



Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability

Application Tips & Tricks

To support you with your application for the Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability, use this Application Tips & Tricks resource. You'll find practical advice from institutions that took part in the 2025 pilot to design and refine the Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability. The pilot institutions share useful insights about how they approached the application, including identifying campus sustainability efforts, focusing your application, crafting your narrative, and developing your ecosystem model for community partnerships.

1. Build a team and map your campus sustainability efforts.

The Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability is a narrative-based application that allows institutions of higher education to tell a comprehensive story of their campus sustainability efforts. The application is broad, and therefore difficult for one person or office to tackle alone. Pilot participants recommend forming a team of individuals with perspectives from across the institution to effectively gather data and shape your narrative.

Start by identifying the people and offices that can contribute to different parts of the application. The University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire built on existing collaborative structures and included individuals from facilities, operations, academics, research, grants, and institutional data. The process of building cross-departmental collaboration led to new learning and connections for many pilot institutions. Mt. San Antonio College "learned about projects that [they] weren't even aware of." You can refer to our [Building Your Team Worksheet](#) for more ideas.

With your team assembled, you can move into mapping and prioritizing the sustainability initiatives on campus. Pima Community College undertook a whiteboard exercise to determine which examples were strongest to include, where they fit, and how individual examples connected across the narrative.

2. Focus on progress, not perfection.

Application reviewers are not looking for perfection, nor are they comparing sustainability commitments across institutions. Reviewers aim to recognize outstanding commitments to sustainability by understanding the unique context and initiatives presented in each institution's narrative.

Pilot participants emphasize the importance of sharing an honest and comprehensive story of your institution's sustainability commitment. For one pilot institution, strategic planning for sustainability was still evolving. They shared draft versions of their climate action plan and identified what is already being implemented to show the current state of sustainability in their application.

Reviewers are aware that many institutions are currently changing the way that sustainability is implemented on campus. Share how your institution's approach to sustainability may be evolving using the terminology that serves your institution best, rather than forcing specific approaches or terminology into your narrative that do not fit your context. Don't hide the messiness: the challenges, ambiguities, gaps, and successes of sustainability at your institution are useful evidence for a thoughtful narrative. You can view your application as an opportunity to inventory current efforts and achievements, analyze institutional plans, and communicate continuous improvement.

3. Craft a consistent and compelling narrative.

Your application is one story that threads together many campus sustainability initiatives. Your audience is a group of peer reviewers with expertise in the field of sustainability in higher education. Pilot participants recommend starting your drafting with the institutional context to frame the rest of the application. One pilot institution shared that your narrative should "advance not only your institutional mission, but also the context in which your institution exists."

Once the institutional context is established, explain its connection to the examples of your outstanding commitment to sustainability that you gathered from across campus. You do not need to share every example of sustainability on campus. Instead, focus on the examples that best show your commitment to sustainability and fit into your institutional context. You can explicitly link the relevance of your examples to your institutional context to ensure that the connection is clear to reviewers.

You can use reports, plans, dashboards, maps, or other materials to demonstrate the scope or legitimacy of your work. Uploading additional documentation is not required, but you can use the optional document and link uploads to share supporting documents that add value or depth to your narrative. Within the narrative, connect your story to the supporting materials.

4. Model your ecosystem of partnerships.

Section III of the application asks institutions to describe how their sustainability-focused partnerships can be described using an ecosystem model, including networked

relationships, reciprocity, shared goals, and more. The ecosystem model for community partnerships is a new lens for many institutions.

Carleton College started designing their model by thinking about the entities and scope of their ecosystem. Instead of writing a list of involved partners, move one step further to identify what connects your partners. The connections between partners could include shared challenges, resources, interactions, and outcomes.

Applicants are encouraged to submit an optional visual map of the ecosystem. The application guidebook includes an appendix with examples of ecosystem model visuals. For example, the University of Arizona model demonstrated the shared challenges of heat, health, and water. Surrounding the shared challenges are networked relationships, resource sharing, and collective outcomes to increase the resilience and sustainability of the community.

Keep these Tips and Tricks in mind while drafting your application for the Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability. You can also find additional resources on our [website](#), including webinar recordings and office hours. Please refer to the [application framework](#) and [application guidebook](#) while completing your application.