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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER REVIEWED)

# Towards a Sustainability Elective Classification: Evidence, Equity and Institutional Change in Higher Education

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## Abstract

The Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability was developed to support higher education institutions in advancing sustainability through institutional self-study, systems thinking, organisational learning and institutional transformation. By encouraging evidence-based reflection and cross-campus engagement, the classification has the potential to shape institutional priorities, strengthen practices and accelerate sustainability efforts across higher education. Drawing on a multi-year feasibility study, a field-informed development process, and a pilot involving 20 colleges and universities across the United States and Puerto Rico, this article examines the origins, implementation and early outcomes of the classification. The pilot engaged institutions in a Community of Practice, application development, and peer review process that fostered shared learning and built a collaborative network of institutions advancing sustainability.

Findings suggest that classification is more than a recognition mechanism. Participating institutions reported that the process increased awareness of existing sustainability efforts; strengthened cross-campus collaboration; expanded institutional networks; and encouraged more strategic alignment between sustainability initiatives and institutional mission. The self-study process helped institutions identify strengths, uncover gaps and better understand the relationships among teaching, research, operations, community engagement and student learning. Participants also highlighted the value of a flexible framework that recognises diverse institutional contexts, missions and approaches to sustainability while maintaining a shared commitment to environmental stewardship, social equity, economic resilience and community wellbeing.

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The article argues that the Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability has the potential to serve as both a catalyst and a framework for institutional transformation. By encouraging evidence-based reflection, organisational learning and collaborative problem-solving, the classification may help institutions deepen and accelerate sustainability efforts across higher education. Implications for future research, institutional practice and the development of sustainability assessment frameworks are discussed.

## Keywords

**Sustainability in Higher Education; Carnegie Elective Classification; Institutional Transformation; Climate Action; Systems Thinking; Community of Practice**

## Introduction: Why a Sustainability Elective Classification Matters

Sustainability in higher education has emerged as a central institutional priority, shaped by the accelerating impacts of climate change and growing recognition of social and economic inequities. Colleges and universities occupy a unique position in advancing sustainability, shaping not only what is researched, taught and studied but also how communities adapt to and respond to pressing local and global challenges. Recent scholarship underscores their role as key drivers of climate action, innovation and workforce development, as well as critical actors in advancing just and equitable transitions to sustainable economies (Findler et al. 2019; Leal Filho et al. 2018; Leal Filho et al. 2021). Subsequent scholarship further emphasises the need for higher education institutions to approach sustainability as an institution-wide process that connects teaching, research, governance, campus operations, community partnerships and organisational learning (Holst 2023; Holst et al. 2024). At the same time, the literature continues to surface sustainability efforts that are often fragmented across departments, unevenly prioritised and difficult to embed within core institutional systems and decision-making processes (Almusharraf 2026; Disterheft et al. 2015; Lozano et al. 2015) while highlighting the importance of sustained leadership commitment, cross-campus collaboration and alignment between sustainability goals and broader institutional missions (Disterheft et al. 2015; Leal Filho et al. 2018; Lozano et al. 2015).

The urgency of sustainability work continues to grow as rising global temperatures and more frequent extreme weather events increasingly shape everyday life, with impacts that are not distributed evenly. Equity-centred scholarship has sharpened the field's focus, emphasising that sustainability cannot be separated from questions of justice. Communities of colour and low-income populations continue to face disproportionate exposure to environmental harms and climate-related risks, reflecting long-standing patterns of inequality (Agyeman et al. 2016). Climate action efforts must therefore address differences in vulnerability and capacity across communities while ensuring that the benefits of sustainability investments are broadly shared (Agyeman et al. 2016; International Labour Organization 2015).

Despite growing recognition of sustainability's importance, gaps remain in how sustainability efforts are assessed, recognised and supported across higher education. Foundational frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have helped solidify an emerging understanding of sustainability as an integrated concept – one that brings together environmental stewardship, social equity and economic vitality (United Nations 2015). In higher education, this broad vision has been translated into practice through initiatives such as the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education's (AASHE) Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS), which provides institutions with tools to assess and benchmark sustainability performance across academics, operations and community engagement (AASHE 2023). At the same time, sustainability scholars and practitioners continue to call for approaches that move beyond reporting and capture the interconnected nature of institutional sustainability work. A growing body of work reinforces this shift, highlighting

whole-institution and systems approaches that connect sustainability assessment with organisational transformation, institutional culture and stakeholder engagement (Holst 2023; Holst et al. 2024; Christou et al. 2024).

These gaps point to the need for a broader form of institutional transformation. Advancing sustainability at scale requires more than adding new programs or coordinating existing initiatives; it necessitates examining and changing the structures, policies, relationships and decision-making processes through which institutions establish priorities, allocate resources and pursue their missions. From this perspective, sustainability becomes not merely an area of institutional activity but a lens through which institutions examine how they operate, learn, adapt and contribute to broader social and environmental change. This raises an important question: What role can a sustainability-focused Carnegie Elective Classification play in understanding, accelerating and deepening sustainability across higher education?

This emphasis on institutional integration aligns closely with the long-standing approach of the Carnegie Elective Classifications, which examine how colleges and universities enact their missions through interconnected systems, structures, partnerships and practices. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching sponsors the Elective Classifications which are managed by an Elective Classification team, which is housed at the American Council on Education (ACE). This discussion article presents the newly developed Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability, which responds directly to this moment. It was intentionally designed to complement existing assessment frameworks by providing a systems-oriented, mission-driven approach that emphasises institutional self-study, evidence-based reflection and continuous improvement while supporting broad participation across institutions with varying missions, capacities and sustainability infrastructures. The Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability further contributes to this landscape by defining sustainability in intentionally broad and flexible terms, allowing institutions to interpret and apply the concept in ways that align with their unique missions and contexts.

Developed with and for the field, this new classification draws on the expertise and lived experiences of higher education institutions to create a framework that is both rigorous and practical. It enables institutions to assess, document and strengthen their work across teaching, research, operations and community engagement while also recognising the diverse ways sustainability takes shape in different contexts. Importantly, the model is designed to broaden participation without compromising standards, aligning with findings from studies that highlight the importance of balancing credibility and accessibility (Lozano et al. 2015; Findler et al. 2019). Its adaptable approach supports meaningful organisational learning and transformation across diverse institutional contexts (Holst 2023; Ogbolu et al. 2026). Grounded in higher education's broader commitment to the public good, the classification creates a pathway for institutions of all types – including those historically underrepresented in national recognition systems – to engage meaningfully in sustainability efforts and contribute to collective climate solutions. While this article focuses on the experiences of institutions participating in the US-based pilot, the lessons may be relevant to institutions, classification systems and sustainability initiatives in other national and international contexts.

This article offers a methodological and practical account of the development and implementation of the Sustainability Elective Classification pilot, grounded in collaborative design, implementation, reflection, and refinement. Rather than presenting a research study, it draws on praxis – the integration of theory, reflection, and practice – to document the work of developing the classification and surface lessons that can inform future iterations and institutional practice. It considers the role that a sustainability-focused Carnegie Elective Classification can play in accelerating and deepening sustainability across higher education. The sections that follow detail the collaborative development and implementation process, present key insights from participating pilot institutions and offer recommendations for institutions considering the Elective Classification for Sustainability in the future.

## A Relationship-Centred Approach

The Carnegie Electives team – Dr Marisol Morales, former Executive Director of the Carnegie Elective Classifications and Assistant Vice President at the American Council on Education, and Dr Amelia Ortiz, former Associate Director of the Carnegie Elective Classifications – convened the field study and pilot that informed the development of the classification. They used an intentional, relationship-centred approach that emphasised trust, reciprocity, shared learning, reflection, and collective knowledge-building throughout the process. This relational approach centred diverse voices and knowledge, recognising participants' expertise, experience and perspectives as essential to collaboration and collective learning.

I joined the initiative in the fall of 2024 as the facilitator of the Sustainability Pilot Community of Practice. As an independent consultant focused on advancing organisational learning, community engagement, and social equity, I have worked since 2022 with institutions pursuing the Carnegie Community Engagement Elective Classification, supporting their self-study processes and application development. I have also served as both a Tier 1 and Tier 2 reviewer for the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, deepening my understanding of the classification process. My connection to this work began earlier, when I facilitated a strategic planning meeting that brought together Carnegie Foundation and American Council on Education leaders to explore future directions for the Elective Classifications. It was during those early conversations that the concept of a sustainability-focused classification gained momentum. Recognising the perspective gained through these experiences, Marisol invited me to author this article to document the evolution of the classification from concept to implementation and to highlight how the Community of Practice model lends itself to truly collaborative work while generating lessons for future classification development.

Given the collaborative and relational approach taken throughout the pilot, the experiences of participating institutions are presented in their own words. Direct quotes are drawn from four pilot institution representatives who shared reflections during the webinar 'From Pilot to Practice: Institutional Stories from the Carnegie Classification for Sustainability', sponsored by the American Council on Education on 1 May 2026. Their reflections offer meaningful insight into the broader experiences of the pilot cohort. Each representative consented to participate and reviewed the quotes and sections featuring their contributions prior to publication.

In addition to representing the pilot cohort, these institutions were chosen for the webinar because they each represent a distinct institutional context and approach to sustainability. They illustrate the breadth of sustainability leadership across higher education and reflect the diversity of institutional types, missions, size, geographies and student populations that the Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability was designed to support.

## Phase 1: The Feasibility Process

The Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability emerged through a multi-phase process of research, dialogue, collaboration and engagement with the higher education sustainability field, reflecting the principle of being developed 'of and by the field'. Between 2023 and 2024, the feasibility study included a literature review, interviews with field leaders, in-person convenings, virtual meetings, conference sessions, surveys and institutional outreach. Engagement included higher education practitioners, faculty, institutional leaders, national organisations and sustainability networks such as AASHE, Second Nature and the U.S. Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development.

These engagements explored institutional readiness, existing sustainability frameworks, measurable indicators and opportunities for a Carnegie classification to complement rather than duplicate existing efforts. AASHE STARS and Second Nature frameworks received particular attention because of

participants' familiarity with them. Feedback emphasised broad institutional accessibility, alignment with existing frameworks and recognition of diverse institutional missions, capacities and approaches to sustainability. Participants also highlighted the importance of Indigenous knowledge, community-based approaches and ecosystem thinking. By mid-2024, the process had coalesced around a shared definition of sustainability and core themes that would guide development of the application framework.

### OUTCOME FROM PHASE 1: A SHARED DEFINITION OF SUSTAINABILITY

Defining sustainability was a critical step. Throughout the feasibility study, participants consistently emphasised that without a shared understanding of sustainability, institutions may use the same language while pursuing fundamentally different goals, making it difficult to align strategies, measure progress, establish accountability or build collective momentum across the field. Developing a definition therefore became more than a semantic exercise; it was foundational to creating a framework capable of supporting institutional transformation, cross-campus collaboration and meaningful assessment across diverse institutional contexts.

The definition that emerged through the collaborative process reflects the collective input of higher education leaders, faculty, sustainability practitioners, community partners and organisations across the field.

> *The Carnegie Foundation defines sustainability in higher education as a holistic approach to advancing environmental stewardship, economic resilience and long-term wellbeing through interconnected academic, research and operational initiatives. This involves preparing students to address climate challenges, promoting responsible resource management and fostering innovation that supports a sustainable future.*
>
> *Institutions pursue sustainability by reducing environmental impacts, conducting research that offers practical solutions to global challenges and collaborating with communities. These efforts are culturally, regionally and contextually grounded and draw on diverse knowledge systems—including Traditional Ecological Knowledge—to ensure the wellbeing of both present and future generations.*

This understanding recognises that sustainability extends beyond environmental impact reduction alone. It includes preparing students to address climate and sustainability challenges, fostering innovation, promoting responsible resource management, strengthening community wellbeing, and advancing equitable responses to complex social and environmental issues.

At the same time, contributors stressed that sustainability work is inherently shaped by institutional mission, geography, culture, history, and community context. As a result, the Carnegie Foundation's definition was intentionally designed to serve as a guide rather than a rigid or prescriptive standard. Institutions articulate sustainability in ways that reflect their own identities, environmental realities, and cultural settings while still aligning with the broader principles of the classification. Rather than requiring institutions to adopt identical terminology, the definition emphasises coherence between an institution's stated understanding of sustainability and the ways sustainability is reflected in decision-making, policy, planning, implementation, and measurable impact across campus. In this way, the shared definition functions both as a unifying foundation for the classification and as a flexible guide that supports institutional diversity, innovation, and continuous improvement across the higher education landscape.

## Phase 2: Shaping the Classification Framework

A convening hosted by Morehouse College in 2024 brought together higher education leaders, faculty, sustainability practitioners, non-profit partners, and other stakeholders from across the United States and Puerto Rico to synthesise findings and advance framework development. Participants worked collaboratively

to define sustainability, identify key components of the application framework, and ensure that the emerging classification reflected the diversity of institutional experiences, capacities, and contexts across higher education. This collaborative and iterative process ultimately led to the development of the Carnegie Sustainability Elective Classification framework application.

### OUTCOME FROM PHASE 2: THE APPLICATION FRAMEWORK

I. Campus Information
II. Institutional Context
III. Sustainability Definitions
IV. Campus Infrastructure for Sustainability
V. Academic Integration of Sustainability
VI. (A) Career Development and Workforce Preparation for Non-Community Colleges
(B) Workforce Development and Career Preparation for Community Colleges
VII. Research and Innovation for Sustainability and Climate Solutions for Non-Community Colleges
VIII. Ecosystem Model for Collaborative Community Partnerships
IX. Resilience and Adaptation
X. Climate Action Plan
XI. Reflection and Additional Information (Optional)

## Launching the Pilot

### 1. THE PILOT COHORT

The 13-month pilot launched in January 2025 with a cohort of 20 participating institutions, approximately 47 core participants, along with six observer institutions that were included in all aspects of the pilot process except for the in-person gathering. Participants engaged in virtual activities, providing feedback, completing the pilot application, and serving as application reviewers. The cohort reflected a broad cross-section of higher education, with representation from one tribal college, four faith-based institutions, one women's college, two rural institutions, four historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), five community colleges, seven private institutions, and eight Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs). This diversity was intentional and central to the development process, helping ensure that the emerging framework reflected the varied experiences, priorities and capacities of institutions across the higher education landscape. (See the Appendix for the full list of participating institutions.)

The cohort also varied in its prior engagement with sustainability assessment frameworks. Ten pilot institutions did not use the AASHE STARS framework; six campuses held active AASHE STARS ratings and four had expired ratings. Out of the 20 pilot institutions, 15 also had documented relationships with Second Nature and its Climate Leadership Network. This variation underscored the importance of developing a classification process that could engage institutions with varying levels of prior experience in formal sustainability reporting systems. It also reinforced a central goal of the classification: to broaden participation in sustainability assessment and recognition while supporting meaningful reflection, accountability, institutional learning and continuous improvement.

### 2. CONTRIBUTING TO FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

The Community of Practice was intentionally designed using an equity-centred and collaborative approach that reflected the values embedded within the Carnegie Elective Classifications. As part of the pilot process, each participating institution completed the pilot application while engaging in a year-long process

of reflection, dialogue and feedback intended to strengthen both the framework and the institutional experience. Over the course of the year, participants engaged in six virtual meetings and a 3-day in-person gathering in San Juan and Utuado, Puerto Rico, centred on co-design, relationship building and collective learning. Participants utilised the ACE Engage platform and broader member network to exchange resources, discuss challenges and provide ongoing feedback on the evolving classification framework, application structure and overall process. The cohort also contributed to presentations at the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education and Second Nature conferences, where participants shared emerging insights and promising practices from the pilot with the broader higher education sustainability field. Each institution documented the time and capacity required for participation and contributed recommendations to strengthen the accessibility, clarity and effectiveness of the application framework.

A central focus of the Community of Practice involved refining the application framework in real time. Participants provided detailed feedback on the structure and design of the application, including the clarity and relevance of questions, terminology and word choice, data requests, the number and organisation of questions, and practical strategies for identifying, collecting, and reporting institutional data. Through iterative review and consultation, the pilot generated more than 50 recommendations that resulted in 39 significant revisions to the framework and application during the pilot period. For example, feedback led to changes in the application's overall structure and clarity, including clearer instructions, defined terminology, reduced redundancy and a more accessible presentation of data. Similarly, feedback on the Ecosystem Model prompted the development of clearer definitions, practical examples and additional guidance to help institutions understand and apply the ecosystem approach. Together, these contributions strengthened the clarity, accessibility and usability of the classification while helping ensure that the framework reflected the lived realities and operational capacities of a diverse range of institutions. The process also fostered new collaborations, expanded professional networks, shared resources and a deeper sense of collective ownership grounded in work developed 'of and by the field'.

## 3. PLACE-BASED LEARNING IN PUERTO RICO

A highlight of the pilot was a 3-day in-person retreat in San Juan and Utuado, Puerto Rico, which brought together Community of Practice participants for a deeply meaningful learning experience. Hosted by two of the pilot campuses, Universidad del Sagrado Corazón and the University of Puerto Rico at Utuado, the retreat combined collaborative work on the evolving classification framework with immersive experiences that highlighted Puerto Rico's environmental, historical and social landscape. Dr. Morales explained that Puerto Rico was intentionally selected because the region provided a powerful context for understanding sustainability, resilience and climate justice in practice.

Participants engaged in campus tours and discussions with students, faculty, administrators and community partners, as well as site visits focused on local sustainability and resilience efforts. At El Caño Martín Peña, a historically marginalised and flood-prone community in San Juan advancing environmental restoration and community-led resilience initiatives, participants explored connections among sustainability, resilience and community leadership (García & Martínez-Román 2025). At Café Gran Batey, a family-owned coffee farm in Utuado, they learned about the connections among agriculture, culture, environmental stewardship and local economic development.

The experiences broadened participants' understanding of how sustainability is shaped by local history, culture and lived experience. Cultural and community experiences, including a traditional Bomba performance and participation in the Festival Tierra Adentro at the University of Puerto Rico at Utuado, further connected sustainability with equity, partnership and resilience. The retreat became a living example

of community-engaged and culturally grounded sustainability practice, while fostering new collaborations, professional relationships and practical ideas for participants' own institutions.

Participants reflected on the convening as an especially immersive example of community-engaged teaching, with Dr Anne Hayes, Executive Director of Global & Interdisciplinary Studies at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina, describing the experience as 'supercharged community-engaged teaching and learning'. She explained that it prompted participants to consider their own institutional and community contexts and how they might create similarly place-based experiences on their campuses.

Lorena Franco, Director of the Center for Professional and International Experiences at Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, reflected that one of the most meaningful aspects of the retreat was experiencing sustainability within a unique cultural and community context. Describing the work connected to Caño Martín Peña, she noted that 'having everyone see that side of the work and speak directly with community members was incredibly meaningful'. Franco emphasised that, in Puerto Rico, sustainability extends beyond environmental stewardship to include access to education, support for neighbouring communities, responses to natural disasters and economic mobility. She also highlighted the importance of helping visitors understand 'the realities and community context that participants might not experience as tourists'.

Together, these experiences reinforced the importance of place-based, community-centred approaches to sustainability grounded in lived experience, resilience and social connection.

## 4. THE PILOT REVIEW PROCESS

Once the applications were submitted, pilot participants were trained to serve on collaborative review teams that contributed to strengthening and refining the classification process. Reviewers assessed the intentionality of sustainability integration across each institution, including alignment with institutional mission and values, coordination and support across units, incorporation into curricular and co-curricular experiences, and evidence of meaningful outcomes and impact. Five-member teams included scholars and practitioners with diverse subject matter expertise, professional backgrounds and experience across higher education institution types. Twenty pilot applications were distributed across seven teams, with each team reviewing approximately three applications. Teams were led by designated team leaders selected for their expertise in sustainability and demonstrated capacity for collaborative leadership, creating an additional layer of peer learning, mentorship and reflection across the cohort. Through the review process, participants helped interpret and refine the framework, identify areas for improvement and deepen understanding of the initiative and its potential contributions to the higher education sustainability field.

The review process generated substantial feedback that directly influenced the evolution of the classification and application framework. Participants identified opportunities to improve the structure, clarity and flow of the application, leading to revisions that made the framework more accessible and easier to navigate. Feedback from reviewers also contributed to restructuring sections related to institutional data collection, refining projected completion times and strengthening the functionality and user experience of the GivePulse application portal. Collectively, the review process reinforced the value of peer-informed assessment and demonstrated how collaborative evaluation models can strengthen both the rigour and usability of emerging sustainability frameworks. It also reinforced participants' role as co-creators, ensuring that revisions reflected the realities, capacities and experiences of diverse institutions.

The peer review process became an important learning experience, offering insight into the approaches that institutions are taking to advance sustainability. Lorena Franco reflected that 'it was valuable to see what different types of institutions, including R1s, tribal colleges and community colleges, are doing to address [the] challenge of climate change', noting that the process highlighted both large- and small-scale practices institutions are implementing in response to sustainability challenges. Trevor Ledbetter, Senior Director of the Office of Sustainability at the University of Arizona in Tucson, similarly described the

review process as valuable because it allowed participants to see how institutions approached the same questions in different ways. He particularly appreciated the differentiated structure within portions of the application for community colleges and non-community colleges, recognising the importance of reflecting distinct institutional missions, priorities and contexts.

The review process exposed participants to the breadth, creativity and resilience of sustainability efforts across higher education, including work happening in contexts shaped by political, financial and environmental challenges. Together, the peer review process reinforced the value of shared learning and surfaced promising practices within the emerging Sustainability Elective Classification framework.

## Discussion: How the Classification Accelerates and Deepens Sustainability

Participant experiences revealed several ways the classification may contribute to accelerating and deepening sustainability across higher education. These included the recognition of institutional diversity, increasing institutional awareness and visibility of existing sustainability efforts, the creation of an inclusive framework, and expanding institutional networks.

### 1. RECOGNITION OF INSTITUTIONAL DIVERSITY AND MOTIVATING FACTORS

Institutions participating in the inaugural Sustainability Elective Classification pilot described diverse motivations for joining the process, reflecting differences in institutional contexts, priorities and sustainability journeys. For some campuses, participation aligned with sustainability planning, climate action initiatives, or institutional assessment already underway. For others, the pilot created an opportunity to examine and make visible sustainability work that had developed organically across campus. Participants also valued contributing to a framework designed to recognise diverse institutional missions, community contexts and approaches to sustainability.

For some institutions, the timing of the pilot aligned naturally with broader sustainability planning and institutional priorities already underway. Lauren Greenberg, a Full-Time Faculty member and Co-Chair in the Sign Language and Interpreting Department as well as the Faculty Sustainability Coordinator at Mt. San Antonio College based in Los Angeles County, California, described the college's participation as somewhat 'serendipitous', explaining that the college was simultaneously preparing for AASHE STARS, completing its second Climate Action Plan and engaging in long-range facilities planning through Mt. SAC 2035, all of which aligned with the California Community College Chancellor's Office Vision 2030. As a large community college where much sustainability work had developed through grassroots efforts, Greenberg felt the pilot arrived at the right moment to help the institution better recognise, organise and communicate its sustainability work within a broader institutional narrative. She also emphasised the importance of having community colleges represented within the pilot, particularly given Mt. SAC's strong emphasis on career and technical education, continuing education and workforce development.

For other participants, the process served as an important opportunity for institutional reflection and greater awareness of work already occurring across campus. Lorena Franco described Universidad del Sagrado Corazón's participation as 'an exercise in awareness and in situating ourselves, understanding where we are as an institution'. She explained that the pace and complexity of higher education can make it difficult to fully see or connect the many sustainability-related initiatives occurring simultaneously across campus. The self-study process created an opportunity to 'deep dive, gather past and present projects, and put them into perspective', helping the institution better understand existing strengths, accomplishments and areas where additional growth was needed. Franco also emphasised the importance of the broader

Community of Practice, noting that the collaborative environment fostered authentic relationship-building and professional development.

Questions of institutional representation and inclusion also emerged as important motivations for participation. Although Anne Hayes described herself as still 'fairly new to the sustainability realm', she viewed the pilot as an important opportunity to help ensure that a wide range of institutional voices and experiences were represented within the framework's development. Hayes emphasised the importance of serving as 'a voice for small and unique institutions, including HBCUs, women's colleges, micro-colleges and under-resourced campuses', noting that it was critical for diverse institutional perspectives to be engaged throughout the pilot process. She described the experience as helping to build a 'phone-a-friend' network that could support ongoing collaboration, connection and mutual learning among sustainability leaders working in very different institutional contexts.

Several participants also described the pilot as distinct from other sustainability assessment processes because of its emphasis on qualitative reflection, storytelling and institutional identity. Trevor Ledbetter explained that the University of Arizona was drawn to the pilot because it was framed as an opportunity for deep institutional self-study and reflection. While the university had previously participated in the AASHE STARS, Ledbetter found the classification process different because 'it focused considerably less on the quantitative and far more on the qualitative and the storytelling. It really encouraged us to go much deeper than we've done in the past. I learned so much more about so many of the other things that this institution is doing, outside of my immediate circle and certainly outside of the operational side of the university, which is where my department is housed. I also built numerous new connections internally, in addition to the network that was formed through this pilot, that have already proven invaluable to the work that I do.'

Participants viewed the classification as an important complement to existing sustainability assessment frameworks, the Carnegie Elective classification offers a more qualitative, narrative-driven approach that allows institutions to tell a fuller story about how sustainability is reflected in their mission, culture, community partnerships and institutional identity.

## 2. A SELF-STUDY PROCESS THAT MAKES SUSTAINABILITY WORK IN A MORE VISIBLE AND CONNECTED WAY

Across institutions, participants described the process as an opportunity to better understand the breadth of sustainability work spanning curriculum, research, operations and community engagement, while also identifying areas where coordination, communication and alignment could be strengthened. The process encouraged institutions to move beyond isolated initiatives and think more holistically about how sustainability work connects across campus systems, institutional priorities and community partnerships. Because applications are not publicly released, the process creates space for honest reflection, institutional self-assessment and candid evaluation of both strengths and areas for growth.

One of the strongest themes emerging from participant reflections was the challenge of understanding and organising institutional sustainability efforts within a broader sustainability ecosystem that does not centre the institution. Participants emphasised that this exercise was valuable because it fostered systems thinking, helping institutions recognise their role within larger social, environmental and economic systems, and identify opportunities for greater collective impact. Trevor Ledbetter explained that one of the greatest challenges at the University of Arizona was 'trying to distil all of the amazing work happening across the institution into a coherent approach to sustainability and community engagement', particularly because so much of the work existed outside of his immediate department and operational sphere. Through the process, the university organised many of its sustainability strengths around the 'three H's' – heat, health and $H_2O$ (water) – which reflect southern Arizona's climate realities. At the same time, the process revealed important institutional gaps, including disconnects between research excellence and operational implementation.

Although the university was engaged in substantial work related to heat resilience, public health and water sustainability, Ledbetter noted that the institution still lacked both an extreme heat plan and a strong water management plan, illustrating the challenges institutions face in connecting research, operations and institutional planning.

At Mt. San Antonio College, Lauren Greenberg noted that visual tools helped the team recognize the breadth of its existing community connections and the strength of its ecosystem. While challenging at first, the process ultimately revealed one of the institution's greatest strengths: a robust network of relationships spanning facilities, academics, students, community partners and local organisations. Greenberg highlighted the strong partnership between the Sustainability Director on the facilities side and her role as Faculty Sustainability Coordinator, noting that collaboration across operational and academic units was deeply embedded in the institution's approach. The self-study also surfaced work taking place across Mt. Sac's campus that had not previously been connected within the institution's sustainability narrative, including initiatives within the dual enrolment program and partnerships with local high schools.

For Anne Hayes, the self-study process created an opportunity for intentional reflection and institutional sense-making that often gets lost amid the day-to-day campus work. Drawing on her background as a qualitative researcher and anthropologist, she described the process as an opportunity to step back and identify 'the threads that tie all of that work together.' Hayes also reflected on the excitement generated through mapping the institution's broader ecosystem of community partnerships and engagement efforts. Understanding who institutional partners were, how those relationships had developed, and how the institution engaged with the broader community became one of the most meaningful aspects of the self-study process and reinforced the importance of community relationships as a core institutional strength.

## 3. RETHINKING SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP THROUGH CONTEXT AND COLLABORATION

One of the goals was to develop an inclusive framework that reflects the diversity of higher education institutions and recognises their distinct missions, organisational structures, resources and stages of sustainability development. Participants emphasised the importance of balancing shared expectations for rigour with the flexibility to demonstrate sustainability commitments, strengths and progress in ways that reflect their unique contexts and capacities. Beyond framework development, the pilot became a collaborative space for institutional reflection, relationship-building and shared learning, creating opportunities to reimagine sustainability leadership across diverse higher education contexts.

A recurring theme throughout the pilot involved challenging assumptions about what sustainability leadership should look like across higher education. Anne Hayes reflected that one of the most meaningful aspects of helping shape the *Sustainability Elective Classification* was the opportunity to rethink whether all colleges and universities need to demonstrate sustainability excellence in the same ways. She emphasised that institutions have distinct missions, priorities and contexts, and that this diversity should be recognised as a strength. In her view, the pilot created space for institutions to articulate and value their unique contributions rather than measuring themselves against a single model of sustainability excellence.

The pilot also prompted participants to consider whose voices, experiences and institutional realities were represented within sustainability frameworks. Trevor Ledbetter reflected that one of the most rewarding aspects of the process was helping identify 'what was missing and what would be of greatest value for institutions going through this classification process.' While acknowledging the value of existing sustainability assessment frameworks such as AASHE STARS, Ledbetter noted that the *Sustainability Elective Classification* places greater emphasis on institutional context and qualitative reflection.

The Community of Practice emerged as one of the pilot's most meaningful strengths. Participants described engaging alongside institutions with different sizes, missions and sustainability approaches as a valuable opportunity for learning and connection. Lorena Franco reflected on the value of 'the intentional

community of practice' and the openness to feedback and dialogue throughout the process. That sense of connection was particularly meaningful in a field where institutions can sometimes feel isolated in their work. Lorena explained, 'In higher education, we might be siloed at times or feel we're working at it alone. So just having these other people, networks that we could reach out to, really made the difference and was highly rewarding.'

Ultimately, the pilot demonstrated that the value of the Sustainability Elective Classification extends beyond the framework itself. By fostering connection, reflection, and mutual learning, it helped build a collaborative foundation for advancing a more inclusive, context-responsive vision of sustainability in higher education.

## 4. WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER: ADVICE FOR APPLICANTS FROM PILOT INSTITUTIONS

One of the clearest lessons emerging from the pilot was that the application process required far more coordination, reflection and institutional collaboration than many participants initially anticipated. A meaningful self-study depended on intentional planning, realistic timelines, and systematic approaches to gathering evidence, assessing institutional practices, and documenting sustainability efforts and their impact. Beyond reporting existing activities, the process offered institutions an opportunity to examine how sustainability is defined, integrated and advanced across institutional functions. Participants' experiences also underscored the importance of recognising diverse institutional contexts. Differences in organisational structures, existing sustainability infrastructure and available resources shaped how campuses approached this work, reinforcing the need for guidance that maintains rigour while supporting institutions at different stages of sustainability development.

A recurring piece of advice was simple: start early. Lorena Franco cautioned future applicants, 'Do not procrastinate.' Much of the work, she explained, involved gathering information from multiple offices, verifying details and coordinating responses across different parts of the institution. Because sustainability-related work is often decentralised, participants found that identifying and synthesising information required significant time and communication. Early planning was therefore not simply a matter of managing deadlines; it was essential to creating the conditions for meaningful institutional participation.

Participants also emphasized the importance of planning for the collaborative work and internal coordination required to complete the application. Reflecting on the University of Arizona's experience, Trevor Ledbetter explained that the Sustainability Elective Classification asks institutions to engage in deeper qualitative reflection, discussion, and institutional sense-making. This process requires time not only to develop responses but also to refine application materials, conduct internal reviews, and secure institutional approvals. At the University of Arizona, the final weeks before submission were devoted largely to these activities, underscoring the importance of building sufficient time for revisions and signoffs into the application timeline.

Another major theme centred on the importance of building a strong and intentionally diverse institutional team. Because the application touched nearly every part of campus, participants stressed that successful applications depended on bringing together individuals with different forms of expertise, authority and perspective. Franco recommended involving senior leadership whenever possible, explaining that having 'a provost, president, or vice president on the team' helped facilitate access to information and accelerate institutional coordination when requests became time sensitive. Similarly, Ledbetter described assembling an advisory team early in the process made up of 'senior-level or near senior-level leaders' who could help move issues forward quickly when approvals or coordination were needed. He also emphasised the importance of including students, whose perspectives strengthened both the application process and the broader institutional conversation around sustainability. Participants further encouraged institutions to think beyond formal sustainability expertise when building teams. Anne Hayes emphasised the importance

of including individuals with complementary skills who can strengthen the overall process, particularly in the areas of communication, synthesis and storytelling. Reflecting on her own experience, she described including the director of the writing centre on the committee as one of the best decisions her institution made. The writing centre director helped translate complex institutional activities into clear, compelling narratives, synthesise contributions from multiple stakeholders and ensure that the institution's work was communicated effectively and cohesively throughout the application.

Hayes also encouraged future applicants to approach the process with confidence and authenticity rather than comparison. She advised institutions to 'use things that you already have', noting that existing grant applications, institutional plans and previous sustainability materials could serve as strong foundations for responses. She emphasised that institutions 'do not have to do everything' to contribute meaningfully to sustainability in higher education. Rather than trying to replicate another institution's approach, Hayes encouraged campuses to focus on their own identity, strengths and context.

Ultimately, applicants should start early, assemble a diverse team with institutional influence, and use the process to tell an authentic, evidence-based story of sustainability that reflects their institution's own strengths and context.

## Conclusion: We Have Only Just Begun

The Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability emerges at a time when higher education institutions around the world are being called upon to respond to some of the most pressing challenges of our era. Climate change, environmental deterioration, social and economic disparities and economic instability require solutions that strengthen resilience, expand opportunity and support long-term community wellbeing. The experiences of the pilot institutions demonstrate that the classification is more than a recognition framework; it can serve as a catalyst for institutional assessment, relationship-building, systems thinking and continuous improvement. The pilot further illustrates how classification systems can function as mechanisms for organisational learning and institutional change, shaping priorities and practices.

Findings from the pilot indicate that the classification can accelerate sustainability by elevating the visibility of institutional efforts, strengthening networks across institutions, fostering internal relationships and supporting more coordinated and strategic approaches to sustainability. It can deepen sustainability by encouraging rigorous self-study, systems-level thinking, cross-campus collaboration and stronger alignment between sustainability initiatives and institutional mission. Together, these outcomes suggest that the classification has the potential to support more integrated, strategic and impactful approaches to sustainability across higher education.

The inaugural 2027 Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability cycle marks the first opportunity for institutions to earn the classification. The inaugural cohort will be announced publicly in June 2027. As Host Campus, the University of Colorado Boulder coordinates and administers the elective, providing training, technical assistance and no-cost support for small and under-resourced campuses to address institutional capacity barriers. The initiative seeks to foster a community of institutions advancing shared approaches to sustainability and resilience.

Pilot findings suggest that the classification's greatest potential may lie not in measuring what institutions have already accomplished, but in helping them see their work more clearly, connect efforts across campus and community, identify gaps, strengthen accountability and create pathways for future action. By encouraging institutions to engage in evidence-based reflection and institutional learning, the classification has the potential to strengthen sustainability as a core institutional commitment. The inaugural cycle creates opportunities for future research into its influence on institutional planning, student learning, community partnerships, organisational culture and sustainability outcomes over time.

Equally important, the pilot demonstrated that meaningful sustainability leadership exists across institutions of all sizes, missions and resource levels. Community colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, tribal colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, women's colleges, faith-based institutions and research universities each brought valuable perspectives and distinct strengths to the process. As the *Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability* continues to evolve, ongoing attention to equitable access, capacity-building and broad participation will be essential to ensuring that institutions of all types can engage in and benefit from the framework. The participation of institutions representing diverse geographic, cultural and institutional contexts, including those in Puerto Rico during the pilot and growing interest from institutions in Mexico, also points to opportunities for broader international engagement, knowledge exchange and shared learning. As climate challenges transcend geographic and political boundaries, higher education institutions will benefit from frameworks that encourage collaboration across regions, cultures and knowledge systems.

The pilot also generated insights that extend beyond sustainability. The inclusive Community of Practice model demonstrated how institutions can contribute as co-creators of an assessment framework, strengthening its relevance, usability and institutional engagement. By incorporating diverse perspectives and field-based expertise throughout the development process, the model fostered shared ownership while supporting continuous improvement and meaningful evaluation. The lessons emerging from this collaborative approach may have relevance beyond sustainability, offering insights for other Carnegie Elective Classifications and institutions seeking to develop assessment frameworks that are both rigorous and responsive to the needs of the field.

Ultimately, the *Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability* offers higher education an opportunity to align sustainability efforts more fully with its broader public purpose. The pilot demonstrates the value of a classification developed 'of and by the field', bringing institutional experience and diverse perspectives into the design of a framework intended to support meaningful change. As the inaugural cycle progresses, its long-term influences on institutional practice, collaboration, and sustainability outcomes remain to be seen.

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## Appendix: Pilot Institutions

We gratefully acknowledge the following institutions for their participation in the pilot and their contributions to the development of the Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability:

—Bennett College
—Carleton College
—Clarkson University
—Dillard University
—George Mason University
—Morehouse College
—Mt. San Antonio College
—Pima Community College
—Santa Rosa Junior College
—Sullivan County Community College
—Tohono O'Odham Community College
—Universidad del Sagrado Corazón
—University of Arizona
—University of California-Merced
—University of Nebraska-Lincoln
—University of Nevada-Las Vegas
—University of Puerto Rico-Utuado
—University of South Dakota
—University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
—Xavier University of Louisiana

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