

# **Sustainability Practices and Research Center**

## **Program Review Report**

Site Visit

1 March 2023

### **Overview**

The Review Committee was extremely impressed by what the SPARC team has been able to accomplish over the past eight years given that it has been, in the words of University President Brad Mortensen, “riding on the backs of overworked individuals.” The SPARC team has done an excellent job of meeting its mission “to inform and educate WSU students, faculty, staff, and the local and statewide community to ensure the sustainability of our region and our world for future generations.” And it has done this on what can only be described as unsustainable resources – both in terms of the number of personnel and the available budget. As we note below, the Review Committee’s strongest recommendation is that SPARC be given the resources needed to continue and build upon its mission going forward.

### **Program Strengths**

SPARC has put together an impressive array of programs and activities, all of which contribute to its mission (noted above).

- The creation of the Sustainability (SUS) course attribute has been a great success. While SPARC Director Dr. Alice Mulder seemed a little concerned that so far (only) 51% of departments across campus have added a SUS designation to at least one of their classes, the review team saw this as a great success, noting that the SUS designation was not approved until 2019 and also noting the continuing increase in SUS designations over time. Faculty praised the “streamlined process” for getting the SUS designation. But perhaps more importantly, they praised the SUS designation for creating the incentive to think about how their courses do (or can do) sustainability.
- Similarly, the creation of the annual Sustainability Across the Curriculum Community of Practice was praised by the faculty we spoke with during our site visit. They praised SPARC for providing an interdisciplinary community that enables them to learn from each other about sustainability issues, both as it contributes to their research as well as their teaching.
- The Program Review team also sees the Intermountain Sustainability Summit as not only a strength of the Center, but a major marquis event for the University. Having said that, we also see the Summit as a challenge (discussed below). The Summit was heralded by different stake-holders for helping to shape the sustainability conversation around the

state and to identify Weber State as a regional leader in the field. It has also been instrumental in creating connections and collaborations among sustainability-focused businesses, governmental entities, and the University.

- The Review Committee also considers both Dr. Alice Mulder (Director) and Bonnie Christiansen (Sustainability Programs & Engagement Manager) to be extraordinary strengths. Put simply, SPARC would not be the success that it is today without the efforts of Alice and Bonnie. As noted by President Mortensen in the Overview section of our report, SPARC's success can be placed squarely on the backs of these two "overworked individuals". The need for at least one additional 12-month contract staff member in SPARC cannot be overstated.

## **Program Challenges**

- The biggest challenge facing SPARC is an unsustainable level of resources, both human and monetary.
- SPARC is woefully understaffed. Not only are both Alice and Bonnie overworked, but, much is expected of student-workers, who all too often stay on staff for just one year, requiring a substantial amount of time from Alice and Bonnie to train new student-workers. Dr. Mulder operates with only a half-time appointment (meaning, 6 hours of released-teaching time each semester). The Review Committee does not see this amount of release-time for the Director as sustainable at all for SPARC going forward.
- SPARC is in desperate need of additional funding, not just to cover the additional staff personnel that is needed. The University needs to match words with deeds and dedicate increased efforts to finding community resources (donors, grants) to support some of the programs SPARC currently runs, as well as programs SPARC hopes to develop in the future. In particular we note SPARC's important goal of creating a "community-facing 'Sustainability Solutions Hub.'" Without a solid funding base in place ahead of time, such goals should not begin to be undertaken, as they will only increase the workload on an already overworked staff.
- The future of the Intermountain Sustainability Summit is a challenge. While we listed this Summit as a strength of SPARC, it has also become a challenge. First off, there is simply the issue of funding that makes this event a challenge going forward. Second, there is the issue of an overworked staff continuing to put on this event every year. The Summit takes up 80% of Bonnie's time over the year – from the planning preparations which begin almost a year ahead of time to the logistics of creating and coordinating panels and securing impactful guest speakers. Lastly, other similar events are cropping up in the region. These new events, coupled with the University of Utah's new Center for Climate Science and Policy leads us to conclude that a re-think on what the specific focus of this Summit should be going forward is needed.
- The Review Committee also notes the "R" in SPARC as a challenge. Currently "research" is the smallest area in SPARC, even though evidence-based research in the domain of sustainability and climate change is of the essence for faculty and students

alike, both with regard to their professional advancement and the credibility of the field. Where SPARC wishes to go in terms of research is a question that needs to be addressed. It is clear that, at this time, there is no scope within the thinly spread staff to adequately consider the “R” in SPARC.

- SPARC staff noted, and the Review Committee agrees, that addressing issues of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion is a challenge for SPARC going forward. The Review Committee agrees with the SPARC report that “attend(ing) to building equity, diversity and inclusion across all areas of engagement with sustainability” in the various ways listed in the Program Review Report is a goal that SPARC should be committed to. It would also be in synch with WSU’s wider mission to provide equal access and opportunity to all.

## **Recommendations**

- First and foremost, the University needs to locate additional resources for SPARC if it is to be sustainable going forward.
- At the bare-minimum, we strongly suggest the creation of an additional full-time staff position. This would ideally be an Admin Level III person on a 12-month contract who would take on general administrative work in the center, train student-workers, and assist Bonnie with event planning (including some of the heavy lifting in terms of the Summit). Creating this position would provide the support that SPARC desperately needs, as well as provide year-round continuity.
- The Review Committee also suggests that an effort be made to increase the released-teaching time granted to the Director each semester from 6 hours to 9 hours.
- Efforts should also be made to hire an Assistant Director (at the level of 3 semester hours of released-teaching time). Student workers noted that it was often difficult to connect with Alice and/or Bonnie given the demands on their time. The students thought an Assistant Director would alleviate some of those communication issues and help to get the word out about SPARC. In general, awareness of SPARC needs to be amplified across campus. Part of the focus of a new Assistant Director could indeed be this (to get the story out about SPARC). This individual could work on strategies to engage more faculty in the activities of SPARC, including leading a “SUS” attribute workshop for adjunct faculty (and others) that would explain the importance of that attribute and how to achieve adding that designation to their courses. This individual could also work with faculty who currently have a CRE designated course and find ways to add a SUS designation as well.
- The students that we interviewed felt that the marketing materials were geared towards faculty and not students and they wanted to see more of an effort to reach out and connect with students. This again could be accomplished with the addition of both a full time admin, and an Assistant Director.

- Finally, there are some noted differences between ESO and SPARC in the sense that SPARC has not had the staff that they need to implement their mission, while ESO has been able to add staff and thus been able to support SPARC at some level. This support for SPARC may diminish as ESO personnel responsibilities change going forward. This possibility makes it imperative that SPARC receive the resources that this committee has identified. These resources are/will continue to be essential in order for SPARC to achieve, amplify, and reach its full potential.

It was our great pleasure to read SPARC's program review report and spend the day meeting the various SPARC stake-holders. The University has something impressive here. From what we heard from the President and the Provost, they recognize this. We hope that they are willing to do what is necessary to allow SPARC to thrive going forward.

Review Team Members:

Dr. Kathleen Cadman  
Kerry Case  
Dr. Andrea Easter-Pilcher  
Dr. Thom Kuehls  
Dr. Michael Wutz