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## University of South Dakota 2022 AASHE STARS Assessment Report

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**University  
of South  
Dakota  
2022  
AASHE  
STARS  
Assessment  
Report**

Presented to the Presidents' Joint  
Committee on Sustainability by the  
Sustainability Capstone Class

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# Executive Summary

## Overview

This report provides a brief summary of the University of South Dakota's STARS Report that was started by the Sustainability Capstone class and is projected to be completed during the summer of 2022. Currently the University of South Dakota has a Bronze rating, which is expected to be set throughout the completion of this report and hopefully increase in the future.

## Problem Summary

Throughout the University of South Dakota's STARS report there were two common problems. The first was a lack of record keeping for information such as emissions and employee satisfaction. The second was that the University did not have any initiatives pertaining to some of the subcategories, this is expected considering that sustainability is a fairly new field.

## Solution Summary

Throughout completing this report, we found that the sub-categories in which the University had kept records or implemented a program, we scored well. This report will provide areas that can be improved upon. Ideally the institution will make it a priority to implement successful record keeping and new sustainability initiatives in these areas.

## Key Next Steps

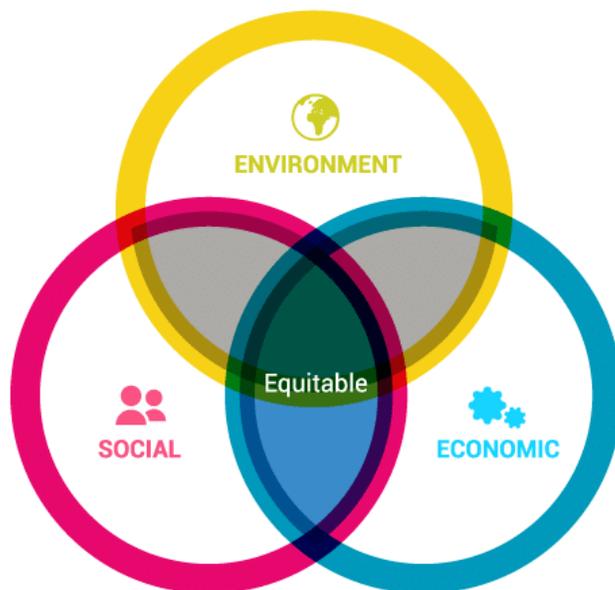
The University of South Dakota has many great sustainability efforts happening across campus. Hiring a sustainability coordinator would allow for all of these efforts to be organized and supported by the institution.

# Introduction

## What is Sustainability?

Often when people think about sustainability, environmental conservation comes to mind. Although conservation, energy efficiency, and combating pollution are important parts, sustainability encompasses a wide variety of areas. This idea is commonly referred to as the Three Pillars of Sustainability, including environment health, social equity, and economic sustainability.

Because these issues are interconnected, sustainability is an incredibly interdisciplinary field, aiming for integration and collaboration to create thriving, resilient, and equitable communities for all in this generation and for generations to come.



3 Pillars of Sustainability – Image from Plastic Packaging Technologies, LLC



Sustainable Development Goals – Image from the United Nations

## How is Sustainability Assessed?

An example of a sustainability assessment is the Sustainable Development Goals from the United Nations. This is a collection of 17 goals aimed at developing a healthy and equitable future. It is a global call for action that allows for measuring progress and building up all pillars of sustainability in an interdisciplinary way.



## What is the STARS Assessment?

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals outline assessing sustainability on a global level; similarly, the STARS report by AASHE represents a sustainability assessment for higher education. Over 1000 higher education institutions have taken part in The Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System (STARS). The STARS is described as a “transparent, self-reporting framework for colleges and universities to measure their sustainability performance” (AASHE). Participating in the STARS assessment is a great way for institutions to understand the different facets of sustainability in higher education. It allows institutions to make meaningful comparisons over time and track progress as the report is filled out every three years. The STARS report also allows participating institutions to share information about their practices and programs with each other.

The STARS report is made up of 4 categories, each with a number of sub-categories which are made up of individual objectives called credits. Each credit is associated with a number of points that collectively contribute to the overall score of the STARS report. The sum of points from the final report correlates with a ranking such as bronze or silver which allows for goal making and tracking progress over time.

### Category & subcategory

Academics – curriculum\*

Academics – research

Engagement – campus engagement

Engagement – public engagement

Operations – buildings

Operations – energy

Operations – air and climate

Operations – water

Operations – grounds

Operations – purchasing

Operations – transportation

Operations – waste

Planning & Administration – coordination & planning

Planning & Administration – diversity & affordability

Planning & Administration – wellbeing & work



## Academics: Curriculum

### Key Findings

- USD is successful at offering a broad range of sustainability-focused programming at the undergraduate and graduate level.
- USD successfully offers immersive learning experiences for their students to be involved in sustainability.

**Sustainability in academics is the backbone of not only campus sustainability, but also sustainability in general since it educates this generation of advocates for a sustainable future.**

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The Academics Category is the largest of the STARS assessment with Curriculum being the largest subcategory. Three credits of the Curriculum subcategory are completed with the rest in progress. These credits are Undergraduate Program, Graduate Program, and Immersive Experience which focus of the sustainability-focused academic programming that USD offers.

### Undergraduate Program

Identifying sustainability-focused undergraduate programs was completed using the USD course catalog and program learning outcomes. From this screening process, the identified programs are listed in the table below. With this, the Undergraduate Program credit of the STARS report was found completely satisfactory.

### Graduate Program

Identifying sustainability-focused graduate programs was completed using the USD course catalog and program learning outcomes. From this screening process, the identified programs are listed in the table below. With this, the Graduate Program credit of the STARS report was found completely satisfactory.

### Immersive Experience

The STARS report classifies an immersive experience as a sustainability-focused educational study program that is one week or more in length. Only one program was necessary to complete this credit, however, two were identified as meeting these criteria: Partners in the Parks offered through the Honors Program and the National Collegiate Honors Council and Faculty Led Programs since a variety of them often offer sustainability or biology credit.

Undergraduate Program	Graduate Program	Immersive Experience
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Majors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability</li> <li>• Biology</li> </ul> <p><b>Minors/Concentrations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability</li> <li>• Biology</li> <li>• Earth Science</li> <li>• Geospatial Analysis</li> <li>• Sustainability in Business</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Majors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability (M.S., Ph.D.)</li> <li>• Biology (M.S.)</li> <li>• Master of Public Health (M.P.H.)</li> <li>• M.S Sustainability/J.D. Dual Degree Program</li> </ul> <p><b>Minors/Concentrations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geospatial Analysis</li> </ul>	<p><b>Sustainability Focused Educational Programs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partners in the Parks</li> <li>• Faculty Led Programs</li> </ul>

## Academics: Research

### Key Findings

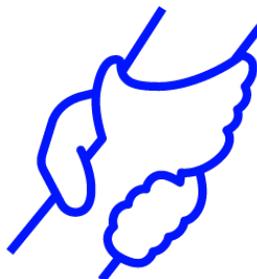
- USD's sustainability research output is still being determined. However, the ample support for sustainability research on campus suggests our output will be high.
- While we have support for the free sharing of research on campus, our open access policy is completely voluntary.

### The three pillars of the AASHE STARS research assessment

Sustainability research output



Support for sustainability research



Open access policy



### Sustainability research output

- “Sustainability research is research and scholarship that explicitly addresses the concept of sustainability, furthers our understanding of the interdependence of ecological and social/economic systems, or has a primary and explicit focus on a major sustainability challenge.”
- Sustainability research output is measured by the proportion of academic faculty and departments conducting research meeting the above definition from STARS.
- We will filter all publications, grants, and presentations by title to determine the number of academic faculty and departments conducting sustainability research.

### Support for sustainability research

- The Sustainable RIVER REU, Missouri River Institute, Center for Fluorinated Functional Materials, and dozens of medical programs/institutions facilitate sustainability research on campus.

- The department of Sustainability & Environment has a sustainability research guide available through USD's library page.

### Open access policy

- Open access policy is completely voluntary at USD.
- USD Red & ILLIAD support the free sharing of research on campus.

### Recommendations

- Voluntary open access policy fails to address broader inequalities in research access. USD should consider an opt-out open access policy approach if it wants to address broader inequalities in research access.

## Engagement: Campus Engagement

### Key Findings

- The University of South Dakota has many great ways to engage sustainability stakeholders across campus, but only ¼ of the information for this section was able to be fulfilled, so there are many ways to improve!

Engagement is very important to the social pillar of sustainability that was mentioned earlier. Engagement is how we engage stakeholders throughout the campus and community to get them interested and involved in campus sustainability. The campus engagement section has 9 credits which are listed below.

- Student Educator Programs
- Student Orientation – orientation material contains multifaceted sustainability topics
- Student life – sustainability related clubs and programs
- Employee Educator Programs
- Employee Orientation
- Staff Professional Development and Trainings
- Outreach Materials and Publications
- Outreach Campaigns
- Assessing Sustainability Culture

### Definitions:

A peer educator program is when a student or faculty is educated on a sustainability topic, and they then spread that information among their peers. Among other universities that completed the STARS assessment it was most common to have student peer educator programs in the residence halls.

Professional Development is anything that fits under the University's Professional Development policy that relates to sustainability. For example, volunteering at the move out program counts as professional development here at USD.

Assessing sustainability culture is done through surveys sent out to members of campus. USD does utilize surveys that could apply, however there are no sustainability related questions asked.

## Recommendations

- Printing outreach materials (e.g., commuter guide/guide to living sustainably in the dorms). Creating an infographic to be shared virtually is a one time and fairly low-cost investment.
- Required orientations or trainings that relate to sustainability would be an easy way to reach 100% of students and staff with sustainability material.
- More sustainability related speakers, programs, and campaigns. The university could also benefit from the participation and use the events as a way to show that USD was taking sustainability seriously.

## Engagement: Public Engagement

### Key Findings

- Here at the University of South Dakota our public engagement sub-category is on average a little behind other universities of our size. We need to track community service better and strive to work towards public policy.

Within the lens of sustainability and public engagement here at the University of South Dakota, we care about a strong sense of sustainable awareness and education. Public engagement is a crucial aspect of sustainability in all walks of life, this is no different for the University of South Dakota. In researching this topic, it has become clear that here at the University of South Dakota, we are good at anything we put our minds to. This trend continues within the realm of public engagement at USD. The sub-category of public engagement contains six credits. These credits are community partnerships, inter-campus collaboration, continuing education, trademark licensing, community service, and participation in public policy.

The two credits that USD does well in are community partnerships and inter-campus collaboration. At USD we do a wonderful job of recognizing and trying to work with sustainable organizations within the town. For example, working with Greening Vermillion and the Vermillion community garden are great steps to start building more sustainable relationships. The university is so successful in these credits because there are people who care and are actively trying to spread awareness to sustainability. Inter-Campus Collaboration gets the same effect. In this credit we gained many points because there are staff at this university that care strongly about the environment and working to educate people about the problems that are being faced. Here at the University of South Dakota we have multiple higher education sustainability networks. These networks range from state, regional, national, all the way up to international levels. We are active within these networks, and they are a great way to allow for a high level of sustainability education. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network, the Sustainable Development Research Network, and the Upper Midwest Association for Campus Sustainability (UMACS) are all wonderful ways to continue to build a strong structure of sustainable culture at USD.

The middle two credits within public engagement are continuing education and trademark licensing. For these two credits we got some recognition but could put more effort into them. Our spring catalog for continuing education has over one hundred courses offered; only a few are related to sustainability. This is a great opportunity for people to learn and gain awareness for sustainability for the rest of life. Along with continuing education, trademark licensing is something we have but do not actively work to improve. It would go a long way if we tried to coordinate a sustainability game or theme with Learfield. These two credits need some work but are not at the bottom of our public engagement portion at USD.

The final two credits are community service and participation in public policy. The better of the two for us here at South Dakota is community service. Greek life does a great job of tracking their members' community service hours. As well as Greek life our athletics find a way to track the community service hours of our athletes here. However, outside of these two aspects it is hard to find a central location for any student to track their community service hours. It would be beneficial for the university from a recruiting standpoint and for students from a prospect standpoint to have all community service hours tracked. Finally, we do not at all participate in public policy when it comes to sustainability. To start slightly trying to have some participation could help the university in huge ways. Getting something as simple as recycling in all campus buildings could again help with recruiting and the outlook many people have on this university.

### Recommendations

- Track community service hours
- Help more sustainable organizations within Vermillion
- Participate in public policy
- Add some sustainable course options for continuing education

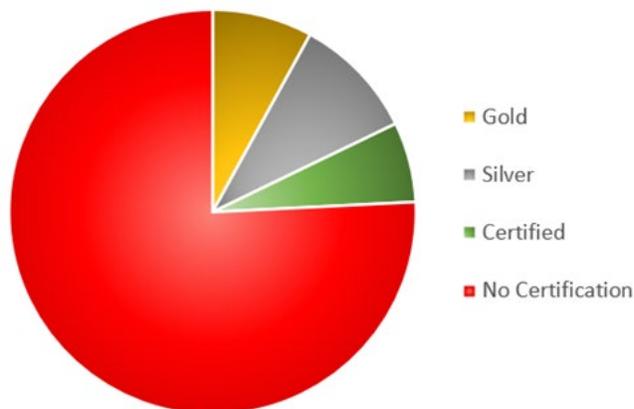
## Operations: Buildings

### Key Findings

- Newer buildings are following green building certification but much of the square footage on campus does not follow green building certification. Green cleaning is used in all buildings on campus.

The Buildings section of the Stars Report looks at Green Building Certifications and building management practices across campus. Recently completed and future building projects have been certified under LEED in accordance with South Dakota Codified Law §§ 5-14-32 through 36. South Dakota LEED buildings have an extreme emphasis on increasing energy efficiency to reduce energy cost over the building's lifetime.

Percent of Square Footage Certified Under LEED



This figure shows what percent of total square footage at USD falls under the different certification ratings under LEED.

### Recommendations

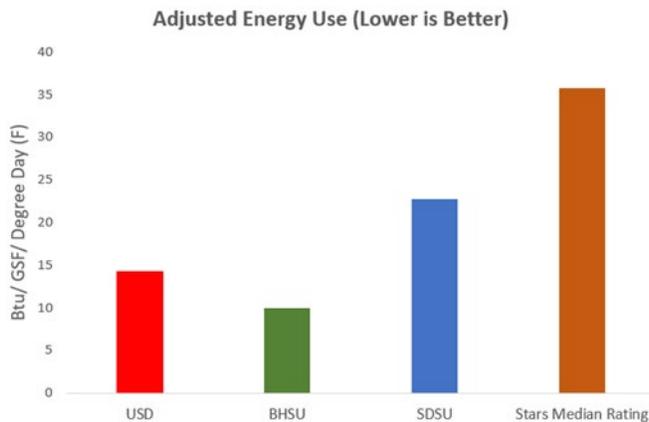
- When building new buildings aim for the highest possible LEED rating that is within the buildings budget.
- Implement multi-attribute sustainability management practices to expand upon green cleaning such as energy conservation and resource management.

## Operations: Energy

### Key Findings

- There is no certified green or renewable energy used on campus however building energy efficiency is high likely due to heating and cooling management practices.

The Energy section of the STARS report looks at Green and Renewable Energy and Building Energy Efficiency. Green/Renewable Energy looks at how much of the University's energy comes from green energy sources while Energy Efficiency calculates an overall energy rating for campus adjusted for square footage and degree heating/cooling days.



This figure shows energy efficiency ratings (lower is better) of the different SDBOR schools who have completed the STARS Assessment. A median score is displayed on the right for comparison. All SDBOR schools score very well in this section.

### Recommendations

- Continue to build buildings that have energy efficiency in mind
- Implement more energy conservation practices

## Operations: Air and Climate

### Key Findings

- The University of South Dakota doesn't keep track of emissions from our imported energy. For energy produced on-campus, we use natural gas. While natural gas produces fewer emissions than coal, it is still a non-renewable energy source.

The first credit, emissions inventory, and disclosure could not fully be filled out. It asks for carbon emissions from scope 1, 2, and 3. Scope 1 carbon emissions are from direct energy production (our boilers on campus), scope 2 emissions are from imported electricity, and scope 3 emissions are from sources such as business travel and purchased goods. We have never done a GHG emissions inventory report, but we do a yearly air permit report that tracks our scope 1 emissions.

The emissions inventory and disclosure also includes an air pollutant emissions inventory, which is included in our yearly air permit. This keeps track of air pollutants other than CO<sub>2</sub>, such as sulfur oxides, carbon monoxide, and nitrogen oxides. Numbers for those emitted by our boilers in 2021 are listed below:

- Nitrogen oxides (NO<sub>x</sub>): 3.98 tons
- Sulfur oxides (SO<sub>x</sub>): .02 tons
- Carbon monoxide (CO): 3.21 tons
- Particulate matter (PM): 0.29 tons
- Lead (Pb): < 0.0001 tons
- Hazardous air pollutants (HAPs): 0.08 tons

The second credit for this category, greenhouse gas emissions, only focused on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the different scopes. Again, since we did not have a GHG emissions inventory report, we cannot fully complete this credit. It also asked for any carbon sinks, such as off-site composting or third-party verified carbon offsets, of which USD does not have. Our scope 1 CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from 2021 were 8,703 metric tons.

### Recommendations

- Track emissions from imported energy, business travel, purchased goods
  - Conduct a GHG emissions inventory report
- Transition from natural gas to renewable energy

## Operations: Water

### Key Findings

- The University of South Dakota is on par with other universities of its size and STARS sustainability ranking in terms of water usage. However, we do not have a rainwater management plan in place, which puts us behind.

USD is a part of the Lower Missouri River Outwash Aquifer, which is considered to be a low-risk aquifer according to the STARS Assessment. This helps decide how weighted the water use credit is in our overall score. Our water use in 2021 is about half of SDSU's water usage, which is on par since our campus is smaller and we have a smaller student population. Our water usage for the whole year is listed below, as well as for per campus user and per square foot of floor area:

- Total water usage: 47,796,615 gallons
- Per campus user: 9,737 gallons
- Per floor area (square foot): 19.312 gallons

The water use credit also keeps track of acres of vegetated ground, of which we have 160 acres. Of our 47,796,615 gallons of water used in 2021, about 5,600,000 of it was dedicated to landscaping. This landscaping water comes from two different wells on campus, while the rest of the water is purchased from the city. An easy way we could use less water on landscaping is to put soil moisture sensors on all sprinklers.

Additionally, the water use credit aims to track the water-use initiatives that campuses have in place. No water-use related initiatives could be found from USD, as well as no initiatives being found about replacing old plumbing fixtures and appliances with water-use efficient ones.

The second credit for the water category is rainwater management. This credit hopes to track a university's rainwater management plan. USD has no rainwater management plans in place, so we were lacking in this credit. Developing one of these is key to improving campus sustainability.

### Recommendations

- Develop a rainwater management plan
- Put soil-moisture sensors on all sprinklers
- Encourage water conservation

## Operations: Landscape Management, Sustainable Procurement, Sustainable Transportation

### Key Findings

- The University of South Dakota spans across 274 acres. As 160 acres here on campus are incorporated into the IPM (integrated pest management) program.
- USD does not implement an institution wide procurement act that spans across all departments when purchasing.
- USD does not incorporate a carpooling system that is recorded through the University that supports sustainable transportation.

### Landscape Management

Operational grounds are an important aspect not to be overlooked here on USD's campus. 160 of its 274 acres are incorporated into an IPM program. The IPM is a program that uses select chemicals on landscapes and grasses only when needed. On campus, this totals nearly every open area besides sports fields and complexes. Established in 2017, the campus incorporated a tree care plan. This plan's goal is to identify the procedures and practices that are required to establish a safe, healthy, diverse and aesthetically pleasing campus from tree care. This can mean looking for plants that are organic in the area along with ensuring proper species selection. The campus grounds are a major recruiting factor for USD. The first thing a student or staff member notices driving down Cherry Street are the grounds and landscaping here. An aesthetically pleasing campus paired with academics is said to be the combination that brings most people to USD.

### Sustainable Procurement

Procurement is also referred to as the source-to-settle as it is an integration of sourcing and purchasing processes. Being sustainably conscious when purchasing is important as it turns policies into impacts. This includes the evaluation, selection, and creation of formal contractual agreements as well as managing the University's ongoing supplier relationships. The University does not implement a set standard when purchasing in all departments. This standard is set by the State of South Dakota and is different for each department. Examples of these purchasing products are LEED chemicals, green furniture, and waste management.

### Support Sustainable Transportation

Transportation has always been linked to sustainability. USD does promote sustainable transportation in many ways throughout campus. One of these ways is shown through the bike sharing program. This program allows students and staff to rent bicycles to get to and around campus in a more sustainable way. New bicycle racks to promote safe storage for students are also a great benefit. Lacking here on campus is a carpooling system in play, allowing students and staff to link up with one another. This does already happen throughout campus on a small-

scale level (e.g nursing program to clinicals). There is no campus wide system for students and staff commuting to and from campus daily. Currently the only feasible group transportation for campus is to establish relationships with peers who are willing to carpool.

### Recommendations

- Set an institution wide standard for sustainable procurement that spans across all departments
- Surveying to better understand the transportation infrastructure
- Provide a way for students and staff to link together for carpooling. (e.g., Facebook page, posters in MUC)

# Operations: Waste

## Key Findings

- There have been several positive activities the university has taken part in to reduce waste which can be grown to continue to help with waste minimization.

At the University of South Dakota in order to work towards waste minimization and diversion, we take part in single-stream recycling. This is available in most of the buildings on campus, and the recycling team goes through this by hand to ensure as little contamination as possible. In 2020 the university's recycling coordinator worked with Post-Landfill Action Network to do the Atlas Zero Waste Assessment. This looked at the waste management system, and it had findings which are valuable to help improve and understand the waste that the University of South Dakota produces. Last spring a move out program was held for students leaving on campus buildings to donate their unwanted items. Often those moving out will throw away items that are like new because it is convenient, which leads to large amounts of waste, but the donation program is able to reduce this issue.

Another topic within this assessment was hazardous waste management. USD sends this waste to a licensed Transportation, Storage & Disposal Facility which properly disposes of all materials, and this has led to a successful management regarding hazardous waste. There are options for the departments to recycle electronics by sending them to IT, but it is a bit more difficult for students as there is only occasionally an on-campus opportunity for this.

## Recommendations

- Bring recycling into all buildings on campus
- Raise awareness for students and staff on recycling and waste related topics
- Continue to participate in sustainability assessments

## Planning and Administration: Diversity & Affordability and Work & Wellbeing

### Key Findings

- USD offers programs to support underrepresented groups, ways to make tuition affordable, many cultural education opportunities through student, clubs and services to benefit mental and physical health.
- However, we lack comprehensive diversity assessment and employee satisfaction feedback.

Planning and administration are ways to institutionalize sustainability by creating an infrastructure for staff to organize and implement initiatives. It creates a framework that shifts sustainability from a student interest to an institutional priority. Diversity, affordability, work, and wellbeing are all concepts that fall under the social pillar of sustainability and create a strong community.

Within the subcategory of diversity and affordability, it was found that between the various student clubs, there are many cultural education opportunities such as Asian Night. There is also diversity training for resident hall staff and hiring committees, but there is no campus-wide required training. USD is able to measure aspects of diversity through various assessments like Sky Factor and the National Survey of Student Engagement. However, these are not comprehensive as diversity is just a section of the surveys. They also do not address employee or student outcomes like retention rates. Regardless, their results are used to drive programming and measure progress.

USD offers several programs to recruit and support minorities and underrepresented groups on campus which allowed us to receive the full points for this credit. There is mentoring, counseling, scholarships, and academic advising through with the TRiO program, Veteran Services, and Spectrum club.

There are limited policies to make tuition more affordable for low-income students. Scholarships and application fee waivers help, but the score in this section was very low due to many students graduating with debt.

In the work and wellbeing subcategory, the university also scored poorly on assessing employee satisfaction because there are no current forms of evaluation that allow for anonymous feedback. There was one assessment used in the past, but it was outside the allotted timeframe designated by STARS. More emphasis should be given to staff and faculty feedback so that the university can invest in them. When assessing wellness on campus, USD received a perfect score. There are many services to address mental and physical health for staff and students through fitness classes, free counseling, and subsidized healthcare.

## Recommendations

- More comprehensive and direct assessment of diversity
- Provide more opportunities for staff and faculty to voice concerns
- Make all assessment results more accessible online to the public
- Institutionalize efforts to enhance diversity with campus-led trainings rather than relying on student groups or academic departments

## Planning and Administration: Planning and Coordination

### Key Findings

- The university has great opportunities for governance but minimal planning and no full-time sustainability officers.

At the University of South Dakota for sustainability coordination there is no current full-time sustainability coordinator. This can make it difficult to implement sustainable practices at the university level. The university does have the President's Committee on Sustainability which is a positive step to helping determine what can be done within USD to help with sustainable efforts. This leaves a great opportunity to hire a full-time sustainability coordinator who can devote time to working towards increasing the overall sustainability of the university.

The President's Committee on Sustainability back in 2015 published measurable plans for USD, but now with time passing there is an opportunity to create new and updated plans. Increasing planning for the university would help with the implementation of more sustainable efforts. Planning is an important step for forming new goals and gaining a better understanding of the possibilities for the future of the university. Governance is another important aspect within sustainability, and at the University of South Dakota the governance is excellent. There are many options for students, staff, and certain community members to get involved. This helps with having a positive experience and creating a good environment for all. The governance at USD can help work towards these sustainable efforts.

### Recommendations

- Hire a sustainability coordinator
- Incorporate sustainability into the university's planning

## Summary



USD currently is rated as bronze institution by the AASHE STARS assessment. While completion of a few areas of the assessment could improve our score, we anticipate maintaining this rating for the 2022 report.

### Overall Recommendations

- Our institution scores highly in areas of the report where efforts have been made at an institutional level (e.g., support for sustainability research). Most of USD's sustainability-related shortcomings stem from fundamental knowledge, assessment, or policy gaps (e.g., community service hour tracking, rainwater management).
- Much of these institutional gaps likely stem from the fact that sustainability, both on campus and as a field, is a new concept.
- We recognize that institutional changes are complex, costly, and time consuming. Instead of suggesting individual policy decisions, we recommend that USD hires a campus sustainability coordinator to improve campus sustainability in a way that works best for both our institution and the environment.

## Acknowledgements

The STARS assessment is a very in-depth report on sustainability. The sustainability capstone class would like to thank their mentors who are listed below for guidance and assistance in data collection.

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