Western Michigan University — Definitions for STARS ER 1 & ER 9
Developed by the President's Universitywide Sustainability Committee in consultation with other faculty and administrators. Approved 130425

I. Sustainability Definition:

At its core, sustainability is about improving the human condition—now and into the future—while adapting our activities to fit what nature can provide.

A characteristic of institutions, organizations, communities, nations, etc. that strive to be sustainable is that they address three broad dimensions—environmental, social, and economic—and satisfy four broad system conditions. They must be anticipatory, ecologically regenerative, socially just, and economically accountable (see Glossary for definitions).

II. Consistent with the definition above, the following criteria are used to identify sustainability-related and -focused courses in Western Michigan University's curriculum.

1. Sustainability-related courses and sustainability-focused courses must satisfy one or more of the following criteria. Explicit “learning outcomes” must appear in course syllabi that demonstrate that these courses:

   • Focus a significant sub-theme, module, major course assignment/important project, or service-learning experience on the concept of sustainability; or
   • Focus course content on the intersection of at least two dimensions or system conditions of sustainability; or
   • Focus course content on one dimension or system condition of sustainability, but explicitly and regularly relate this to two or more additional dimensions or system conditions.

2. Sustainability-focused courses must satisfy two additional criteria. Explicit “learning outcomes” must appear in course syllabi that demonstrate that these courses:

   • Concentrate centrally on the concept of sustainability, including all dimensions and system conditions, and
   • Focus on examining an issue or topic using sustainability as a lens.

III. Parallel criteria are used to identify sustainability-related research and sustainability-focused research at Western Michigan University.

1. Sustainability-related research is consistent with at least one of three approaches. It:

   • Focuses significantly on the intersection of at least two dimensions or system conditions of sustainability; or
   • Focuses principally on one dimension or system condition of sustainability but explicitly and regularly relates this dimension or system condition to the other dimensions or system conditions.
   • Uses at least one dimension and two system conditions to address a particular unsustainability challenge.

2. Sustainability-focused research is consistent with at least one of three approaches. It:

   • Concentrates centrally on the concept of sustainability, including all dimensions and system conditions; or
   • Focuses on examining an issue or topic using sustainability as a lens; or
   • Uses all dimensions and system conditions to address a particular unsustainability challenge.
IV. Glossary

Three Dimensions:

1. Environmental—physical surroundings, natural and human created.
2. Social—the totality of relationships among humans (adapted from American Heritage Dictionary).
3. Economic—the set of arrangements that govern the production, consumption, and exchange of goods and services.

Four Systems Conditions:

4. Anticipatory—forward thinking, not simply ad hoc or adaptive.
5. Ecologically regenerative—processes or practices that restore, rebuild, or renew the natural environment.
6. Socially just—processes or practices that uphold human rights, are equitable, and promote the dignity of every human being.
7. Economically accountable—economies that employ full-cost accounting to internalize externalities and facilitate the making of decisions that are consistent with what nature can provide and with what societies and communities can afford.