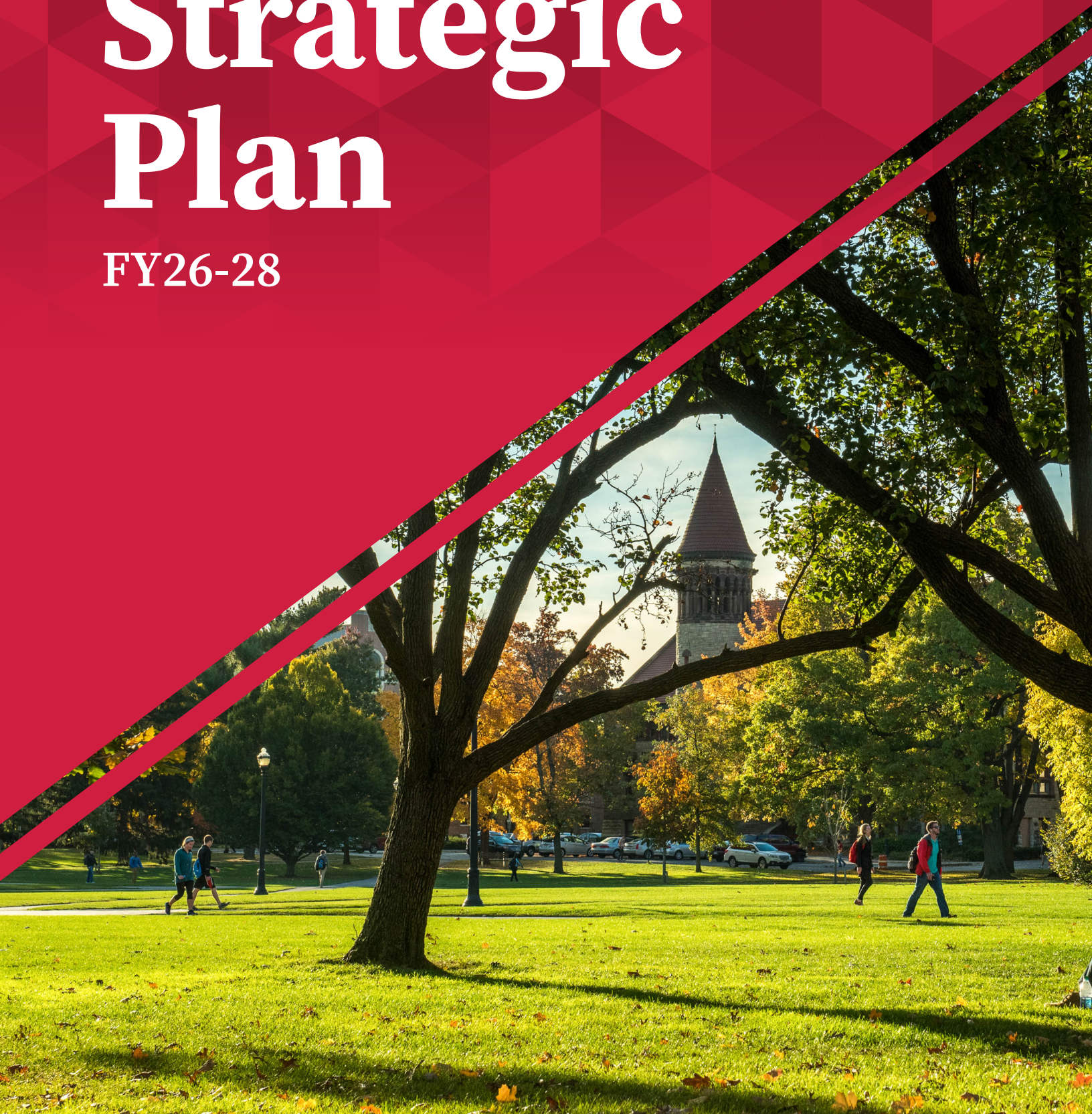
Sustainability Institute at
The Ohio State University

Strategic Plan

FY26-28



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Message from the Director

Elena Irwin

Director, Sustainability Institute

Distinguished University Professor

College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Dear Colleagues and Partners,

We are pleased to share the Sustainability Institute's updated Strategic Plan FY26-28, developed following the 2023–24 Advancing Sustainability at Ohio State initiative that engaged more than 2,600 faculty, students, staff, alumni, and external stakeholders (see p. 6 for more information). This plan builds on this unified vision and aligns with Ohio State's new Strategic Plan Framework "Education for Citizenship 2035" by providing an action framework.

Businesses have set ambitious science-based targets because they know sustainability strengthens performance, attracts talent, and reduces costs. This drives demand across many sectors for workers with sustainability knowledge and skills. And individuals everywhere are striving to live more sustainably, ensuring a flourishing world now and in the future.

Increasing strains on energy systems, impacts of extreme weather events, and harms to environmental and human health are issues of national security, underscoring the urgency of accelerating win-win solutions for people and the planet. A new force is also transforming society: artificial intelligence (AI). In the Midwest and across the US, regional utilities project unprecedented electricity and water demands driven by data centers. Without new approaches, these trends will strain communities and increase environmental impacts. At the same time, AI is proving to be essential for advancing climate prediction, environmental monitoring, and other sustainability solutions.

In aligning environmental, economic, and social outcomes, sustainability science advances innovations that reduce resource scarcities, improve climate resilience, and ensure human health. With over 800 faculty from across its 15 colleges and multiple campuses, Ohio State is advancing sustainability research and education that spans natural, social, health, and engineering sciences, arts and humanities, and the professions.

Through deep collaboration, extensive partnerships, experiential learning, and global reach, the university is uniquely positioned to further connect science with practice and become a national leader in sustainability. The Sustainability Institute is committed to working together with partners from across the university and the private, public and non-profit sectors to achieve this ambition.

Sincerely,

Our Mission

Accelerating interdisciplinary research and education that advance sustainability solutions by catalyzing and connecting Ohio State faculty, students and partners. Our goals are to:

Foster transdisciplinary knowledge & research

by engaging with partners to co-create sustainable solutions to energy, water, waste, and environmental health challenges facing the communities and constituents Ohio State serves.

Expand education & workforce development opportunities

for the emerging, current, and future workforce to develop sustainability skills and competencies.

Translate sustainability knowledge into practice

through actionable living labs that demonstrate research, provide experiential learning and achieve community and university resource stewardship improvements.

Build the capacity of Ohio State and its sustainability community

in pursuing inter- and trans-disciplinary collaborations to generate, teach and translate sustainability knowledge.

Develop and expand strategic collaborations with external partners

that contribute funds, counsel, influence, and other resources to the Sustainability Institute's priorities for research, education and living labs.

Our vision:

Healthy communities, economic prosperity and resilient ecosystems throughout Ohio, the nation and the world.

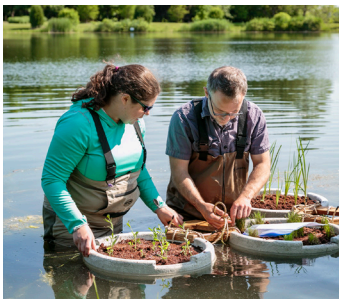
Five-Year Accomplishments

2015 Ohio State invested in new Sustainable and Resilient Economy Discovery Themes to recruit interdisciplinary faculty and accelerate translational research to address critical societal challenges.

2019 The Sustainability Institute was created by a merger of the Discovery Theme initiative with the university Office of Energy and the Environment to advance sustainability scholarship, education and related activities across the university.

$96.9 million

in externally funded research secured by 107 proposals supported by SI

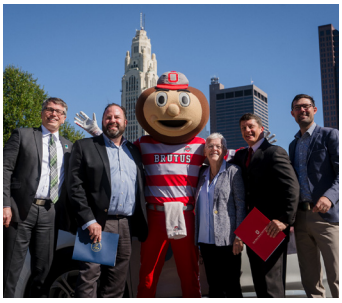


370+

faculty, researcher, & instructor affiliates across 40 academic units and 12 colleges

10:1

ROI in total external funds secured by interdisciplinary teams for research supported by SI seed grants



$8 million

from industry for sponsored research, grant cost share and other scholarly activities supporting faculty, students and programs across the university

22

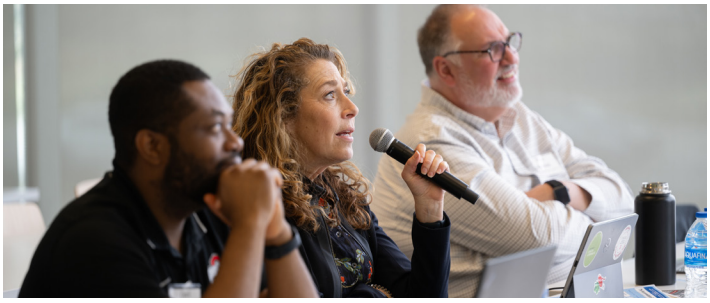
new sustainability courses supported, including 20 General Education sustainability courses

100+ faculty

teaching sustainability who regularly engage with the Sustainability Education Learning Committee

$1.5 million

from industry collaborations established by SI for university operational sustainability initiatives



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co-curricular activities and programs, including the SUSTAINS Living-Learning Community, which enrolled 195 students and logged more than 4,300 service and professional development hours through the academic year

Advancing Sustainability at Ohio State

In 2023-2024, Ohio State's sustainability community came together to assess the university's existing strengths and challenges and to identify opportunities to further advance sustainability across research and innovation, education and workforce development and community engagement.

Through this initiative, supported by the Sustainability Institute (SI), over 2,600 faculty, students, staff, administrators and external partners and experts were engaged. This included three visioning committees comprising 63 faculty and eight staff from 12 colleges, 37 academic units, 15 centers and institutes and five campuses.

Building from an extensive process of data collection, shared learning and consensus-building, members of visioning committees articulated a comprehensive framework to guide how faculty, students and staff collectively engage with sustainability, centered on Ohio State's core values.

Vision: Healthy communities, economic prosperity and resilient ecosystems throughout Ohio, the nation and the world.

Goals and Targets:

Foster trans-disciplinary research to generate new knowledge and co-create sustainability solutions

- Secure over $200 million in funding from grants and philanthropic sources.
- Increase public and foundation funding for sustainability by 30%.
- Retain and recruit top sustainability faculty who are supported by a tenure and promotion system that recognizes and rewards inter- and trans-disciplinary scholarship.

Offer comprehensive sustainability curricula and workforce development opportunities

- Enroll an additional 1,000 students in sustainability programs.
- Ensure 5,000+ undergraduates enroll in graduate programs or secure post-graduate work in sustainability.
- Offer customized workforce development training in sustainability for employees from over 100 organizations.

Broaden community engagement and accelerate sustainability actions

- Co-design community solutions through engaged scholarship that supports research and contributes to direct community improvement.
- Implement new models that leverage campus as a living lab for research and education activities that support sustainability practices.
- Launch coordinated sustainability marketing and communication efforts to attract funders, collaborators and prospective students.
- Foster a greater sense of community and belonging among sustainability researchers, educators and staff across all campuses and programs.

Below: The Education and Workforce Development Visioning Committee displays the Six Dimensions of Sustainability.

Research Collaboration Services

Connecting ideas, people and partners to accelerate sustainability research and impact

SI accelerates interdisciplinary research by providing a suite of research collaboration services that strengthen proposal competitiveness, improve post-award outcomes, and amplify institutional impact. These services span the full research life cycle – from ideation to proposal development to project implementation and long-term sustainability.

Our goal is to provide scalable, flexible support that meets teams where they are, strengthens their competitiveness, and maximizes the impact of award funding. In select cases, SI can also provide limited proposal development funding to offset the related costs of developing high-impact, interdisciplinary proposals with strong potential for external investment.

Early Stage

- Facilitated brainstorming and ideation sessions that support proposal development guided by faculty-driven research interests, interdisciplinary collaboration opportunities and alignment with funder and institutional priorities.
- Landscape scans of funding opportunities aligned with SI's research priority areas.
- Assistance with team building, leveraging SI's network of nearly 400 affiliated researchers and multi-sector partners.

Submission Stage

- For large, strategic proposals, support with framing, narrative refinement and coordination of proposal elements.
- Team science and collaboration planning to strengthen team readiness, dynamics and other practices for building highly effective teams.
- Support for developing broader impact, engagement and translation strategies.
- Matchmaking assistance to connect with external stakeholders and demonstrate support and cost share.

Implementation Stage

- Embedded staff support for consortium and project management, including engagement of key external partners.
- Development of data and integrated modeling tools.
- Connection to SI's education and workforce initiatives to embed experiential learning.
- Translation of research findings for broader audiences, and visibility and amplification through SI communication channels.

Recent Examples

- Supported year-long collaboration planning for a $10 million multi-institutional, transdisciplinary research project (USDA, Sustainable Agricultural Systems, 2025).
- Provided fractional leadership for management of industry program for an Ohio State-led $26 million Engineering Research Center on alternative natural rubber (NSF, TARDSISS, 2024).

Strategic Plan – FY26-28

Research

Foster inter- and trans-disciplinary knowledge and research to co-create sustainable solutions to energy, water, waste and environmental health challenges working with the communities and constituents we serve.

Goal 1:

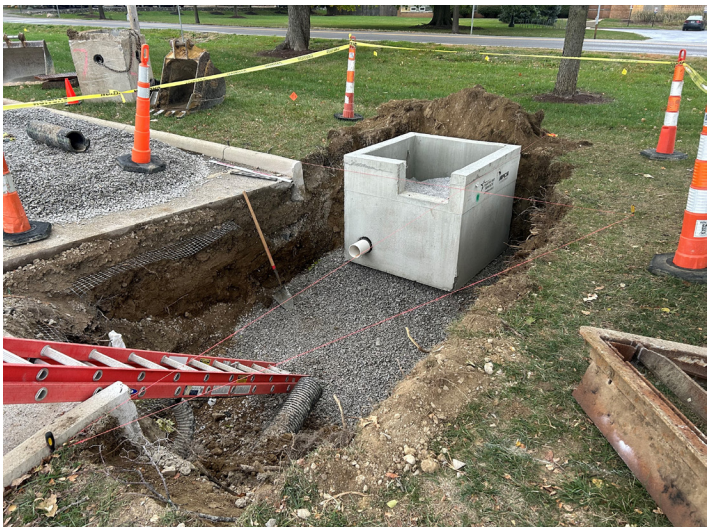
Develop, support and advance major, high-impact inter- and trans-disciplinary proposal submissions and awarded teams that drive progress in SI's research priority areas.

Priority Plans:

- Provide deep coordination and strategic framing for 2 or 3 major proposal submissions, including the CHEX Climate+Health Center of Excellence full proposal submission.
- Partner with faculty research leaders in SI's priority areas to develop competitive major funding submissions.
- Offer strategic support to strengthen smaller-scale or early-stage proposals aligned with SI's mission.

Metrics:

- Number and dollar amount of proposals submitted with SI support, broken out by funder, research area, college and department.



Above: Faculty-led living lab research is testing the impact of stormwater treatment equipment on runoff from university surface parking lots.

Goal 2:

Identify, align, track and share strategic external research funding opportunities to support inter- and trans-disciplinary sustainability research.

Priority Plans:

- Complete landscape scans of external funding opportunities across SI's priority research areas.
- Use landscape scan results to co-develop SI research development strategies with strategic support to strengthen smaller-scale or early-stage proposals aligned with SI's mission.

Metrics:

- Number and dollar amount of proposals awarded with SI support, broken out by funder, research area, college and department.

Goal 3:

Build and launch Research Collaboration Services to strengthen inter- and trans-disciplinary research aligned to SI's priority research areas.

Priority Plans:

- Build and pilot foundational infrastructure for Research Collaboration Services, including assessing partner needs.
- Introduce and promote Research Collaboration Services to faculty and internal/external partners.
- Implement a tracking system for SI research support efforts.

Metrics:

- Number and dollar amount of proposals submitted and awarded with SI Research Collaboration Services included.
- Results of faculty satisfaction survey with Research Collaboration Services

Goal 4:

Strengthen SI research capacity to meet strategic demand through new research roles and improved coordination with other units, centers and institutes.

Priority Plans:

- Foster collaborations among sustainability research leaders.
- Organize FY26 convenings with co-designed charge and expectations focused on inter- and trans-disciplinary strategy, funding and information sharing.

Metrics:

- Number of different disciplines and units represented by sustainability research leaders group.

Goal 5:

Implement internal research funding mechanisms to strategically build inter- and trans-disciplinary research capacity across SI's priority areas.

Priority Plans:

- Launch FY26 SI Seed Grant Program.
- Manage Proposal Development Funds.
- Refine and implement return on investment tracking using updated survey tools.

Metrics:

- Track number and dollar amount of SI research seed grants, broken out by research area, college, department and, where applicable, external collaborator.
- Track dollar amount of proposals submitted and awarded that were supported by SI proposal development funds.
- Calculate return on investment based on 1-, 3- and 5-year windows.

Education

Expand education and workforce development opportunities for the emerging, current and future workforce to develop sustainability skills and competencies.

Goal 1:

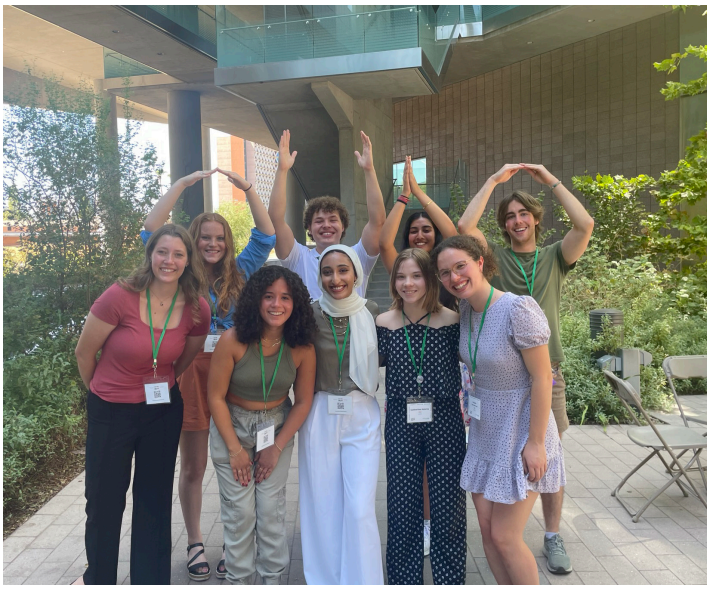
Expand curricular opportunities in sustainability workforce development by supporting the development of new graduate level certificates, minors, and master's degree programs.

Priority Plans:

- Encourage enrollment in the proposed Master of Energy Sustainability (MES) degree program prior to program launch.
- Engage external partners to build relationships that will support MES graduates, including the Sustainable Energy Accelerator.
- Build the administration plan for the MES in coordination with the Graduate School and the faculty program directors.

Metrics:

- Enrollment numbers and dollar amount for MES program.



Goal 2:

Implement recommendations from the university-wide sustainability education visioning process and the work of the Sustainability Education and Learning Committee (SELC).

Priority Plans:

- Engage SELC in discussions and the development of teaching resources related to AI and sustainability.
- Support the development of new graduate-level curricula envisioned by the graduate and professional education subcommittee and creation of online versions of master's programs.
- Assist Sustainability in Action subcommittee contributions to Sustainability Living Labs program.
- Support developing a set of modules for incorporating topical sustainability content into courses.
- Identify additional marketing strategies for undergraduate sustainability programs to prospective student audiences.

Metrics:

- Number of new sustainability-related programs (majors, minors, certificates and learning resources).
- Number of faculty engaged in sustainability education efforts, broken out by college and department as well as the type of engagement.

Left: Ohio State students attended the 2025 Local Conference of Youth, where they helped craft the National Youth Statement on Climate.

Goal 3:
Provide new pathways for students to access experiential learning opportunities by living lab work and redesigning available resources.

Priority Plans:
- Create a sustainability living labs project matching platform on the SI website to connect projects to students, faculty and external partners.
- Develop internal resources to increase efficiency in project matching efforts for student projects, capstones/studios and external partner engagement.
- Create communication materials on exemplary lab projects to share with prospective students and external partners.

Metrics:
- Number of students, faculty and external partners engaged in living labs.

Goal 4:
Expand co-curricular initiatives in sustainability by enhancing current programming and increasing opportunities to connect to external partners.

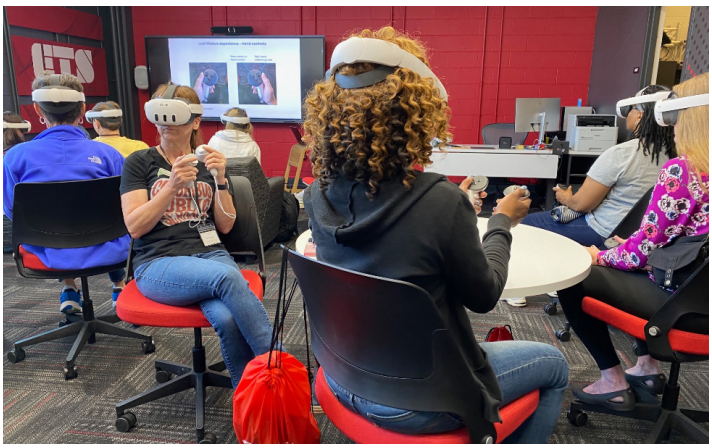
Priority Plans:
- Conduct a community needs assessment process to gain insight into how to best streamline sustainability living labs projects involving community groups.
- Reboot SI Student Advisory Board with new recruitment plan and goals.
- Augment current program marketing efforts with a goal to increase number of SUSTAINS LLC applications to 60 or more.
- Work with Student Life to support the student sustainability council and USG sustainability committee.

Metrics:
- Number of SUSTAINS applications and acceptance rate.
- Number of Student Advisory Board members, broken out by major, college and department.

Goal 5:
Develop opportunities to engage teachers and the current workforce by creating new programs and/or certifications.

Priority Plans:
- Develop sustainability education offerings for current sustainability professionals, including engagement with Fisher College of Business executive education program.
- Offer professional development day for Columbus City Schools
- Engage Columbus City Schools K-12 teachers by offering other campus visits/ programming and/or pursuing another STEAMM Rising collaboration.

Metrics:
- Number of participants in executive education programs and total revenue.



Above: SI has begun hosting Columbus City Schools teachers on campus for professional development experiences, including a session with Art faculty that have recreated an historic stream on the Columbus campus in a virtual reality environment.

Sustainability Living Labs

Translate sustainability knowledge and innovation through living labs that demonstrate research, provide experiential learning and achieve community and university resource stewardship improvements.

Goal 1:

Create Sustainability Living Lab program pages on SI website to provide overview of program for university researchers and students.

Priority Plans:

- Update SI website with new Sustainability Living Lab program resources, exemplary projects, instructions on how to engage and current opportunities with points of contact.
- Seek input and feedback from the SELC Living Lab Subcommittee.
- Share finished product with student organizations and living lab community faculty and researchers.

Metrics:

- Number of unique views of Sustainability Living Lab program web pages.

Goal 2:

Improve campus living lab development processes for academic and operational interests centered on SI priority areas.

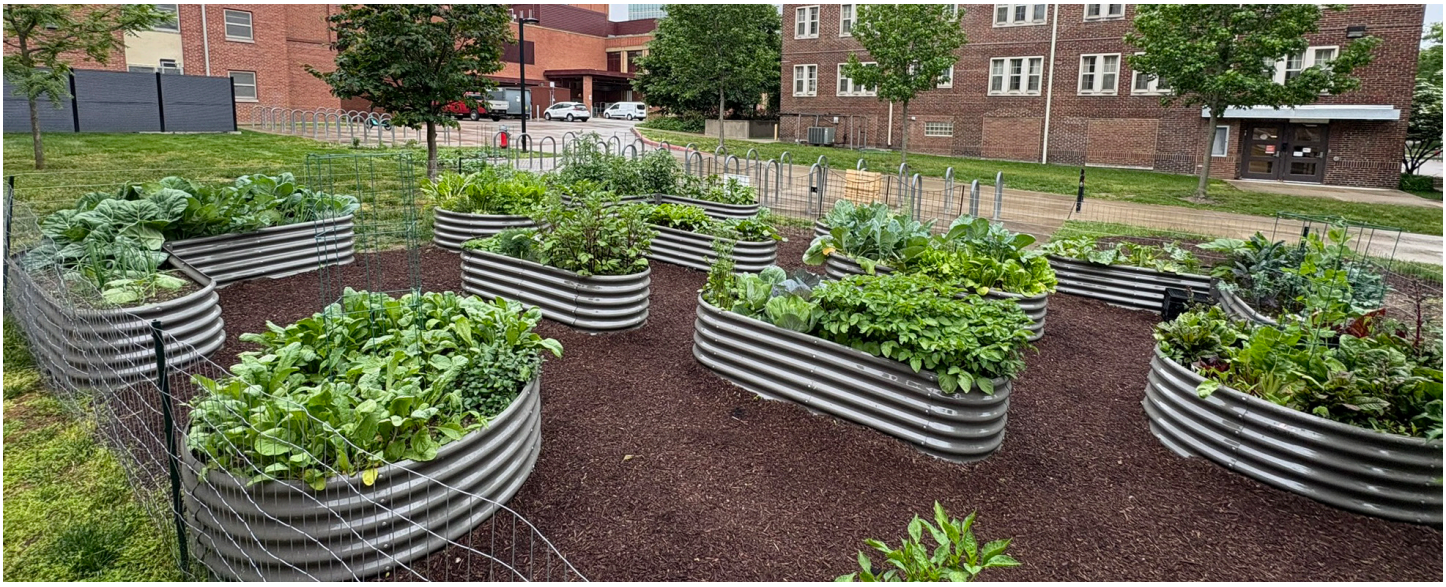
Priority Plans:

- Work with university partners to identify barriers to campus living lab development and opportunities to overcome those barriers.
- With input from the SELC Living Lab Subcommittee, create tools to better manage inquiries or requests and project investigation navigation.
- Feature ways to engage in existing living lab efforts, especially in high demand topics.

Metrics:

- Number of new or expanded sustainability living labs not initiated by SI.

Below: Student-led Container Garden living lab project, maintained by SUSTAINS LLC and supported with an SI student grant.



Goal 3:

Craft right-sized projects with long-term visions to enable larger scale impacts within academic calendar realities.

Priority Plans:

- Conduct interested party listening sessions with academic partners and external collaborators to identify areas and projects of interest for researchers and students.
- Develop one long-term living lab project for each of SI's priority research areas.
- Co-develop segmented series of projects that can be accomplished within a semester or academic year.
- Identify necessary internal and potential external partners and funding resources to execute initial segmented projects.
- Seek opportunities to incorporate projects into coursework curriculum.

Metrics:

- Number of living lab projects with support by SI broken out by campus unit, community partner, research objective and class or educational program.

Goal 4:

Fund two or three sustainability living lab projects that advance SI priorities and build the Sustainability Living Lab program.

Priority Plans:

- Establish SI Sustainability Living Lab investment criteria.
- Target investments up to $50,000 per identified project with intention to support at least one energy research priority.

Metrics:

- Dollar amount of SI investment in new or expanded living lab projects.
- External funds raised for living labs with SI support.

Goal 5:

Develop conceptual return on investment (ROI) guidance for capital projects that incorporates the value of academic outcomes into the university's operational sustainability project investments.

Priority Plans:

- Conduct institutional model program benchmarking, including through ASHEE and UC3 living lab working group participation.
- Identify the potential value of academic outcomes within capital project planning.
- Explore internal project examples, quantifying value of teaching/learning and research gains (including external funding) leveraged from operational or infrastructure investments with appropriate faculty members.
- Socialize findings with university operational leaders and potentially key partners for consideration and refinement.

Metrics:

- Pilot one application of ROI evaluation to a university capital project.

Building Internal Capacity

Build the capacity of Ohio State faculty, students and staff in pursuing inter- and trans-disciplinary collaborations to generate, teach and translate sustainability knowledge.

Goal 1:
Strengthen SI's strategic partnerships with university, college and unit leaders.

Priority Plans:

- Support SI-facilitated groups of faculty to develop shared actions in support of common goals.
- Share SI strategic plan and opportunities for faculty, students, academic units and other internal partners to engage with SI.
- Use sustainability research landscape scans and education program benchmarking results to identify critical gaps in faculty expertise related to priority areas in sustainability research and education and share the information with academic units.

Metrics:

- Number of purposeful interactions with university, college and unit leaders to share SI strategic plan by college and department.

Goal 2:
Grow interdisciplinary collaborations with sustainability-related units.

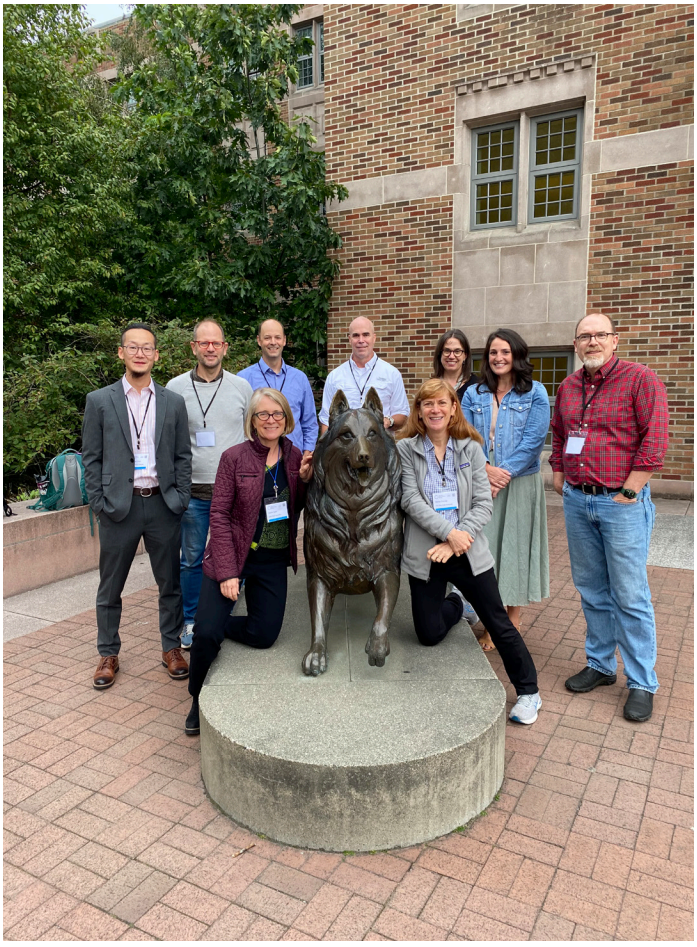
Priority Plans:

- Develop joint TDAI-SI initiative to support AI and sustainability research.
- Form and implement a plan for securing external resources to support sustainable energy transdisciplinary research in collaboration with academic units and other centers and institutes.
- Create a strategic roadmap for climate-health transdisciplinary research with a plan for securing external resources.
- Explore collaboration with Byrd Polar and Climate Research Center to strengthen climate services research and outreach.

Metrics:

- Launch of a collaborative initiative to promote AI and sustainability research at Ohio State.
- Completion of strategic roadmap for climate-health research.

Below: Ohio State faculty, staff and students presented at the National Sustainability Society's first annual meeting, held at the University of Washington.



Goal 3:
Foster greater integration of sustainability researchers, educators and practitioners.

Priority Plans:
- Foster a vibrant community of sustainability education practitioners that reaches across the university and multiple campuses.
- Foster and grow interdisciplinary connections among members of the Ohio State sustainability community by leveraging ongoing initiatives, programs and events and exploring the possibility of a "sustainability salon."
- Represent Ohio State in key regional and national sustainability networks and encourage other faculty, staff and students to participate.

Metrics:
- Number of faculty and researchers participating in SELC townhalls and other sustainability events.

Goal 4:
Redefine and implement processes for SI membership.

Priority Plans:
- Implement a strategy to confirm and recruit Institute affiliates.
- Develop affiliates and members database on new SI website.
- Establish guidance for affiliates to determine if and how SI should be included on the ePA-005.

Metrics:
- Number of SI affiliates by academic unit, college, discipline and area of scholarly expertise.
- Number of ePA-005s with SI at 0% and >0%.

Goal 5:
Celebrate accomplishments across our sustainability network.

Priority Plans:
- Explore the feasibility of an annual sustainability showcase and recognition gathering for affiliated/interested faculty and staff.

Above: The Research and Community Engagement Visioning Committees hosted an inaugural joint session in September 2023.

External Partnerships

Develop and expand strategic collaborations with external partners that contribute funds, counsel, influence and other resources to SI's priorities for research, education and living labs.

Goal 1:

Work with the Office of Corporate and Foundation Engagement to secure philanthropic support from companies and foundations for Ohio State sustainability priorities.

Priority Plans:

- Map key corporate and foundation funders across SI research priorities to identify high-potential collaboration opportunities.
- Steward and expand SI signature corporate partnerships.
- Help Ohio State Energy Partners (OSEP) to attract high-quality proposals for its annual request for proposals.
- Support new investments under the Coca-Cola academic development R&D funding.
- Recruit ten new industry members for TARDISS NSF Engineering Research Center.

Metrics:

- Amount of financial support for university sustainability priorities raised from private sources by funder.
- Amount of OSEP grants supporting university sustainability priorities.
- Amount of Coca-Cola sponsored research projects with sustainability outcomes.
- Number of new TARDISS members and total membership fees raised.

Above: Ohio State and Rumpke Waste & Recycling personnel celebrate the opening of Rumpke's new Columbus recycling center, which will house research and education space for Ohio State faculty and students.

Goal 2:

Solicit input and support from external stakeholders to help inform sustainability research, education agendas and projects.

Priority Plans:

- Work with the Environmental and Social Sustainability Lab (ESSL) to survey corporate, government and nonprofit employers regarding sustainability skill sets desired.

Below:: Ohio State joined local and regional collaborators for the Central Ohio Circular Economy Roundtable.

Goal 3:

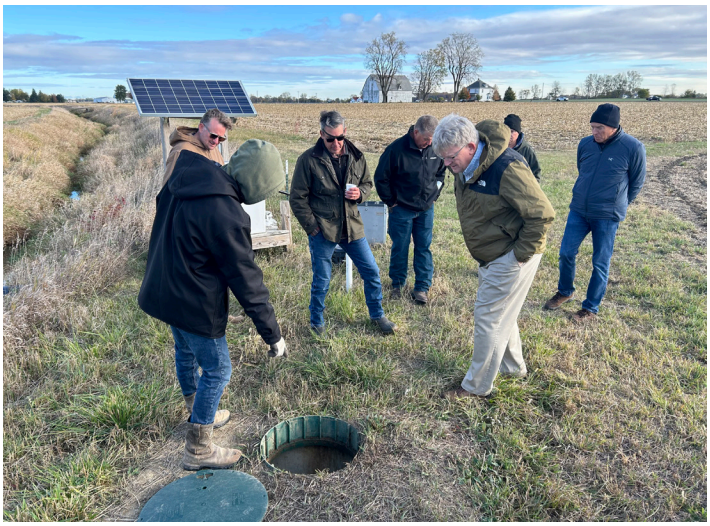
Launch and manage an External Advisory Board (EAB) representing academia, government and the private sector to solicit advice and other assistance on SI's priorities.

Priority Plans:

- Solicit input from key internal allies on draft charter and suggested membership.
- Confirm chair and actively recruit members.
- Convene first External Advisory Board meeting in 2026.

Metrics:

- Number of External Advisory Board members broken out by sector.



Right: Ohio State faculty led a state legislator tour of Lake Erie water quality improvement research and demonstration sites.

Goal 4:

Guided by the Office of Government Affairs, engage and educate policymakers at the federal, state and local levels about the benefits of sustainability to show impact of existing and future public investments.

Priority Plans:

- Develop sustainability policy plan with guidance from university Government Affairs.

Metrics:

- Number of policymaker engagements with SI support broken out by government level (federal, state and local).

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