Program Sustainability Rubric User Manual

This Sustainability Rubric is a flexible tool designed to help teams reflect on and develop plans to improve the sustainability of their programs. Whether you're working on a funded project, engaged in change initiatives, or efforts focused on broadening participation, this tool supports honest reflection, conversation, and planning. Use it as-is or adapt it to better suit your context and goals. See our Creative Commons license CC: BY-NC-SA listed below.

How we define program sustainability

Program sustainability refers to the process of maintaining a program's positive impact over time, which may involve continuation, adaptation, re-scaling, or adoption by others in response to changing conditions such as shifts in funding, personnel, or organizational context.

About the Rubric

The Sustainability Rubric is organized in seven dimensions, each representing a key area of sustainability practice: Funding, Personnel, Information Resources, Propagation, Evaluation and Learning, Culture, and Partnerships. Each dimension includes three stages—Developing, Stabilizing, and Optimizing—which are intended to support reflection and discussion, not to judge or score performance. Instead, it is a guide meant to help your team better understand where your program currently stands and what areas could benefit from more attention.

The findings emerging from your sustainability analysis represent a snapshot of the present moment, not a definitive measure of programmatic success or failure. The rubric's primary purpose is to surface insights that support growth and shared understanding across your team.

Who Should Use This Tool?

The rubric is designed for a wide range of users in or adjacent to higher education, including anyone working on funded projects, organizational change initiatives, or efforts focused on broadening participation. It works well for teams at any stage of sustainability planning and is especially helpful for those seeking a structured but flexible framework to guide reflection, conversation, and future planning.

Ways to Use the Rubric

You can use the rubric individually or as a group. Completing it independently first can give participants space for honest reflection before coming together to compare and discuss responses. This approach may surface a broader range of perspectives and encourages shared understanding.

Alternatively, you may choose to complete the rubric together as a team. This can be more efficient, but teams will need to ensure that quieter voices can contribute fully. Some teams use a hybrid model, combining both individual review and team discussion, or adapting their approach to match the needs of their organization and goals.

If the full tool feels overwhelming, consider working through it one dimension at a time, or prioritizing dimensions of special interest to your program. Spreading the discussion out across multiple sessions can reduce cognitive burden and allow space for more thoughtful dialogue and planning.

Time Estimates and Use Patterns

The sustainability rubric consists of a total of 54 multiple-choice questions (between 4 and 10 per dimension), with 6 short open-ended prompts after each dimension, for teams to briefly identify challenges, successes, and actions. The time it takes to complete the rubric questions can vary depending on your team's approach, pacing, and whether you're working individually or as a group. Completing the questions themselves is relatively quick, but team-based discussion —especially when focused on action planning — can take considerably longer. Below are some general guidelines to help you plan. Teams may choose to spend more time on certain dimensions that are especially relevant to their goals or pause to collectively plan next steps. We encourage projects and teams to adjust timing and planning based on their own needs.

Individual completion:

Filling out the full rubric as an individual—including all seven dimensions and reflection and planning prompts—typically takes between **30 and 90 minutes**, depending on familiarity with the tool and the complexity of the program being assessed.

Team completion with discussion:

It may take significantly longer if you are completing the rubric in a team setting. Group-based completion and discussion often requires more time. For example, a team of four to five people may spend **20–30 minutes per dimension** if engaging in in-depth discussion

and collaborative action planning. This means that a full team conversation could range from **2 to 4 hours**, or be spread across multiple meetings.

Working by Dimension:

Teams can choose to address the rubric one or two dimensions at a time, allowing them to reflect deeply without feeling rushed. Each dimension—including discussion and planning—can take **15 and 30 minutes**, depending on the level of reflection and whether pre-work has been done.

Tailoring the Process:

Some organizations may wish to use the rubric as a one-time snapshot; others may integrate it into ongoing planning, revisiting different dimensions over time. Some may prioritize only a few dimensions most relevant to their current goals. The process is flexible by design, so you may adapt it to fit your team's needs.

Note: It can be helpful to clarify early on which dimensions are most relevant for your team and how much time you're able to commit to each. The depth of discussion is up to you—some groups may use this tool for a quick scan, while others may choose to organize full-day workshops around it.

Using the Rubric

Use a consistent unit of analysis: When completing the rubric, all participants should focus on the same program, initiative, or organizational unit. This shared frame of reference makes it easier to compare responses, identify themes, and generate meaningful action plans. The more complex the unit of analysis, the longer the completion and discussion may take. For example, evaluating a large, multi-institutional collaboration using the rubric may take longer, and the rubric could be best suited to analyzing one component of this collaboration at a time.

Include multiple perspectives: The quality of your discussion will be enriched by including a diverse range of voices, across roles, backgrounds, and partner organizations. This helps surface overlooked areas and ensures that action plans are grounded in collective insight and collaborative efforts.

Encourage evidence-based responses: Ask participants to reflect on and document the reasoning behind their responses. This might include specific examples from practice, reflections on past challenges, or observations about what's working. These notes create a stronger foundation for later conversations and decisions.

Expect variation across responses: It's normal — and valuable — for individuals to evaluate dimensions differently. Teams may also find themselves at different stages across the rubric's dimensions. Don't aim for uniformity. Instead, use the variation as a starting point for discussion.

Feel free to skip items that are not relevant: Not every item will apply to every organization or project. Participants should feel empowered to skip items where necessary. The goal is to make the tool useful—not to force a fit.

Encourage honest reflection: This rubric is a tool for learning, not judgment. It offers a snapshot of where you are now—not where you should be. Use the three stages— **Developing, Stabilizing,** and **Optimizing**—to help guide reflection and conversation, not as a scoring system. These stages are meant to prompt dialogue about strengths, challenges, and areas for growth within each dimension.

You may find that your responses don't align neatly with a single stage — and that's expected. Rather than assigning a final label to a dimension, use your responses as clues to where progress is being made, where gaps may exist, and what supports are needed. However, to use the rubric as a reporting tool, you may wish to determine your stage based on which responses were chosen most often. We also encourage anyone who wishes to label each dimension with a stage to consider using the narrative version of the rubric to guide you in making this determination – in doing so, this tool may help you understand how certain challenges and achievements can coexist in one stage. Overall, we reiterate that sustainability is not a linear process, and teams often operate across multiple stages at once. The goal is to use this insight to inform action, not to simplify complex realities into fixed categories.

Reflection and Action Planning

Use the end-of-dimension prompts to guide action: At the end of each rubric dimension, you'll find a set of prompts designed to help you and your team reflect and move toward concrete steps. These include:

- **Evidence of Successes**
- **Evidence of Challenges**
- **What to Take Action On**
- **Who Will Take Action** (and what roles each person will have, if more than one)
- **Timeline for Action**
- **Support Needed from Project Colleagues**

Focus on what matters: The reflection and action planning prompts are designed to help your team move from insight to action. While not every prompt may apply equally across all dimensions, we encourage teams to engage with as many of them as possible, especially where they support your goals or highlight opportunities for growth. Use what's most relevant to your context and skip what doesn't serve your team's goals. The purpose of these questions is to help you connect reflection to next steps, not to add unnecessary complexity.

Beyond the Rubric: What Happens Next?

Look for patterns and priorities: After completing the rubric, revisit your responses across all dimensions. Are there recurring strengths or consistent gaps? Are there dimensions that prompted the most discussion or disagreement? Use these patterns to shape priorities for your team, spot areas where communication or alignment may be needed, and name concrete next steps.

Choose one or two starting points for action items: Sustainability planning can feel overwhelming—start small. Pick one or two areas to focus on. Ask: What's the most urgent? What's the most actionable? What change would make the biggest impact? Who can help initiate actions?

Check in and revisit as needed: Some teams may choose to use the rubric once a year, while others may use it to check in more regularly, e.g. on a quarterly basis. You don't have to address everything at once. Use the tool at a pace that fits your project timeline and team capacity. Check in on previously identified action steps. Adapt the rubric for future use or embed it into routine planning.

Use facilitation or support when helpful: While the rubric can be completed independently, some teams benefit from a facilitator to guide discussion, especially in early uses. A facilitator could be a member of your team or another trusted colleague, or an internal or external evaluator.

Explore other resources if this isn't the right fit: This rubric is one of many tools available for sustainability planning. If it doesn't meet your needs, we encourage you to explore other frameworks or adapt this one. What matters most is that your team has a way to reflect, align, and plan for long-term impact.

- Program Sustainability Assessment Tool and Clinical Sustainability Assessment Tool – both available at: https://www.sustaintool.org/

- Tamarack Institute guide for sustaining collaborative impact: https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Events/CI%203.0/Workshop%20Resources/Sustaining%20CI%20-%20Tool%20.pdf?t=1497903311895 [based on the Mancini and Marek index]
- Program Sustainability Index (Mancini & Marek, 2004): https://dissemination-implementation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Module-9-Program-Sustainability-Index.pdf
- The dynamic sustainability framework (Chambers, Glasgow & Stange, 2013)
  - Article in Implementation Science: https://implementationscience.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1748-5908-8-117
  - Application in different contexts:
  - https://implementationscience.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1748-5908-8-117/tables/3
- Han, Cook & Turns (2022) "Will the change last? That's the question. A framework for assessing the sustainability of a program, curricular, or pedagogical change https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&arnumber=9962697

Contact Information

Have questions about the program sustainability rubric? Contact us at UW CERSE: elitzler@uw.edu

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For a digital copy of this rubrics developed out of work with the NSF Eddie Bernice Johnson INCLUDES Aspire Alliance by UW CERSE, please visit: https://bit.ly/CERSE_EVAL

Glossary

Seven Dimensions:

Propagation requires developing and sharing an innovation responsive to the needs, interests, and situations of potential adopters. Has only occurred when an innovation is used successfully by others. Requires dissemination. (Stanford et al., 2015)

Personnel: people involved in the planning and implementation of the project, including employees, volunteers, contractors, etc.

Culture: the nature of the project's values, attitudes, systems, and rules, as well as the degree of its attentiveness to matters of power, positionality, and justice affecting the implementation of positive change

Information resources: Documentation, data, reports for key program processes, policies and other information that are necessary to the program

Partnerships: other people and other organizations that may have aligned goals who are able to help support your project in different ways.

- **Expansion Partners**: other organizations implementing your program for individual or institutional change
- **Coordination Partners**: other organizations that support your implementation to advance positive change.

Funding: money or financial resources to support the implementation and propagation of the program

Evaluation and Learning: the systematic collection and analysis of relevant data to assess program implementation and outcomes, and the integration of insights from these data to promote or amplify positive impacts

Three Stages:

- **Developing:** Early-stage development of activities and practices that promote program sustainability
- **Stabilizing:** There is evidence of practices that are conducive to program sustainability, but there remain barriers to sustainability, or opportunities to improve these practices.
- **Optimizing:** The project or program is operating in an institutional environment or using practices that are highly conducive toward program sustainability

Community Members are typically the group or audience that you are doing your work for. If you have a change project seeking to support undergraduate students, then undergraduate students are your community members.

Self-awareness means that individuals and teams are not only aware of what is happening in their organization but are also able to recognize how their own assumptions, habits, and positionalities may influence organizational culture and decision-making. This involves recognizing patterns that may be harmful or exclusionary, as well as acknowledging successes.