated institutions are featured in AASHE's annual [Sustainable Campus Index](#) (SCI) which recognizes top-performing colleges and universities in each of the STARS subcategories, top overall

performers by institution type, and innovative and high-impact initiatives from institutions that submitted STARS reports during the previous year.

The Reporting Process

Getting Organized

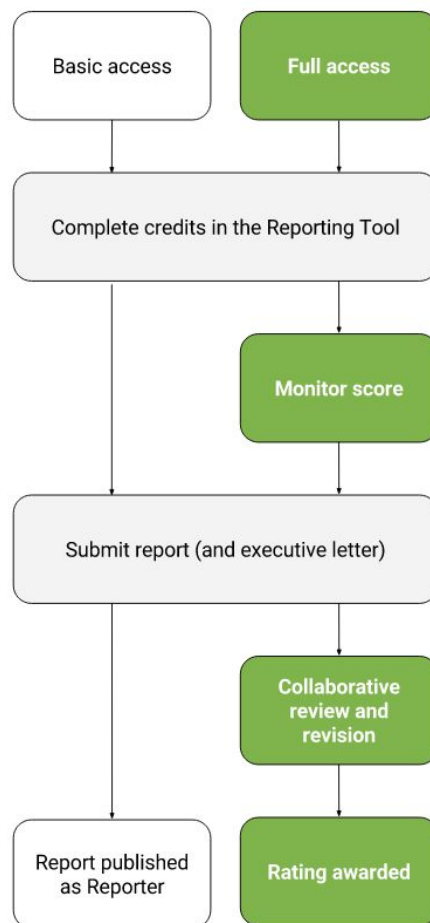
What to Expect

STARS provides a great deal of flexibility so that you can tailor the reporting process to meet your institution's needs, goals and timeline. Therefore, the amount of time it takes to complete a STARS submission varies considerably depending on how you choose to approach the reporting process. Some institutions use STARS as a tool to engage staff, students and faculty and help build a culture of sustainability on campus. For institutions that use STARS this way, the process can be as important as the results, therefore it may take a full year to complete a STARS submission.

Other institutions take a more straightforward approach, relying on a small committee or hiring consultants to complete their first submission in as little as two months.

Subsequent submissions become easier because STARS credits will typically only need to be updated and not started from scratch. Institutions that re-submit annually find that the process takes less time because annual reporting helps maintain relationships with data providers and creates a routine that many are already familiar with because of other annual reporting commitments.

The STARS process varies based on your institution's level of access:



Planning Your Approach

As you start the reporting process, it is helpful to keep the following points in mind.

Deciding Which Credits to Pursue

Use the [Credit Checklist](#) to review available credits:

- Are there credits that don't apply to your institution?
- Are there credits that you are confident you will be able to earn?

- Are there credits that your institution is not ready to pursue right now?

Most credits may be completed with readily available data, however some credits require the completion of an assessment or inventory. For example, the Academic Courses credit requires an inventory of the institution's sustainability course offerings. The process of completing these assessments can have enormous value in terms of setting baselines and identifying opportunities for improvement, but it can also take some time. It is therefore helpful to plan an approach to these credits early on in the process.

Identifying Data Sources and Providers

STARS requests data that will need to be sourced from diverse departments across campus. This process helps build relationships and also encourages staff members and faculty to better understand the role their departments can play in building institutional sustainability. Locating the departments and individuals that have the information you need can involve some detective work, so allow time to "map" where sustainability data live on campus.

Deciding on an Approach to Data Collection

There are several different approaches to collecting data for STARS. Which option(s) make the most sense for your institution? Can multiple options be employed?

- The sustainability champion - a single energetic individual who leads the process.
- A sustainability office or committee - a group of diverse campus stakeholders that each take responsibility for coordinating data collection for specific subcategories or credits.
- Student projects - for example, STARS could be a thesis project for a graduate student or the focus of student interns for course credit.
- STARS courses - usually led by an enthusiastic faculty person, courses may be created to focus solely on STARS or STARS may be integrated into an existing course.
- A distributed model - for example, give staff, students and other data providers direct access to the Reporting Tool and/or other collaborative tools.

Getting Administrative Support

Executive support can often streamline the data collection process. A memo from the president, chancellor, or other administrator to faculty and staff requesting support for the STARS data collection process, or an email request for sustainability data copied to or co-signed by a provost or other executive can serve as important encouragement for data providers to participate. Please also note that every STARS submission must be accompanied by a cover letter from a high-ranking executive.

Staying Organized

Because STARS is comprehensive, it is important to have a system in place to manage the data collection process. Some institutions manage the process in the Reporting Tool itself, while others use tools like collaborative Google Sheets to assign credits and track progress ([access templates on the STARS website](#)). Deciding on an approach to managing data collection and tracking progress in advance will help keep you focused and on schedule.

Completing Credits

Using the Reporting Tool

The STARS Reporting Tool is organized into the following sections:

My Summary	Add and manage users and Responsible Parties (see “Users and Data Providers”, below), update contact information, and share and manage data.
My Submission	Record and save information in credits; access credit criteria, definitions, and guidance; monitor your provisional score and rating (full access subscribers); and submit your STARS report.
Preview Submission	Access benchmarking charts (full access subscribers) and preview your report before you submit it.
My Resources	Download data tracking spreadsheets, template emails, press releases, any STARS seals that your institution has earned, and other promotional tools.
My Published Report(s)	Review and download your institution’s published STARS reports.
Settings	Select your institution’s preferred units: SI (Metric) or IP (US/Imperial).

Users and Data Providers

You may [add as many users as you wish](#) to help enter and/or review data in the Reporting Tool.

User Roles

- **Observers** can view the information saved in credits. For example, you could give your provost or department head Observer status so that she can review the progress you have made or preview a report before you submit it.
- **Data entry users** can enter and save information in credits. You can elect to give individuals who are actively collecting information the ability to edit data in the tool directly.
- **Administrators** can manage and share data, add/delete users, purchase subscriptions, and submit reports. You may want to restrict this level of access to your immediate team or the committee leading the process.

Responsible Parties

You also have the option to create a roster of “responsible parties” that may be associated with specific credits. The responsible party for each credit should be a staff member, faculty member, or administrator who is willing to affirm that the information submitted is accurate and can respond to questions regarding the data. When your institution submits a report, the responsible party’s name will be made public alongside the information submitted for the credit.

Data Providers

There are several different ways to share credits with data providers and responsible parties to decentralize the reporting process. Although many institutions complete all of their work in the online Reporting Tool, others prefer to supplement the tool with spreadsheets or Google Docs. Regardless of

the approach you take, all data eventually has to be entered into the online Reporting Tool. [Learn more about sharing credits with data providers.](#)

Credit Timeframes

Each credit in STARS has a specific time frame from which the reported information must be drawn. Although you should reference the [Credit Checklist and Technical Manual](#) to determine the specific timeframe for each credit, generally speaking there are three types of timeframes in STARS:

- Programs and initiatives should be ongoing or active as of the anticipated date of your next STARS submission.
- Quantitative performance year data should be the most recent data available from within the three years prior to the anticipated date of submission. (Credits that also request baseline year data allow any year from 1990 to the present.)
- Activities or events must have taken place within the three years prior to the anticipated date of submission.

Credit Status

By default, each credit in the Reporting Tool is marked "Not Started". When you are ready to save the information you have documented in a credit, you will have the following options:

In Progress	You are still editing and may not have completed all required and conditionally required reporting fields.
Complete	You have completed all required and conditionally required reporting fields. Saving a credit as Complete will identify any errors and also calculate the score (for full access subscribers).
Not Pursuing	You have decided to opt out of the credit and accept zero points for it.
Not Applicable (selected credits)	The credit is not relevant to your institution and should not count toward scoring calculations. To save a credit as Not Applicable you will have to select a valid reason from a pre-populated drop-down menu.

You will be able to go back and edit credits, including changing the status of individual credits, up until you submit your report.

Getting Help

Guidance and Resources

To address frequently asked questions about the reporting process, AASHE provides a [knowledge base](#).

For credit-specific help, each credit in the Reporting Tool includes an integrated glossary, inline help text, and a resources tab that provides additional guidance, potentially including assessment tools, a credit completion checklist, and best practice reporting examples from other institutions.

The [STARS Technical Manual](#) also includes reporting and scoring examples for many credits. In addition, it may be helpful to access [published STARS reports](#) or the [STARS Data Displays](#) to see how other institutions have reported under the same version of STARS.

AASHE provides a [Pre-Submission Review Template](#) to help you identify and correct errors and inconsistencies before submitting a report. Conducting a pre-submission review of your data will help expedite the collaborative review and revision process and earn bonus points for the *Pre-Submission Review* exemplary practice credit.

Finally, you may want to explore STARS-related case studies, publications, and conference presentations in AASHE's [Campus Sustainability Hub](#) to identify new ideas and best practices.

AASHE Staff Support

If you can't find an answer to your question in the knowledge base, the guidance provided in the Reporting Tool, or the Technical Manual, AASHE staff are available to help. To get in touch with us, use the "question mark" widget in the upper right corner of every page of the STARS website and Reporting Tool or email stars@aathe.org.



Sharing & Publishing

Sharing With Stakeholders

Data Exports

You have the option to generate an export of the data saved in the "My Submission" section of the Reporting Tool at anytime in PDF or CSV (Excel) format.

Preview Submission

The Reporting Tool also includes a Preview Submission section that will allow users to see what your final report will look like when published. Full access subscribers have the ability to use Preview Submission to view benchmarking charts and compare your institution's performance with other institutions of a similar type, for example:



Public Reports

All of your institution's published STARS reports will be publicly available on the [STARS website](#) and may be downloaded and freely shared.

Sharing With Other Organizations

AASHE facilitates data sharing with third party organizations. Specifically, participants in the U.S. and Canada can share their STARS reports with *Sierra* magazine and/or The Princeton Review each year to be included in those organizations' green rankings. [Learn more about data sharing.](#)

Submitting to AASHE for Publication

When you're ready to publish a STARS report, simply click the "Submit Report" button in the My Submission section of the Reporting Tool. You will be asked to complete four steps:

1. Review your submission and revisit any credits you may have missed.
2. Upload a cover letter from the institution's president, chancellor, or other high ranking executive.
3. Update your institution's contact information.
4. Final confirmation that the report is ready to be submitted.

Upon completion of the submission process, the institution's STARS Liaison will receive an email outlining next steps.

Tip

Acquiring an executive letter may take some time. AASHE encourages institutions to notify the administration about this requirement several months prior to the anticipated date of submission.

Accountability and Data Accuracy

STARS data accuracy processes improve the quality of current and future reports, help protect the credibility of STARS, and provide a fair and transparent means for resolving questions about the accuracy of STARS data.

Collaborative Review and Revision

AASHE staff review portions of each report submitted for a rating for accuracy and consistency and will work with you to make any needed revisions before the final rating is awarded. Once the review and revision process is complete, the report will be published on the STARS website and a certificate of rating will be emailed to the STARS Liaison, Executive Contact, and President/Chancellor. [Learn more about STARS data accuracy measures.](#)

Tip

After submission, it typically takes **2-3 weeks** for AASHE staff to conduct a review and email the results to the STARS Liaison. Some revisions may be required before a rating is awarded, so it is important that you build some extra time into your schedule for the review and revision process.

Correcting a Published Report

Once a report has been published, you can address any oversights or inconsistencies by submitting data revision requests. To add new or updated information, you will need to submit a new report. [Learn more about revising a STARS report.](#)

Next Steps

Publicize Your Rating

Here are a just a few examples of ways you can highlight your institution's STARS rating:

- Share your certificate of rating with campus officials.
- Post the appropriate STARS seal to your institution's website, social media sites, sustainability website, newsletters, email signatures, and other relevant locations.
- Contact all of the individuals that helped you complete STARS, thank them for their efforts, share the link to your institution's report, and invite them to collaborate on enhancing sustainability initiatives in their respective areas of campus.
- Connect with your institution's marketing and communications offices and design a strategy to gain broader public recognition of your achievement. A template press release is available in the My Resources section of the Reporting Tool.
- Highlight your STARS rating when connecting with prospective students and their parents to illustrate your institution's commitment to sustainability.

Develop a Sustainability Report or Plan

STARS provides a comprehensive framework that can be adapted to create and publish a sustainability report. The targets and metrics included in STARS can also lay the groundwork for the development of a strategic sustainability plan for your institution. In addition, your STARS rating or score can be incorporated into your institution's overall strategic plan as an indicator of progress toward sustainability.



Continuous Improvement

Hundreds of institutions have submitted STARS reports, making the [STARS Data Displays](#) a rich source of best practices and a great way to benchmark your institution's performance against its peers. In addition, some institutions conduct a gap analysis after they have submitted a STARS report to identify opportunities for improvement and map out a path to a higher overall score and rating.

Help Shape the System

STARS was developed with broad participation from the higher education sector and remains a highly collaborative project. Feedback from participants is encouraged throughout the reporting process and every suggestion for improvement is considered in developing future versions of STARS. AASHE also provides opportunities for individuals and organizations to participate more formally in [program governance](#).