



SUSTAINABILITY AT CC

A STRATEGIC PLANNING PROPOSAL

PREPARED BY

CAMPUS SUSTAINABILITY COUNCIL'S
STEERING COMMITTEE



A LETTER FROM THE CSC STEERING COMMITTEE

Dear President Richardson,

Welcome to Colorado College! We are the Campus Sustainability Council's Steering Committee. The CSC was established in 2004 as an advisory group to represent the collective interests from a broad group of students, staff, and faculty members to provide advice on matters relating to campus sustainability. We have a deep appreciation for the significance of this work and its importance to the community. In years past, the CSC has been an appointed Presidential Advisory Council. This year, due to the disruption caused by COVID-19 and by leadership changes, we have continued as an ad-hoc committee to carry on the work begun by the Climate Change Task Force that began in 2019.

We are thoroughly excited to continue our work under your leadership, especially realizing that you bring insights and experience from a top-performing institution in sustainability. Although we have ideas and recommendations of our own, we hope to combine these with your expertise to forge our college's path forward.

To that end, and representing the greater CC community, we have compiled this report to provide insights on the current state of sustainability, as well as propose general recommendations that we feel are important as we move into the next academic year and begin to right ourselves post-COVID and with new leadership. Our hope is that you find the report beneficial as you continue to learn more about CC. The intended goal of this report is to prioritize this discussion with you and resume our advisory role in supporting specific efforts, initiatives, and commitments of the institution.

Sincerely,

The Campus Sustainability Council Steering Committee

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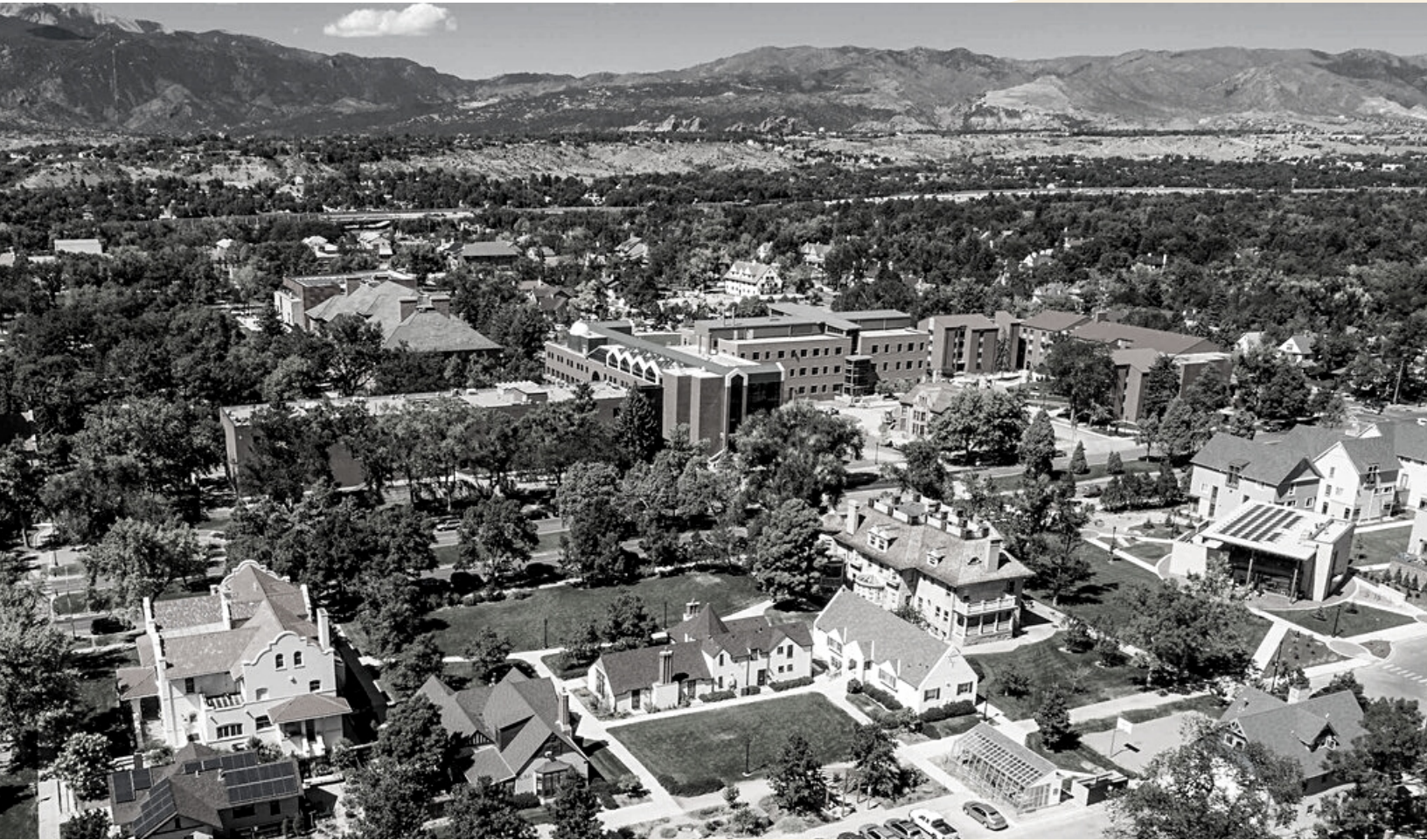
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sustainability is a broad topic that is actively addressed in many ways across Colorado College. Many of the efforts that contribute to broader institutional and societal sustainability, however, are not recognized explicitly as sustainability work. In part, this is because the term sustainability has most often come to be associated with environmental issues. While these are a critical part of building a sustainable campus and society, they are far from the only consideration. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline 17 broad goals for creating a thriving global society. Examination of these goals show myriad connections to the college's efforts, including some of our most recognizable efforts, such as becoming an antiracist institution.

One of the college's greatest sustainability achievements to date was achieved on January 1, 2020, when it achieved the milestone of carbon neutrality. As outlined in the SDGs and the inherent connections between them, that achievement has broad impacts on sustainability across campus, within our community, and globally. This monumental achievement has positively impacted the college's operating budget, has reduced our gross greenhouse gas emissions, and has placed CC in the national spotlight — if only briefly before COVID overtook the news cycle. However, now is no time to rest upon our successes.

Carrying on with the work that was begun with the Climate Change Task Force under Provost Townsend, the Campus Sustainability Council's Steering Committee has spent this past year researching best practices, comparing peer and top-performing institutions, and surveying ideas, attitudes, and hopes of the campus community and beyond to determine what comes next for sustainability at CC.

Our committee has ideas about how to determine next steps and identify our next goals as well as some of the strategies and resources that would be required to reach those goals. However, our primary request at this time is to discuss these ideas in more depth with President Richardson in late summer or early fall of 2021. We also request that the Campus Sustainability Council be formally constituted for the upcoming academic year as a Presidential Advisory Council as it has been in prior years in order to better engage the community in this work and to leverage the collective expertise that exists at the college in determining strategies (2020 was an anomaly due to challenges due both to COVID-19 and changes in leadership; CSC operated informally as an ad-hoc group during this past year).



INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is a broad topic that encompasses many — if not most — of Colorado College’s priorities and strategic initiatives. Distilling the depths and nuances of its meaning, sustainability can be described simply as: creating a thriving human experience, now and into the future. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, developed in 2015 through a lengthy, participatory process that included over 190 member states, have outlined 17 areas that are critical to creating that thriving experience across Earth’s human population. These SDGs expand on earlier notions of sustainability, incorporating environmental, social, and economic facets. A cursory review of the SDGs shows many surface-level connections to the college’s priorities: enhancing our distinctive place of learning through environmental sustainability and place-based learning efforts; providing financial aid and access for a broader demographic of students to Colorado College; becoming an antiracist institution; creating an Innovation Institute [[Creativity & Innovation](#)] that seeks to create resiliency and change, and more. A deeper understanding of the connections of the SDGs and their underlying causes and tensions opens myriad connections to most all of the work that happens at CC in support of our educational mission and especially in support of the social justice charge and antiracism work that CC has taken on. Although it isn’t always recognized or called such, sustainability work is happening across the campus every day in support of these goals.

As of January 1, 2020, Colorado College achieved the longstanding milestone of carbon neutrality as set forth in 2009 upon signing the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment. This achievement is the most visible outcome of the college’s sustainability commitment and efforts to date and highlights the importance of setting stretch goals and providing continuous support and resources toward those goals. At the time, CC was only the eighth institution of higher education in North America to achieve such a designation and did so in a way that is replicable by many, if not most other institutions and entities. Knowing that climate change is and will continue to have broad negative consequences that exacerbate challenges in achieving the SDGs makes this the morally correct effort.

Still, that effort comes at significant benefit to the college. Since 2014, Colorado College has spent \$2.77 million on sustainability through Renewal and Replacement and Auxiliary projects, especially on those aimed at energy and water savings (see [Appendix A for Sustainability Project Expenditures](#)). Those expenditures have netted over \$7.6 million in savings since 2008 (see [Appendix B for Energy Report & Savings Analysis](#)). The return on our investment is compelling and has freed up resources to be used toward other college goals. By most measures, operational sustainability efforts at CC have been hugely successful.

Being in academia, the natural question that arises with these successes is, “What comes next?” This question was officially engaged beginning in 2020 with Provost Townsend convening a Climate Change Task Force at the request of the Board of Trustees. Through the various changes in leadership and challenges to continuity presented by COVID-19, the [Office of Sustainability](#) and the [Campus Sustainability Council](#) have assumed the role of addressing this question.

INTRODUCTION CONT.

In this report, we have identified several key pieces of information that support this work and give contextual background before diving into the findings. These are:

- Historical Context of Sustainability Efforts at CC
- Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, & Rating System: STARS

In addition, the CSC Steering Committee has worked to compile and analyze the following information to serve as a conduit for the voices and trends across higher education as well as the CC community.

- 2020-21 Sustainability Survey: Findings
- Comparison of CC's Sustainability Programming to Leading and Peer Institutions

We view the current moment in time — both due to the pandemic and due to the change in leadership — as an opportune time to address this question, provide recommendations, and begin planning for our next steps.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS AT CC

Sustainability efforts at Colorado College have come far over the past two decades. What started as student grassroots efforts has evolved into a campus-wide movement and an institutional commitment, working to become a way of life. While we have made much progress, addressing many ecological, economic, and social justice concerns, much remains to be done. A brief look at the milestones from the past two decades frames this report.

2003

President Dick Celeste appoints a working group on Campus Sustainability. In response to the group's advice, the Board of Trustees (BOT) & President Celeste, add an explicit focus of environmental sustainability to CC's values.

2004

The Campus Sustainability Council is established by President Celeste.

2009

ACUPCC was approved by the BOT & signed by President Celeste on April 15, 2009 committing the college to become carbon neutral by 2020.

2012

Under the direction of President Jill Tiefenthaler, the Facilities Department hired Mark Ferguson as the new Campus Energy Manager.

2013

The Dean's Office hires Ian Johnson, later becoming the 1st Sustainability Director for the Office of Sustainability.

2017

Tutt Library becomes the first net-zero energy building making it the largest academic library to achieve this distinction.

2020

Carbon neutrality is achieved on Jan. 1, 2020.

SUSTAINABILITY TRACKING, ASSESSMENT, & RATING SYSTEM: STARS®

Sustainability can be measured in many ways across a broad range of indicators. The premier metric that has emerged over the past decade for measuring sustainability performance in higher education is the Sustainability Tracking Assessment and Rating System (STARS®). STARS® is a transparent, self-reported framework that is administered by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) and has evolved with the adoption of sustainability programs and common practices at colleges and universities since 2008.

STARS® is loosely analogous to the idea of key performance indicators (KPIs) in the corporate world and derives quantitative results from both quantitative and qualitative data. It is a rating system and is also the basis for several of the ranking systems used by third parties to assess various sustainability aspects of colleges and universities.

Colorado College has participated annually in STARS® since 2014. The data collection and reporting is an intensive process. In the first reporting year, CC attained Silver status in the rating system, rising to Gold status in 2015 and maintaining that level since. Individual points within the categories that are used to determine the final rating have fluctuated each year, with performance in some categories improving while others have declined.

As of 2021, Colorado College is solidly perched within the Gold level. In the 2017-18 academic year, the CSC recommended a goal to President Tiefenthaler of achieving STARS® Platinum by 2020. While this goal was never formally adopted and has not been achieved to date, the Office of Sustainability examined the possible pathways and recommended an achievable pathway in the Measurable Impacts Report during the 2019-20 academic year. To date, there are nine institutions in North America that have achieved the Platinum level and continually rank highly in Sierra magazine's Cool Schools rankings and Princeton Review's Guide to Green Colleges. This is an important consideration in continual recruitment of prospective students: A full 75% of survey respondents in 2021 said having information about a college's commitment to the environment would affect their decision to apply to or attend the school [1]. We fully anticipate that this trend will continue and the importance of not only environmental sustainability, but also the recognition and alignment with socioeconomic issues as outlined in the SDGs will increase in coming years.

STARS® RATING SCALE

PLATINUM

GOLD

SILVER

BRONZE

STARS® is organized into four macro-categories which are then further subdivided and composed of individual credits comprised of specific data points.

ACADEMICS

OPERATIONS

ENGAGEMENT

PLANNING &
ADMINISTRATION

See Appendix C for STARS®: Table of Credits for further breakdown.



[1] Franek, R. (Ed.). (2021). 2021 College Hopes & Worries Survey Results. Retrieved April 14, 2021, from <https://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings/college-hopes-worries>

2020-2021 SUSTAINABILITY SURVEY: FINDINGS

As part of the continuation of the work that was begun by the Climate Change Task Force, the Campus Sustainability Council's Steering Committee created a survey that was distributed across campus in February 2021 to determine trends, identify focus areas, assess current sustainability literacy, and understand the campus climate as it pertains to our efforts to date.

We had a total of 124 responses between students, staff, faculty, alumni, and peer institutions. This response greatly exceeded expectations given the survey and online fatigue that people were feeling. While statistical significance could not be determined, the large number of voluntary participants indicates that sustainability in general is a topic that continues to motivate and be of importance to the CC community. The Steering Committee worked with Director of Assessment and Program Review Amanda Udis-Kessler, to compile the findings and identify major themes and goals. A few prominent themes were discernible from the comments and are briefly summarized below. Detailed findings can be found in [Appendix D: 2020-21 Sustainability Survey Findings: STARS® Priorities](#) and [Appendix E: 2020-2021 Sustainability Survey Findings: Possible Arenas of Focus Moving Forward](#).

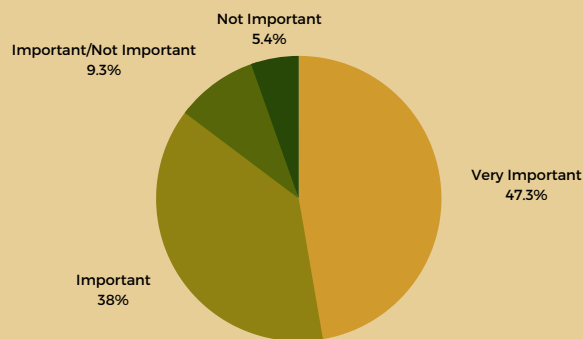
- Highly visible efforts continue to be of importance and/or scrutinized. For example: the topic of waste diversion was mentioned in some context repeatedly. Other examples mentioned included water use and landscaping, energy use and building retrofits, and operations at the student farm.
- Optics, and the need to educate the campus of the reality behind them, continues to be an issue that appeared numerous times. For example: the perception that CC is simply buying carbon offsets to achieve carbon neutrality ignores the massive reductions in gross emissions that the college has achieved, as well as the importance of offset market development, but continues to be a misunderstood and therefore heavily critiqued piece of our strategy.
- Despite ongoing education and training around broader sustainability topics that align with the SDGs, environmental issues continue to comprise the bulk of the community's understanding and desires as it pertains to sustainability. This finding overlaps with the optics/education finding above.
- There continues to be support and desire for action around fossil fuel divestment.



2020-2021 SUSTAINABILITY SURVEY: FINDINGS CONT.

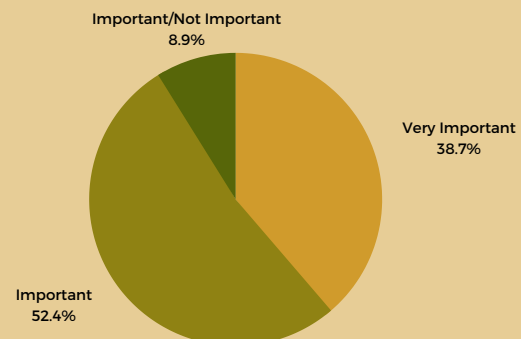
Respondents were asked to rate how important they felt it was that CC commit and work to improve our performance in each of the four main categories in STARS®. Below you will find breakdown of responses: Very Important, Important, Neither Important nor Not Important, and Not Important.

KEY FINDINGS: ACADEMICS



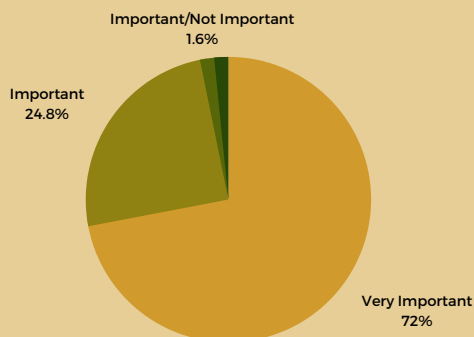
Among the comments were a number of concerns about the practicality of the above actions especially in the context of the college's current work on antiracism. That said, the positive comments suggested a sense of urgency in addressing this category.

KEY FINDINGS: ENGAGEMENT



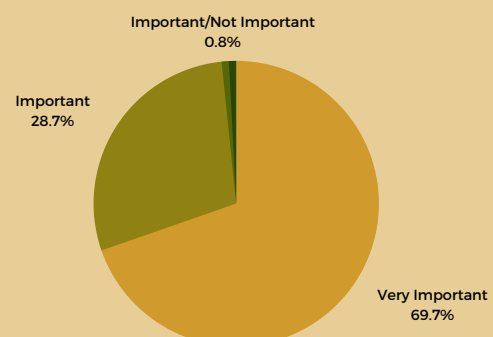
This category did not elicit many comments and they were quite mixed even though the answer to the above closed-ended question suggested a strong interest in working on this category.

KEY FINDINGS: OPERATIONS



While there is strong interest in improvement in this category, there seemed to be some frustration in how the category was defined in a relatively limited way. There may be a need to provide additional education about this category or fold it into a larger category.

KEY FINDINGS: PLANNING & ADMINISTRATION



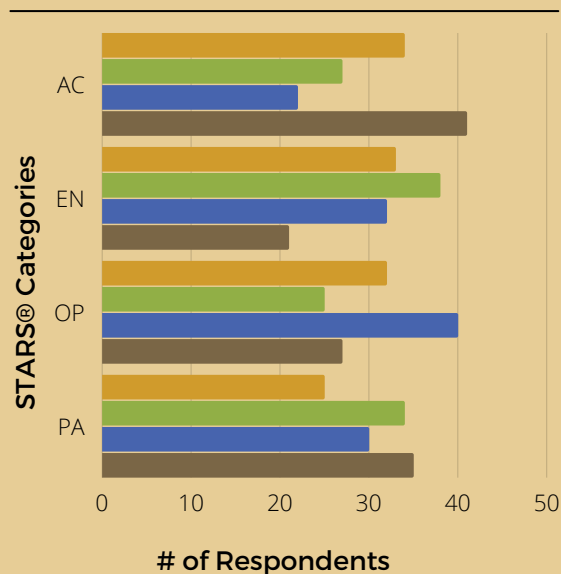
This category proved somewhat contentious in how different respondents saw the relationship between sustainability and various social and economic justice issues, and while some other categories elicited comments suggesting that CC could not practically meet the goal, this category elicited comments expressing pessimism about the value of the goal in itself.

2020-2021 SUSTAINABILITY SURVEY: FINDINGS CONT.

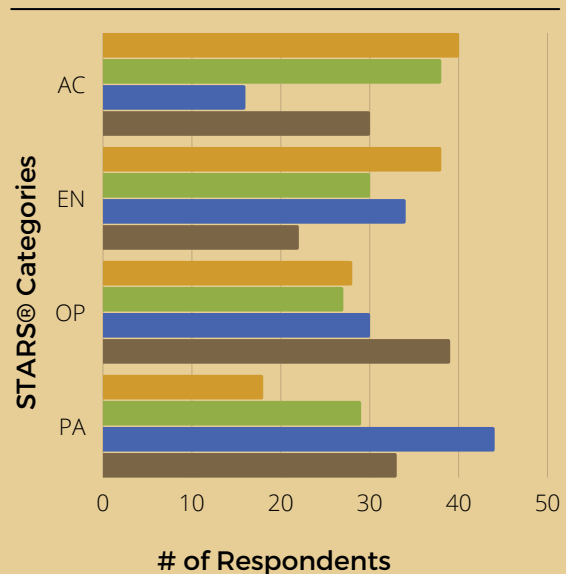
The last section of the survey asked respondents to rank the STARS categories by interest and then by importance. Three points seem worth mentioning.

- First, it is notable that CC has thus far made the most progress in the Engagement category and the least progress in the Planning & Administration category.
- Second, it is interesting that a greater proportion of respondents marked Engagement very important or important than gave the Academic category such priorities given how much more progress CC has already made in the Engagement category.
- Third, while roughly similar percentages of respondents marked all four categories either very important or important, breaking out the two degrees of importance shows a disjuncture between the Academic and Engagement categories, on the one hand, and the Operations and Planning and Administration categories, on the other. The latter two categories had far greater percentages of respondents marking them as very important (71.4% and 68.0% respectively) compared to the former two categories (47.3% and 38.1% respectively).

**RANKING OF STARS CATEGORIES BY:
PERSONAL INTEREST**



**RANKING OF STARS CATEGORIES BY:
COLLEGE IMPORTANCE**



RANKINGS	KEY
 1	AC - Academics
 2	EN - Engagement
 3	OP - Operations
 4	PA - Planning & Administration

The disjuncture between the College Importance chart and Personal Interest chart is interesting, as it almost perfectly reverses the order in the Personal Interest chart.

COMPARISON OF CC'S SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAMMING AT LEADING AND PEER INSTITUTIONS

In an effort to better understand the standing of our current sustainability organization, office, and programming, it was also necessary to look to our peers and other institutions that are leading sustainability efforts in higher education. In order to do this, we used multiple methods including reviewing higher education sustainability staffing survey information compiled by AASHE, comparing results from STARS, mining institutional websites for information pertaining to sustainability efforts, staffing, and organization, and interviewing select counterparts at other institutions to determine key elements to their successes and challenges.

CC was an early adopter when it envisioned and placed the Office of Sustainability in the academic realm with counterparts and colleagues supporting on-the-ground work in other areas, particularly in Facilities Services. The recognition that sustainability issues will be a challenge that all of our students will face in the future led to this placement to complement and strengthen the academic program through co-curricular and professional development pursuits while utilizing the campus as a laboratory for this work. The reality of the need to both a) educate and involve students, and b) make continual, real progress through specific projects made the development of a student internship program necessary, practical, and effective. Although the practice is now widespread throughout higher education, CC has built one of the most effective sustainability internship programs and is repeatedly recognized by other institutions for this successful model.

Leading institutions in each of the STARS® categories were listed for informational context in the survey and findings included in this report. While these institutions are not necessarily analogous to CC (e.g. they may be public, R1, larger, etc.), they do provide context about what strategies top-performing institutions are using to advance sustainability.

Key institutional findings from the comparison institutions listed can be found in Appendix F: Comparison of Sustainability Programs at Leading and Peer Institutions. Additional clarification and information was obtained through personal interviews with the top sustainability officers at the University of Denver [2] and Bates College [3].

LEADING AND PEER INSTITUTIONS IDENTIFIED IN THIS COMPARISON INCLUDE:

- Arizona State University
- Bates College
- Colby College
- Colgate University
- Middlebury College
- University of Denver

REASON(S) FOR SPECIFIC INTERVIEWS:

- Not as much information was readily discernible by mining data available on their websites
- The person interviewed responded to an interview request
- The proximity of the institution and existing relationship with the top sustainability officer made compelling case for in-person communications.

[2] Johnson, Ian. "Notes From Interview with Chad King, Sustainability Director, University of Denver." 1 Mar. 2021.

[3] Johnson, Ian. "Notes From Interview with Tom Twist, Sustainability Manager, Bates College." 2 Mar. 2021.

COMPARISON OF CC'S SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAMMING AT LEADING AND PEER INSTITUTIONS CONT.

Major themes that emerge from this comparison include:

- All but one of the institutions now house their sustainability efforts within the academic division. Academic focus or goals for sustainability at a majority of institutions. In discussions, at least three of these institutions have not experienced the same challenges as CC has in developing additional sustainability courses, at least in part because those institutions' directors have a faculty appointment or are expected to teach core sustainability classes.
- CC sustainability staff ranks among the lowest number of dedicated staff employed in sustainability while simultaneously overseeing the second-largest number of student interns and volunteers.
- At least two of the institutions besides CC have distinct antiracism initiatives. In discussion with one of these institutions, this initiative — while supportive of sustainability goals — is not well connected to their sustainability efforts or vice-versa. This mirrors the current state at CC.
- All institutions have something loosely analogous to CC's Campus Sustainability Council to provide input from campus constituents on sustainability issues and priorities.
- One leading institution has implemented a complete campus sustainability literacy survey every two years.
- CC is roughly on par with median annual operating budgets for sustainability offices. Interviews with two of the institutions listed above supported that finding.
- CC is below the median for sustainability staff salaries (broken out by position). This aligns with trends identified through interviews of two of the institutions as well as anecdotal trends across higher education.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations from the Campus Sustainability Council's Steering Committee are based on an analysis of the 2020-21 Sustainability Survey and from analyzing peer and other leading institutions.

OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Maintain and strengthen institutional focus and commitment to sustainability at CC by building on past successes.**
 - Determine new goals and next steps, including stretch goals by determining resources as needed to work towards goals.
- **Clearly connect sustainability efforts at CC to other campus-wide commitments and strategic initiatives that are inherently connected to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.**
 - Examples: becoming an antiracist institution; creating equitable access to education; promoting social justice, emphasizing health and well-being for the community, etc.

TO FACILITATE THESE RECOMMENDATIONS, OUR PRIMARY REQUESTS TO THE PRESIDENT AT THIS TIME ARE:

- **To formally constitute the Campus Sustainability Council (CSC) as a Presidential Advisory Committee as in prior years for the upcoming academic year.**
 - Work with the Steering Committee to identify and appoint individual members to CSC and develop a charge for the committee.
- **To meet in person in late summer/early fall to determine the above institutional goals and the strategies required to achieve them in partnership with the CSC.**

CONCLUSION

Sustainability at Colorado College has a long history with increasing focus on measurable impacts and achievements, leadership, and literacy as time has progressed. To date, the greatest and most visible success has been the achievement of carbon neutrality in 2020. This achievement has far-reaching implications on other college goals and global sustainability as outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This was evidenced by the recognition and creation of a Climate Change Task Force on the heels of that achievement to determine what the next steps for our college should be. The work begun by that task force has been carried forward in the 2020-21 academic year by the Campus Sustainability Council's Steering Committee. We believe this is no time to rest on our successes.

Based on information gathered this year on best practices at comparable institutions, top performers in various contexts of sustainability, and community input at CC and beyond, we believe that the college should build on our successes by implementing new strategic goals as they pertain to sustainability. While we have ideas about what some of these goals and strategies could be, our primary request at this time is to formally constitute the Campus Sustainability Council as a Presidential Advisory Council in the upcoming year and to discuss these possible goals, strategies, and timelines in more depth and in person during the late summer/early fall.

We look forward to drawing upon the insights of President Richardson and her experiences at a top-performing institution in the realm of sustainability to help make Colorado College a widely recognized and impactful institution for sustainability.