

31st Annual IAJBS World Forum 2026 Extended Abstract of Presentation Proposal:

Integral Ecology in Practice: Laudato Si' Goals, Sustainability Performance, and Institutional Outcomes

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Purpose and Context

Ten years after *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, colleges and universities, particularly mission-driven and Jesuit institutions, continue to face a central challenge: translating holistic commitments to integral ecology into measurable, accountable, and institution-wide practice. While the *Laudato Si' Action Platform* (LSAP) provides a normative framework organized around seven interrelated goals, sustainability reporting systems such as the *Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System* (AASHE STARS) translate environmental, social, and governance activities into standardized performance metrics. These two are already being conceptually mapped by some Jesuit institutions, for example, Loyola Marymount University (<https://mission.lmu.edu/csjcenter/lsap/goals/alignment/>).

Despite the growing prevalence of both frameworks, there is limited empirical evidence assessing whether institutional prioritization of specific *Laudato Si'* goals aligns with realized sustainability performance or produces meaningful institutional outcomes.

This project examines the extent to which institutional prioritization of one or more LSAP goals is associated with sustainability performance and downstream outcomes in higher education. By using sustainability reporting as an empirical lens, the study advances integral ecology scholarship by connecting normative mission commitments to observable organizational behavior, responding directly to *Laudato Si'*'s insistence that ecological conversion must be integrated, institutional, and sustained rather than merely aspirational.

Research Questions

The study addresses four interrelated research questions central to the Integral Ecology Special Sponsored Track. First, which institutional characteristics and organizational priorities are associated with adoption of sustainability reporting frameworks and explicit prioritization of one or more LSAP goals? Second, to what extent is emphasis on specific LSAP goals (such as *Ecological Education*, *Ecological Economics*, or *Response to the Cry of the Poor*) associated with higher performance in theoretically corresponding STARS categories and sub-scores? Third, following adoption and articulated goal prioritization, do institutions experience measurable changes in enrollment, donor engagement, financial structure, and sustainability-related academic offerings? Fourth, are these alignments between LSAP priorities, sustainability performance, and outcomes stronger or qualitatively different for mission-driven institutions, particularly members of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU), relative to peer institutions?

Conceptual Framework: Integral Ecology as Institutional Alignment

The project conceptualizes integral ecology as demonstrated alignment across three institutional domains. The first domain is mission and values, expressed through public articulation and prioritization of one or more LSAP goals reflecting commitments to ecological responsibility, justice, education, and stewardship. The second domain is governance and practice, reflected in sustainability reporting adoption and realized performance across STARS domains, including academics, engagement, operations, and planning and administration. The third domain is outcomes and justice, captured through observable effects on stakeholders, resources, and educational structures.

Public LSAP–STARS alignment frameworks such as that in LMU offer illustrative examples of how institutions conceptually link mission-level LSAP goals to operational sustainability categories (e.g., *Ecological Education* with STARS Academics indicators, *Ecological Economics* with Planning and Administration measures, and *Response to the Cry of the Poor* with justice-oriented engagement indicators). This study does not assume the validity of these mappings; instead, it treats them as empirically testable propositions.

Data Sources

The analysis integrates longitudinal institution-year data from U.S. colleges and universities, including public and private nonprofit institutions. Institutional prioritization of LSAP goals is captured through content-coding of publicly available materials such as mission statements, sustainability plans and framework mapping, and LSAP-related disclosures. Sustainability performance is measured using AASHE STARS participation and scores, including both overall ratings and category-level performance, supplemented by Second Nature climate commitment data. Institutional characteristics and outcomes, which include enrollment, academic offerings, governance structure, donor engagement, and financial indicators, are drawn from IPEDS and IRS Form 990 filings.

Analytic Strategy

Analytically, the project employs a multi-method research design that integrates conceptual innovation with design-based causal inference. Structured data integration aligns organizational priorities, sustainability performance, and institutional outcomes over time. Explanatory factor analysis is used to identify latent organizational priorities such as stewardship orientation, capacity building, donor focus, and financial stability that shape sustainability behavior.

The core methodological approach lies in goal-specific alignment tests, which examine whether prioritization of a given LSAP goal (for example, *Ecological Education*) is associated with stronger performance in conceptually corresponding STARS domains (such as Academics and Co-Curricular Engagement). A staggered difference-in-differences framework, complemented by event-study analyses, estimates post-adoption effects while accounting for selection bias and heterogeneous adoption timing. Heterogeneity analyses assess whether observed relationships differ for mission-driven institutions, particularly AJCU schools, relative to peer institutions.

Contributions and Significance

The project contributes to integral ecology scholarship by empirically evaluating whether holistic mission commitments are internally coherent and institutionally consequential. Rather than presuming alignment between values and practice, it identifies when, how, and under what conditions such alignment emerges.

Practically, the findings provide evidence-based guidance for institutional leaders seeking sustainability strategies that are credible, justice-centered, and scalable, clarifying when sustainability reporting serves as accountability rather than symbolic compliance.

Pedagogically, the research may inform experiential, data-driven learning aligned with the *Inspirational Paradigm*, enabling students to engage critically with real institutional trade-offs, governance decisions, and ecological commitments.

References

Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si': On care for our common home*. Vatican Press.

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. (2023). *Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System™ (STARS) technical manual*. <https://www.aashe.org>