

## **UW Oshkosh strikes ‘Gold’ with latest sustainability achievement**

**by Alex Hummel - Tuesday, February 07, 2012**

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/16804/uw-oshkosh-strikes-gold-with-latest-sustainability-achievement/>

Chalk it up as one more milestone on the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh’s journey toward sustainability.

The University has become only the 25<sup>th</sup> institution to date in North America and the first in Wisconsin to earn the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education’s (AASHE’s) Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System (STARS) "Gold" rating.

“This is the most detailed and extensive externally-driven assessment that we have ever done that confirms that we are one of the leading universities in the country for sustainability,” said UW Oshkosh Director of Sustainability Michael Lizotte. “In the past we have been making this claim based on expert opinion,... but this is by far the best measure we have of it.”

AASHE collaboratively designed the STARS award assessment to: “Provide a framework for understanding sustainability in all sectors of higher education; enable meaningful comparisons over time and across institutions using a common set of measurements developed with broad participation from the campus sustainability community; create incentives for continual improvement toward sustainability; facilitate information sharing about higher education sustainability practices and performance; and build a stronger, more diverse campus sustainability community.”

UW Oshkosh is one of 313 institutions to have registered for STARS. Upon approval of its extensive submission on Feb. 4, the institution became the 25<sup>th</sup> to earn the Gold status – the highest echelon yet achieved by the 156 institutions in the United States and Canada to have earned a STARS rating. Only 16 percent of STARS-rated institutions have earned "Gold" status. UW Oshkosh joins two others comparable, comprehensive institutions (Cal. St. U. Monterey Bay and the University of Northern Iowa) to have earned Gold STARS status. Other public and private institutions that have attained Gold ratings include prestigious research universities such as Duke University, Arizona State University and Cornell University.

While there is a “Platinum” designation in STARS, no institution has yet earned it, Lizotte said. To date, UW Green Bay and UW River Falls are the other two UW institutions to have achieved a STARS designation, each earning Silver status.

“I am proud that our University of Wisconsin System institutions working on sustainability have committed to high standards for measuring and reporting results to the public,” said UW System President Kevin P. Reilly. “The achievement of UW-Oshkosh, UW-Green Bay and UW-River Falls shows the dedication of our faculty, students, and staff to continue the long legacy of environmental awareness and stewardship in Wisconsin.”

While UW Oshkosh has been repeatedly honored with listings among The Princeton Review's "Guide to Green Colleges" and the Sierra Club's "Cool Schools" designations, Lizotte said he and campus administrators believe the rigorous and all-encompassing STARS assessment process is the strongest, most-quantifiable validation of UW Oshkosh's sustainability practices yet. It reinforces a point that he and other members of the University's Sustainability Team have stressed since the Campus Sustainability Plan was established in 2008 – that sustainability is about far more than just "being green."

"Our commitment to engagement, collaboration and 'green' environmental principles guides our strategic and operational planning, while our dedication to liberal education reform, student success services, faculty development, sustainability and integrated marketing and communications makes our academic community distinct," UW Oshkosh Chancellor Richard Wells states in the letter that accompanied the institution's STARS submission. "We have used these strengths to develop a truly campus-wide approach to sustainability."

UW Oshkosh was one of STARS charter participants and one of 31 institutions to participate in the pilot program. Lizotte said there was originally some skepticism about how comprehensively and fairly an assessment like STARS could be designed, authentically rating all the varying facets of sustainability within a University community. However, Facilities Director Steve Arndt and other sustainability leaders on campus helped AASHE shepherd creation of a rating – not ranking -- instrument that genuinely and transparently gauges the variety of widely-accepted sustainability targets at an institution.

STARS point-based system covers four categories, including "Education & Research," "Operations," "Planning, Administration & Engagement" and "Innovation." Within each category, subcategories offer a number of points for institutions to apply for and, if successful, claim. An institution's STARS score is based on the average of the percentage of applicable points it earns in each of the three main categories, according to AASHE.

Lizotte said UW Oshkosh's commitment to campus planning earned it every single point in that subcategory. Earning nearly every point in the "Diversity" subcategory was "very pleasing to see," he said. The University also scored well in the "investment" subcategory, he said, noting the UW Oshkosh Foundation's support for [innovative, renewable energy and high-impact learning facilities such as the institution's dry fermentation anaerobic biodigester](#).

"A lot of universities aren't doing this or are not able to do it because they haven't decided to have staff work on this issue," UW Oshkosh Vice Chancellor for Administrative Services Tom Sonnleitner said. "In our case, having a full time director means we can measure our progress and, more importantly, follow up with comprehensive actions plans where our efforts might be falling short."

Institutions have been submitting STARS data since 2010, according to the AASHE's website for the rating system.

UW Oshkosh's review and submittal process was a long and involved but, in itself, incredibly rewarding Lizotte said. The final report is nearly 230 pages and includes an opening, sustainability-minded plea to readers to think twice before hitting "print."

"It took a little more than a year to complete, so, it was that extensive," he said. "We got a lot of help

from [STEP \(Student Titan Employment Program\) interns](#) to get the work done. It involved a lot of interviews on campus and enhanced our concentration on areas we didn't have fully addressed in our sustainability plan, including diversity, human resources and investment.”

Lizotte said it was the cooperation and collaboration of the entire 13,500-student and more-than 1,700-employee campus that affirmed the institution-wide embrace of sustainability.

“For me, it was a really great way to build relationships and talk to a much wider variety of people on campus about sustainability and how are they related to it,” he said.

#### **About AASHE:**

AASHE is an association of colleges and universities working to create a sustainable future. AASHE's mission is to empower higher education to lead the sustainability transformation. It provides resources, professional development and a network of support to enable institutions of higher education to model and advance sustainability in everything they do, from governance and operations to education and research.

#### **Read more:**

- [Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education STARS](#)
- [UW Oshkosh STARS ratings](#)
- [UW Oshkosh Sustainability](#)