Student Tutorial: Stakeholder Engagement

Purpose and Definitions
Stakeholder engagement is a vital part of sustainability education and research; it can help you gain insight and practice skills like relationship building, interpersonal communication, recruitment, client/customer service during real-world learning experiences, and collect data, co-creating knowledge, and link knowledge to action during research (Talwar, Wiek & Robinson, 2011; Loorbach, 2010; van Kerkoff & Lebel, 2006, Brundiers & Wiek, 2013; Talbot, 2013).

Strictly speaking, the term “stakeholder” refer a person who contributes to a sustainability problem or solution options, or is impacted by one or both. In this guide, we use the term more loosely to refer to anyone from outside of your classroom who you interact with during real-world learning. This include experts who give guest lectures, community partners whom you collaborate with on a research project, participants in research you conduct, as well as people with a direct “stake” in a sustainability problem or solution.

Stakeholder engagement can be extractive, collaborative, or somewhere in between (Arnstein, 1969). In extractive engagements, stakeholders provide one-time, one-way information and their participation and control over a project is minimal. Classic examples include interviews and observations. In collaborative research, stakeholders actually co-create knowledge; they are included in decision making for each step of the research process (Talwar, Wiek, and Robinson, 2011; Lang, et al., 2012). Classic examples include walking audits and collaborative research projects.

The purpose of this document is to provide students with guidance on stakeholder engagement. It does not provide detailed training in any single stakeholder engagement method (e.g. surveys, walking audits, workshops). Instead, it provides a checklist that outlines important considerations in basic professionalism, safety, communication, data collection, and ethics, as well as a set of resources - people, materials, and research - that you can draw from in preparing for and conducting a variety of engagements.

Checklist
Ethics. You will be interacting with people who you might impact through your learning experience and have an ethical responsibility to them. You will want to consider how to minimize negative impact, maximize positive impact, and make sure that you have gone through appropriate certification procedures of conducting research on human subjects (including interviews and surveys).
• **Minimize Negative Impact.** Consider how the way you interact during an engagement, your observation or data collection, even just your presence might impact an event, a place, or people. Design and participate in engagements for low impact.

• **Maximize Positive Impact.** Whenever possible try to design collaborative engagements so that stakeholders sense of ownership, feel respected, and are able to shape the engagement to meet their objectives, too. Consider how to design engagements that contribute something both to you the student (information, insight, and other data) and to the stakeholder. Some examples might be arranging service learning that the need of a non-profit organization, catering food for an event from a local, sustainably-sourced restaurant. These are just examples, talk the stakeholders you engage about their and jointly decide if / how you can incorporate them into your learning experience.

• **Secure Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval if doing research.** If you are conducting research (collecting data from people that will be shared outside of the classroom), apply for an IRB certification. Make sure to secure signed consent to participate forms from all people who you collect data from. Make sure that they know that their participation is voluntary and they can withdraw their participation at any time, any questions they can contact, and how to contact your professor and the IRB office with questions.

**Professionalism and Comportment.** How you behave towards the people you engage with will influence how valued they feel, how seriously they take you, and how willing they will be to help you or participate in future collaborations.

• **Be aware of how people see you.** Remember that when you interact with people, they may see you as representative of your class, your school, and your university whether you see yourself in that way or not. Make sure to act accordingly.

• **Dress appropriately.** Think about appropriate attire (in some cases, e.g., if you do outside surveys, it might be helpful to wear ASU clothing, in others it might be more appropriate to wear business clothing). Carry your ASU ID card and have it readily available to show it to people or consider wearing it on a lanyard.

• **Carry relevant information.** Carry an introductory letter and the contact information of your professor to show people who question what you are doing. Be able to explain the purpose of your assignment.

• **Be Organized and Timely.** Contact people 2 weeks in advance to schedule a meeting or invite people to attend an event. Respond to emails and phone calls within 24 hours, even if it is just to say that you will get back to them to show
respect and keep the sender engaged. Keep track of information people give you, decisions made together, feedback shared so that you can easily reference it you don’t waste time and can maximize progress.

- **Be respectful and say thank you.** Plan ahead and value people’s time. Always thank participants in person after interacting with them and more formally in a written letter or email later.

- **Share results of collaboration and / or extend its life.** Submit a summary on SustainabilityConnect, and / or let us know about it! Consider collaborating with community partner to continue work in a subsequent semester, or connecting them with a colleague interested in RWLEs, or connecting them with an interested peer or professor.

**Safety.** Taking a few precautions will help your engagements go smoothly and safely. Communicating with instructors about engagement plans, safety concerns or issues will enable them to support you.

- **Plan your engagement and get approval for it.** This is both a safety precaution as well as a good communication practice. Always get approval from the course instructor for your engagements – email a plan that includes (1) logistics: date, time, location, and goal of engagement / what info do you want to collect; (2) information about participants: number of students involved, targeted stakeholder or stakeholder group; (3) design of the engagement: data collection method (e.g., observation, meeting, interview, survey, film); (4) resources needed (e.g., expenses for food, material).

- **Never go out or meet someone alone.** Always stay in groups of AT LEAST two people and carry a cell phone.

- **Walk away if you are uncomfortable.** If a situation is uncomfortable don’t hesitate to leave. You don’t need to finish the activity. Say thank you and leave.

- **Be prepared for the conditions.** Dress appropriately for the event and weather (i.e. closed toed shoes for walks, hikes, tours). Bring water and sunscreen if you will be outdoors.

- **Talk about safety issues.** Notify your professor of any safety concerns you have or issues you encounter during the experience.

**Communication.** How you communicate with peers, instructors, and community partners will influence how productive your collaborative project is. Communication happens through speaking, but also emailing, and creating, storing, and revisiting documents like proposals, meeting agendas that create a collective memory of plans and decisions.
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• **Coordinate engagement.** Communicate with course instructor and peers about the people who you want to engage so that you can coordinate calls, requests for information, interviews, etc. so that you don’t overwhelm or annoy the people with multiple requests or send the message that you, your class, your school, or your university is thoughtless or not well organized.

• **Communicate thoughtfully.** Make sure that the language you use to talk about your assignment, project, or research is accessible to the people you engage with. Don’t use acronyms or jargon (terms that only have meaning to a small group of people). Think about how you would tell a friend or a family member about your school work or research, then adjust depending on the person you are engaging. Think about how to address ‘stakeholders’ in an inclusive way. People often address them as “the stakeholders”/“our stakeholders” in the presence of them but using a term like “community partner” is less jargony and promotes a sense of collaboration.

• **Set Parameters.** Make sure to define everyone’s roles and responsibilities, the desired output from the engagement, and a rough timeline for collaboration.). Discuss other expectations such as how often students and community partners will interact. Remember, you cannot arrange an official partnership between an organization and ASU-SOS, but you can collaborate with them as a community partner.

**Methods**

• **Select appropriate methods.** There is a saying that goes, “If all you have is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail.” You should pick methods based on their ability to collect data that will help you answer your research question, not your knowledge of them. If you need help finding or learning about specific methods, tell instructors or peers about your research question and ask for their help in finding and learning an appropriate research method.

• **Practice.** Be familiar with your assignment objectives as well as the data collection methods and/ or instrument you are using. This might help your
interactions be more casual and thus your observations more fruitful. Practicing ahead of time can help.

Readings

Participatory Research


Client/Partner Relations


Stakeholder Engagement

Bibliography & Resources


