



Resource guide for U.S. universities to engage with the Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the world's shared plan to address global challenges across social, economic, and environmental dimensions by 2030. Adopted by all countries in 2015, the SDGs emerged from the most inclusive and comprehensive negotiations in United Nations history and have inspired people from across sectors, geographies, and cultures. Achieving the Goals by 2030 will require heroic and imaginative effort, determination to learn what works, and agility to adapt to new information and changing trends. The 2030 Agenda explicitly recognizes the critical role that academia plays in achieving this ambitious global effort.

But how do higher education institutions engage, especially when the SDGs cover so many topics and were designed to be a framework for countries, not universities? Public and private universities of all sizes across the United States have already begun adapting the framework to the university context. This resource guide is informed by their experience and strategies as they apply the SDG framework across their campuses and in their communities.

This guide provides an overview of the three key questions for U.S. universities to answer as they begin their SDG journey. This is not an endorsement of any particular approach mentioned but rather a menu of options for universities to consider in order to meet their unique needs.

1.) **Why and for whom are we choosing to engage with the SDG framework?**

Determine the purpose of engaging with the SDGs, including identifying key stakeholders and how they will benefit from engaging with this framework.

2.) **Where and how do we already work towards the SDGs?** Review your institution's courses, research, and operations to determine where there are existing activities as well as opportunities to do more.

3.) **What is our plan to implement the SDGs at our university?** Based on these findings, develop and implement programming for your institution to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

This guide is a part of a series of guides for U.S. universities interested in engaging the SDGs. The full series can be found [here](#).

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1.) Why and for whom are we choosing to engage with the SDG framework?

Determine the purpose of engaging with the SDGs, including identifying key stakeholders and how they will benefit from engaging with this framework. Before deciding how you will engage with the SDGs, it is important to determine the reasons you would like to do so in order to guide the process. Each university has a distinct purpose and mission, but below are some common considerations that apply across institutions. These may change over time, but having a clearly-stated purpose from the outset will help ensure you consult with all relevant stakeholders and result in a much richer analysis and plan of action.

Stakeholder	Desired benefit(s) from university SDG engagement
Students	<input type="checkbox"/> Interdisciplinary education <input type="checkbox"/> Employment opportunities
Faculty	<input type="checkbox"/> Research funding <input type="checkbox"/> Connections with complementary researchers both internally and externally <input type="checkbox"/> New teaching resources
Staff	<input type="checkbox"/> Sustainable policies and practices <input type="checkbox"/> Existing sustainability efforts uplifted and recognized <input type="checkbox"/> Streamlined operations
Alumni	<input type="checkbox"/> Increased engagement and support
Community	<input type="checkbox"/> Strengthened relationships with community leaders and members
University-wide ecosystem	<input type="checkbox"/> Increased cooperation within the institution <input type="checkbox"/> Strengthened recruitment for students, faculty, and staff <input type="checkbox"/> Connection to a larger SDG community (e.g., other universities, local and international organizations, the United Nations, etc.)

2.) Where do we already work towards the SDGs?

Review your institution's courses, research, and operations to determine where there are existing activities as well as opportunities to do more on the SDGs. This may involve conducting a Voluntary University Review (VUR). A VUR consists of reviewing a university's activities, assessing how they align with the Sustainable Development Goals, and identifying opportunities to take action. Here are some questions to help you get started.

Who should be consulted?

Offices that are often engaged with these analyses are those focusing on sustainability, international partnerships, and diversity, equity, and inclusion, together with the office leading campus operations. Additional units and departments who generally hold key information include university libraries, enrollment services, operational divisions, and the institutional research office. Student government, the faculty senate, and the staff council can help guide your consultations. If you have campuses in other locations, their experiences should also be incorporated.

Establish who should be consulted.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Sustainability Office	<input type="checkbox"/> Facilities
<input type="checkbox"/> International Office	<input type="checkbox"/> Human Resources
<input type="checkbox"/> Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Office	<input type="checkbox"/> Health and Well-being
<input type="checkbox"/> University Operations	<input type="checkbox"/> Institutional Research
<input type="checkbox"/> Libraries	<input type="checkbox"/> Student Government
<input type="checkbox"/> Registrar	<input type="checkbox"/> Faculty Senate
	<input type="checkbox"/> Staff Council

What type of reporting already exists?

There are numerous reporting mechanisms that may help inform your analysis. These include internal university reports and strategies as well as external reports that specifically address the SDGs.

Determine what types of reporting already exist.	
<input type="checkbox"/> University strategies	<input type="checkbox"/> AASHE STARS reporting
<input type="checkbox"/> University annual reports	<input type="checkbox"/> Times Higher Education Impact Rankings

Is your institution a member of a network that engages with the SDGs?

It is likely that some of your colleagues are already engaging with the SDGs, whether it is an individual professor attending a conference, a student group interested in related topics, or membership in a higher education network that is addressing the SDGs. Bringing these early adopters into the process will help you think through the most effective way to involve the broader university community in your efforts. You can start by reviewing your institution's membership and engagement in some of the networks that already engage with the SDGs.

Establish if your institution belongs to an SDG network.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Association for the Advancement of Higher Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Sustainable Development Solutions Network |
| <input type="checkbox"/> International Sustainable Campus Network | <input type="checkbox"/> UN Academic Impact |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The National Academy of Sciences | <input type="checkbox"/> UNA-USA university chapter |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> University Global Coalition |

How will you organize the analysis?

The three main areas of activity to examine are education, research, and operations, though you can also look at other activities like student organizations and volunteer projects. Each institution is unique so the approach may vary, but these are some starting points for you to explore. We have developed guides for these three areas that provide more detailed suggestions for how you might like to conduct your analysis.

3.) What is our plan to implement the SDGs at our university?

Based on these findings, develop and implement programming for your institution to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. After conducting a thorough review of existing activities and establishing relationships through the process, you will have a clearer picture of where the institution has strengths and room for improvement. Based on findings in steps 1 and 2, you can develop and implement programming for the university to help achieve the SDGs across education, research, and operations. Some options are listed below. The additional guides in this series also provide more information about several of the approaches listed here.

Education

- Tagging courses with the SDGs so that students can find relevant courses outside of their disciplines
- Encouraging faculty to incorporate the SDGs in their syllabi
- Developing resources for instructors to incorporate the SDGs into their courses
- Creating communities of practice

Research

- Educating faculty about existing research publication tagging tools
- Establishing small grant programs
- Creating cross-disciplinary research and courses
- Providing research funding
- Organizing symposia
- Providing grants for working with students

Operations

- Elevating champions to demonstrate the many ways that students, faculty, and staff can contribute to the SDGs
- Partnering with other institutions, local authorities, and organizations to enhance cooperation
- Using the SDGs to identify and uplift opportunities for the institution to make its operations more sustainable