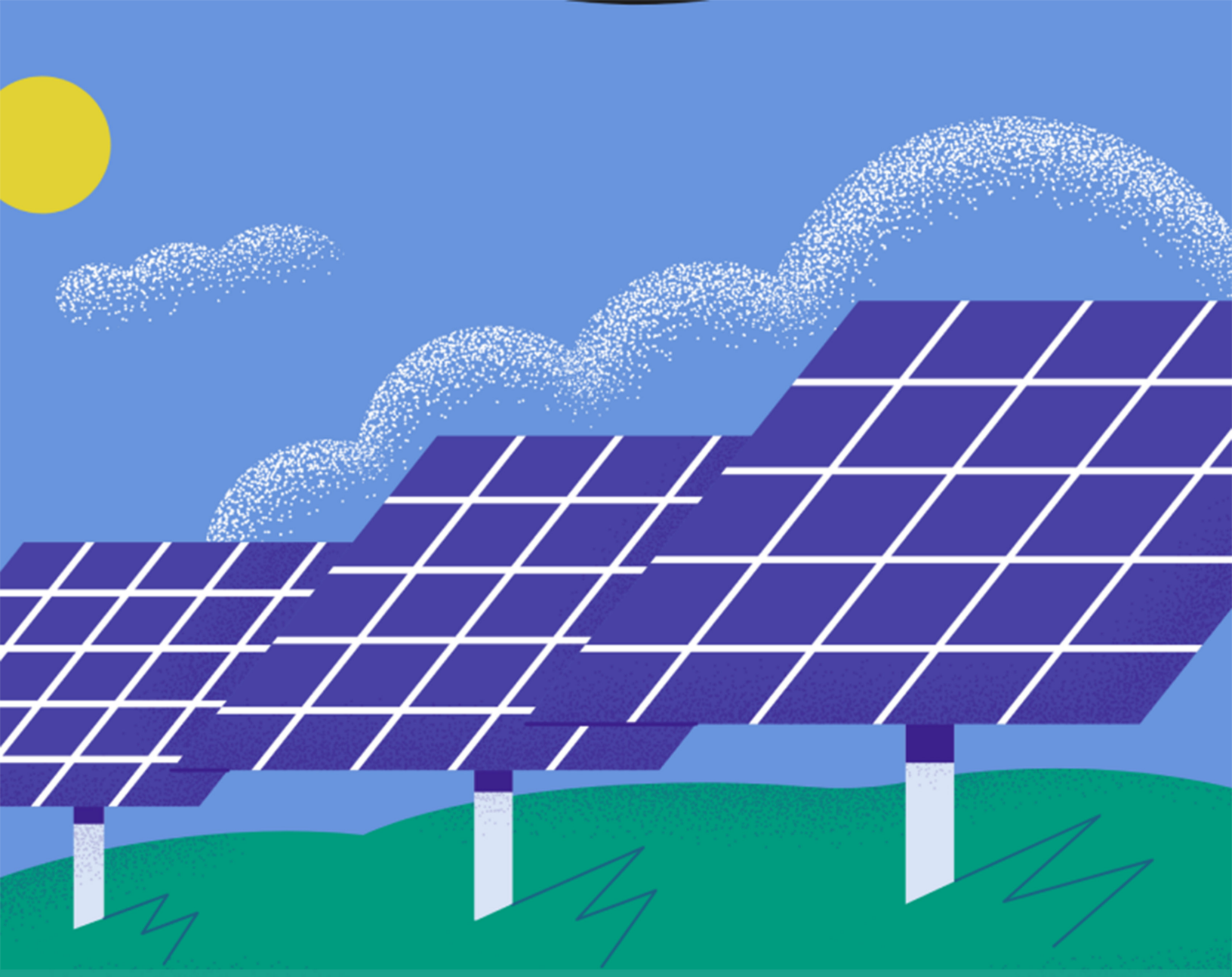

ENGAGED RESEARCH PROJECT

Amplifying Sustainable Procurement

at American University

ENGAGED RESEARCH PROJECT

Amplifying Sustainable Procurement at American University

A research project funded by Center for Environment, Community & Equity (CECE) at American University and Translating Research into Action Center at American University.

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Executive *Summary*

This report presents findings from a study of sustainable procurement at American University (AU), conducted in partnership with AU's Office of Sustainability and Office of Procurement and Contracts. The study drew on 47 stakeholder interviews, two on-campus workshops with 21 participants, and a cross-institutional session at the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) annual conference with 23 sustainability officers and university vendors.

Procurement decisions account for up to 96% of an organization's total climate emissions and carry profound social equity implications. Yet most institutions have not systematically embedded sustainability into their purchasing practices.

AU has earned national recognition for sustainability leadership achieving carbon neutrality in 2018 as the first U.S. university to do so. It holds an AASHE STARS Gold rating. Yet 79–90% of higher education's climate impact flows through procurement, and AU's procurement policies, last updated in 2014, provide minimal sustainability guidance. This gap between institutional values and operational practice is also the primary barrier preventing AU from achieving a Platinum STARS rating.

96%

Of an organization's total climate emissions can flow through procurement decisions.[1]

79–90%

Of higher education's climate impact occurs through procurement.

2018

AU became the first carbon-neutral university in the United States.

ES. 1 Key Barriers

Stakeholders identified six interconnected barriers: information and knowledge gaps (buyers lack trustworthy guidance on sustainable options and certifications); time and workload pressures (procurement is treated as a task to complete quickly, not a strategic decision); decentralized decision-making (fragmented authority produces inconsistent practices and missed economies of scale); cost perceptions (budget structures reward minimizing upfront costs, not lifecycle value); lack of institutional prioritization (no sustainability criteria in vendor selection, no training, no accountability); and limited coordination (no shared product catalog, vendor database, or mechanism to track procurement sustainability performance).

[1] CDP &BCG, 2024 | https://www.american.edu/about/sustainability/tracking-progress.cfm

ES. 2 Recommendations

Stakeholders proposed seven categories of action: centralizing sustainable vendor and product information; building buyer capacity through systematic training; embedding sustainability criteria in vendor selection, RFPs, and contracts; pursuing strategic vendor partnerships that leverage AU's purchasing power; selectively centralizing high-volume purchasing categories; expanding reuse and circular economy programs; and implementing measurement and accountability systems to track and reward sustainable procurement performance.

Centralize information | **Build buyer capacity** | **Embed in RFPs** | **Strategic partnerships**

Selective centralization | **Reuse & circularity** | **Measurement & accountability**

ES. 3 The Path Forward

These recommendations carry broad institutional legitimacy, having emerged from nearly 75 stakeholders across AU's procurement ecosystem and been validated against peer institution practices. The question is no longer whether AU should act, but how quickly. With leadership commitment and strategic investment in systems and capacity, AU can transform procurement from a sustainability gap into a sustainability strength and a model for peer institutions.

AN ENGAGED RESEARCH PROJECT

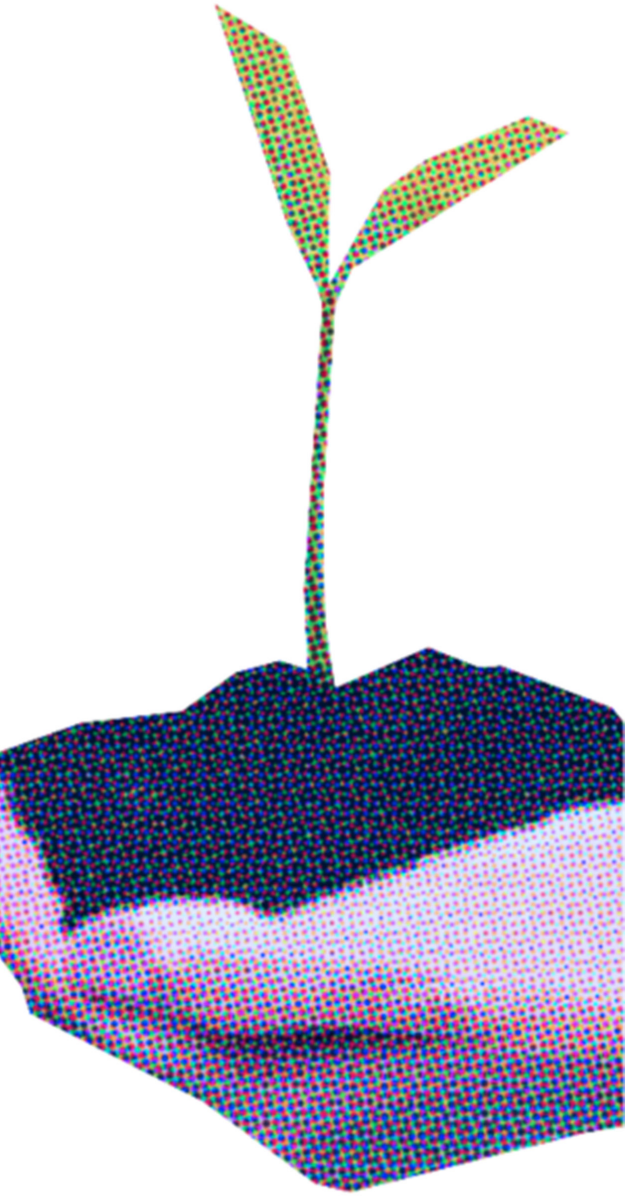
Nearly 75 stakeholders contributed to this study
— across AU, peer institutions, and vendors.

· 47 semi-structured interviews · 21 participants across two on-campus workshops
· 23 sustainability officers and vendors at an AASHE national session

Context

SECTION ONE

Introduction 01



Sustainable procurement is an impactful-yet-underutilized lever for organizations to advance environmental and social goals. Procurement decisions, such as what to source, from where, and from whom, account for up to 96% of organizations' total climate emissions (CDP & BCG, 2024) and are linked to significant social disparities globally. Despite this outsized impact, most organizations have not adopted sustainable procurement practices (United Nations, 2022), and among those that have, 97% report facing significant implementation obstacles (Procura, 2021).

American University (AU) stands at a critical juncture. While it achieved carbon neutrality in 2018, the first university in the nation to do so, sustainability opportunities remain, particularly in the area of procurement. AU's current Procurement and Contracts Policy and Guidelines, last updated in 2014, provide limited reference to sustainability, revealing an opportunity to better align the university's operational practices with its forward-facing sustainability messaging.

This report presents findings from a research translation project conducted in collaboration with AU's Office of Sustainability and its Procurement and Contracts Office. Through 47 stakeholder interviews, workshops and ideation sessions involving 21 people, we examined AU's procurement landscape to identify barriers to sustainable procurement and develop actionable recommendations for advancing the university's sustainability goals.

Outside AU, we engaged 23 individuals affiliated with other universities to learn how our findings compared with activities happening at their organizations and to learn how they were developing goals to meet their sustainable procurement goals.

The insights presented here are designed not only to guide AU's procurement system, but also to serve as a model for other organizations, especially institutions of higher education seeking to align their operational practices with their sustainability commitments. By transforming procurement from a transactional function into a strategic sustainability tool, organizations can amplify their sustainability impact far beyond campus boundaries.

SECTION TWO

Background 02

2.1 Understanding Sustainable Procurement

Sustainable procurement is defined as "the pursuit of sustainable development objectives through the purchasing and supply process" and is "consistent with the principles of sustainable development, such as ensuring a strong, healthy and just society, living within environmental limits, and promoting good governance" (Walker and Brammer, 2009: 128). Sustainable procurement introduces environmental and social criteria into the procurement process, offering enormous promise to address global sustainability concerns (Behravesh, et al., 2022).

Organizations' procurement accounts for approximately 38% of US GDP (Hafsa, et al., 2021). Beyond financial scale, procurement decisions have profound environmental and social impacts. Across supply chains, more than 21 million individuals are producing products under forced or unfair labor conditions (United Nations, 2022). Even in countries with strong labor protections, procurement disparities affect both equity and economic development. In the United States, minority- and women-owned small businesses receive only 15% of federal contracts despite comprising 40% of eligible firms (The White House, 2021).

These significant environmental and social impacts are why the United Nations and other international governance bodies identify sustainable procurement as a vital sustainable development solution. Yet adoption remains low (Darnall et al., 2017), and implementation challenges persist even among committed organizations (Procura, 2021).

38%

Share of US GDP represented by organizational procurement.

21M+

People producing products under forced or unfair labor conditions globally.

15 / 40

Minority- and women-owned businesses receive 15% of federal contracts despite being 40% of eligible firms.

FIGURE 01 · PROCUREMENT

Procurement sustainability problems

01

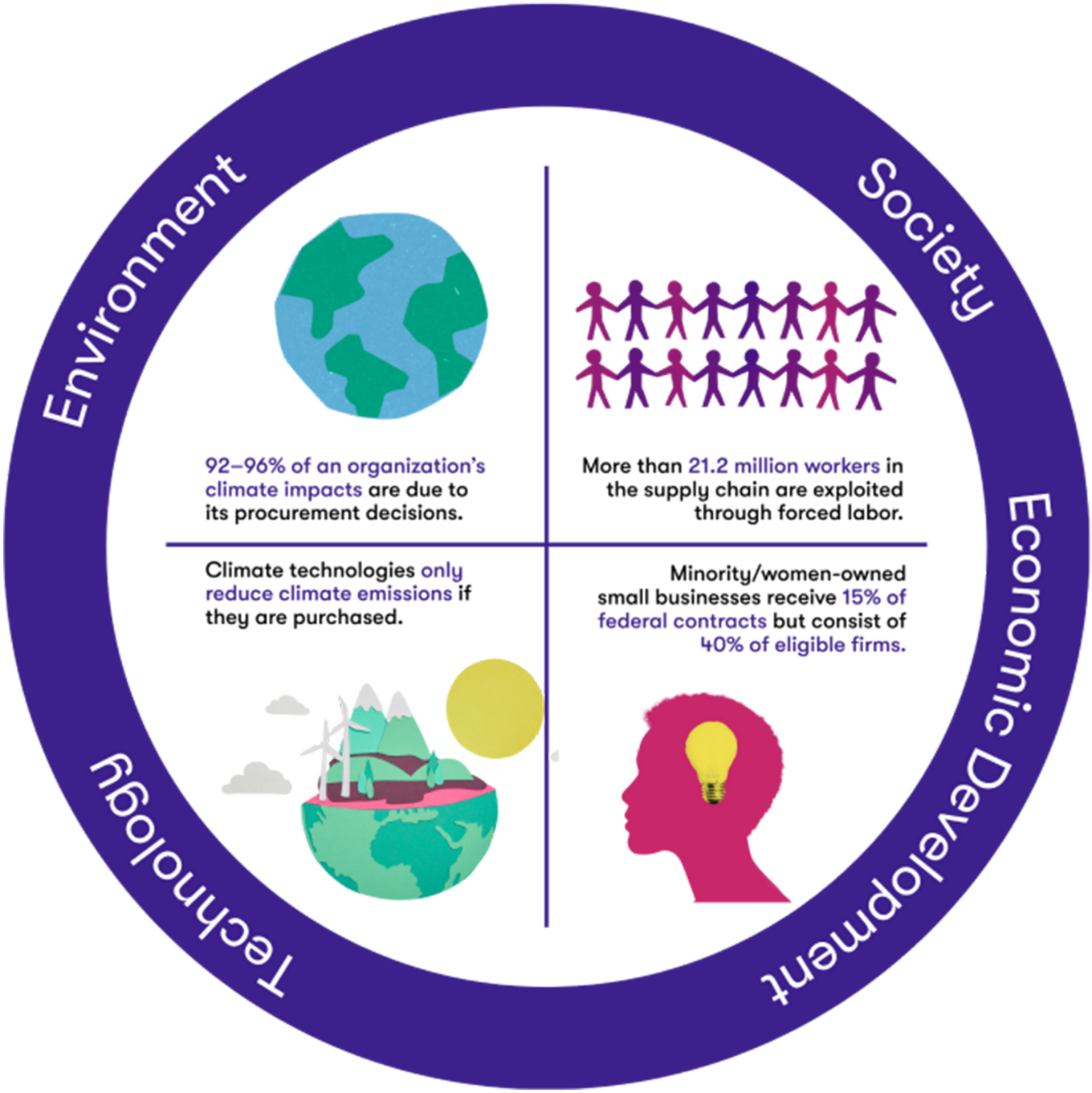


FIGURE 1 The four impact pillars of sustainable procurement.

2.2 The American University Context & Opportunity

American University has established itself as a national leader in sustainability in higher education. In 2018, AU became the first carbon-neutral university[2] in the United States—a milestone demonstrating a deep and sustained commitment to environmental stewardship.

The university also earned a Gold rating through the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education's (AASHE's) Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS), a benchmarking framework that evaluates sustainability performance across academics, operations, governance, and community engagement. These achievements reflect years of strategic planning, targeted infrastructure investments, and sustained engagement by AU students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Together, these efforts have embedded sustainability into the institution's core operations and culture.

However, these accolades tell only part of the story. Between 79 - 90% of higher education's climate impact occurs through its procurement decisions (Kiehle, et al., 2023; Valls-Val & Bovea, 2021). While AU has made significant strides in reducing direct emissions from campus operations, the university's procurement processes have not evolved at the same pace as its broader sustainability commitments, which is a significant factor preventing the university from achieving a Platinum STARS rating (Litke, 2025).

Current procurement policies at AU include minimal sustainability provisions. The university's Procurement and Contracts Policy and Guidelines do not systematically integrate environmental or social criteria into vendor selection, product specifications, or contract requirements (see AU Procurement Policy, Appendix 1). This gap creates a tension between AU's sustainability messaging and its operational reality, where purchasing decisions are made primarily on the basis of cost, convenience, and compliance with basic procurement regulations.

This disconnect is not unique to AU. It reflects broader challenges that organizations face when attempting to embed sustainability into complex operational systems. Procurement at universities is particularly challenging due to decentralized decision-making, diverse stakeholder needs, limited resources, and competing priorities. Yet this very complexity also creates an opportunity. By systematically integrating sustainability into procurement, AU can leverage one of its most powerful tools for advancing environmental and social goals. This raises a critical question: how can AU realize this potential in practice?

[2] https://www.american.edu/about/sustainability/tracking-progress.cfm

SECTION THREE

Research *Question* 03

This research addresses the central question:

How can American University bolster its positive sustainable procurement impact?

More specifically, we sought to understand:

01 How do different stakeholders experience and influence the procurement process?

02 What are the current barriers preventing more sustainable procurement practices at AU?

03 What systemic changes would enable AU to embed sustainability more deeply into procurement decisions?

04 What actionable recommendations can help AU align its procurement practices with its sustainability commitments?

How We Listened to AU's Procurement Ecosystem

SECTION FOUR

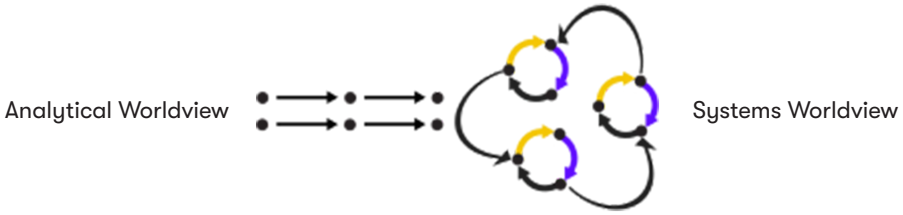
Method

04

To answer these questions we collaborated with key stakeholders across campus, including Megan Litke, Director of the Office of Sustainability, and Eleni Karistinos, Director of Procurement.

Co-production methodology: Innovation Compass

We employed a participatory, co-creation methodology aligned with the Innovation Compass framework (Sharma, Greco, Grewatsch, & Bansal, 2022)[3]. The Innovation Compass approach emphasizes bringing together diverse perspectives to collaboratively define problems, generate awareness, develop ideas, and identify actionable solutions. This methodology was particularly appropriate for sustainable procurement research, where implementation barriers are often systemic and solutions require buy-in from multiple stakeholders.



4.1 Research Design and Partnership Approach

The research involved four steps between spring 2025 to winter 2026:

STEP 01 · FEB–APR 2025

Defining the Problem

Initial meetings with project partners helped refine the problem definition. These sessions provided crucial details about AU's procurement structure, challenges, and opportunities.

STEP 02 · FEB–NOV 2025

Building Awareness

Most of the data collection occurred during this phase through stakeholder interviews and other data gathering.

STEP 03 · SEP 2025–FEB 2026

Generating Ideas

Workshop sessions explored systems maps, identified interconnections, and co-created ideas for advancing sustainable procurement at AU.

STEP 04 · NOV 2025–FEB 2026

Validation of the Ideas

During this time we presented our findings in multiple venues to validate the ideas and enhance the relevance and validity of our findings. The most notable was a presentation at an AASHE conference session, which included sustainability officers in local higher education institutions and university vendors that were increasing their focus on sustainable goods and services.

[3] https://innovationnorth.ca/the-compass/

4.2 Data Collection

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

After defining our problem (Step 1), we worked with our project partners in the Office of Sustainability and the Office of Procurement and Contracts to identify key stakeholders across the AU organization who we should interview (Step 2), as denoted in Figure 2. To ensure that we covered a diverse sample, we used AU's organizational chart as a reference. Ensuring a diverse stakeholder sample was essential for understanding procurement from multiple perspectives and identifying systemic barriers that cross organizational boundaries.

We conducted 47 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in or affected by AU's procurement process, such as procurement officers and staff from the Procurement Office; departmental buyers across various academic and administrative units; unit leadership who authorize purchases; staff from the Office of Sustainability; vendors and suppliers who work with AU; and other stakeholders with knowledge of procurement systems. Interviews took place between March and November 2025.

Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and covered topics including: current procurement processes and decision-making structures, barriers to considering sustainability in procurement decisions, information needs and access to sustainability data, vendor relationships and communication, organizational culture and incentives around procurement, and ideas for improving sustainable procurement practices. We created six different versions of the interview protocol (see Appendix 2), depending on the interviewee's role.

OTHER DATA

Other relevant data that we collected and analyzed included:

- AU's current Procurement and Contracts Policy and Guidelines
- AU sustainability reports and STARS submissions
- Procurement policies from peer institutions
- Industry best practices and frameworks for sustainable procurement

These archival data provided context for understanding AU's current system of procurement, benchmarking against peer institutions, and identifying proven approaches to sustainable procurement in higher education.

FIGURES AHEAD

Figure 2 on the following page maps the organizational reach of the interview sample. **Figure 2B** summarizes the 47 interviews by category — Unit, Support Services, Executive Office, Procurement & Contracts, and Vendors.

FIGURE 02 · DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

02

Interview reach across AU's organization

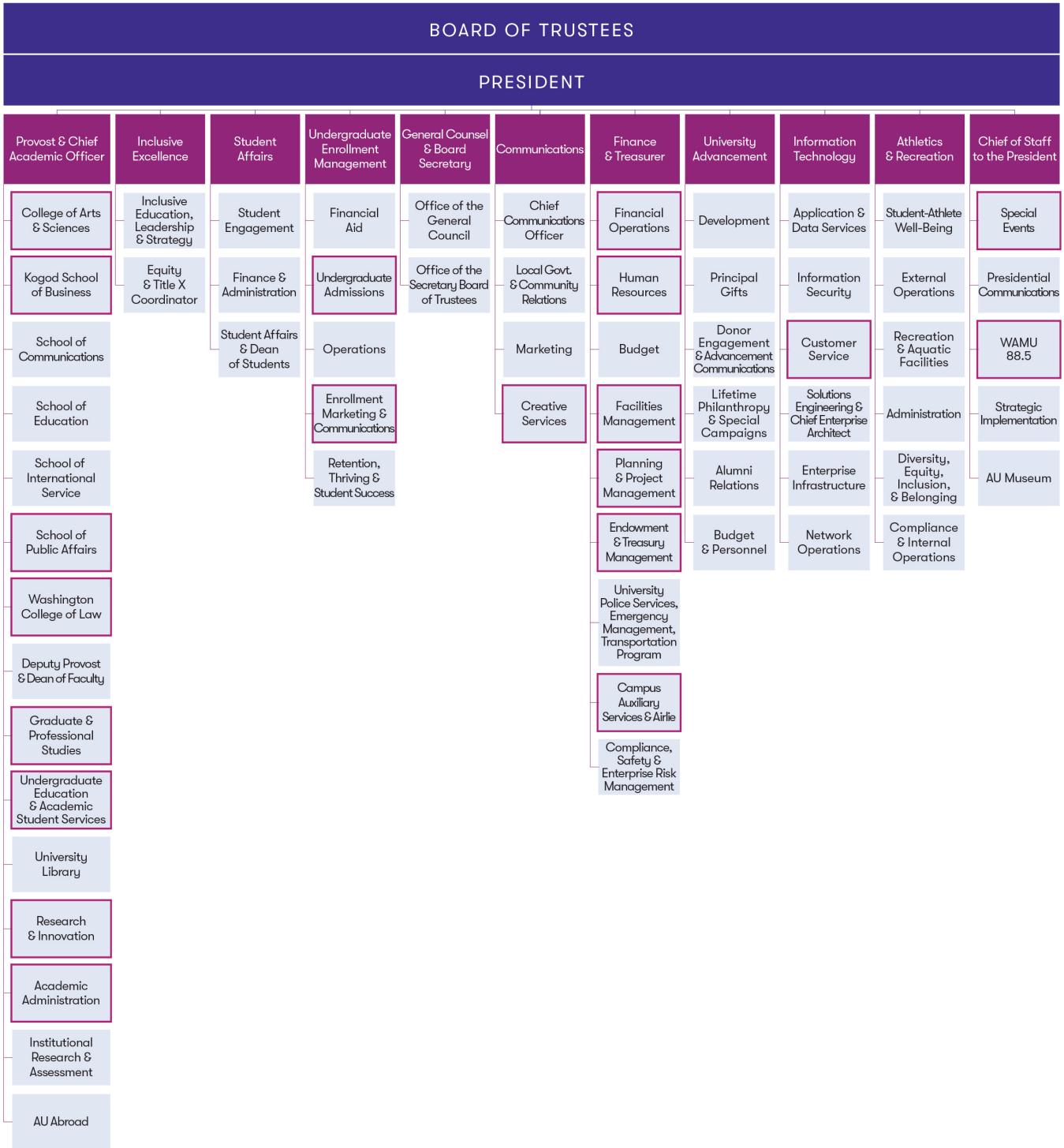


FIGURE 2 Data Collection Strategy — Organizational reach of the interview sample across AU. Units highlighted in magenta indicate where stakeholder interviews took place.

2B Breakdown of Interview Sample

The 47 interviews spanned five stakeholder categories — 13 in academic/administrative units, 20 in support services, 6 in the executive office, 4 in procurement & contracts, and 4 vendors.

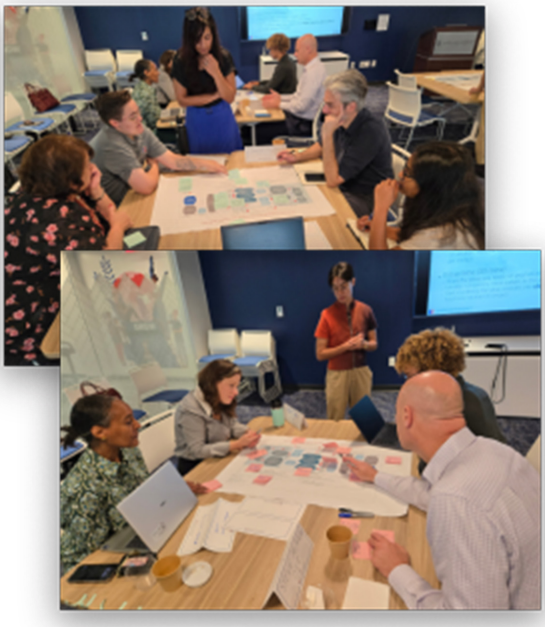
Unit	Support Services	Executive Office	Procurement & Contracts	Vendors
Leadership: AVP/VP — 0	**Leadership:** AVP/VP — 4	**Leadership:** AVP/VP — 3	**Leadership:** AVP/VP — 2	**Preferred:** 2
Purchase Approver: Director, Sr. Dir. — 6	**Purchase Approver:** Director, Sr. Dir. — 11	**Purchase Approver:** Director, Sr. Dir. — 3	**P&C Approver:** Director — 1	**Nonpreferred:** 1
Buyer: Manager, Admin. — 7	**Buyer:** Manager, Admin. — 5	**Buyer:** Manager — 0	**Buyer, P&C Mgr:** Admin — 1	**Affiliates:** DC Coalition — 1
13	20	6	4	4

*Some individuals were interviewed more than once.

FIGURE 2B Data Collection — Breakdown by stakeholder category.

4.3 Workshops and Systems Mapping

We hosted two workshops with 21 stakeholders in September 2025 to share findings from interviews, present systems maps of AU's procurement process, and collaboratively generate ideas for advancing sustainable procurement.



The systems mapping exercise was particularly valuable. Workshop participants discussed these maps, validated findings, identified additional interconnections, and brainstormed potential ideas to address the barriers. This participatory analysis was crucial for ensuring that recommendations would address root causes rather than symptoms. Throughout the process, we maintained close collaboration with AU's Office of Sustainability and Procurement Office to validate findings, test interpretations, and ensure participants' recommendations were grounded in AU's organizational realities.

To assess whether our findings and recommended solutions might apply beyond AU, in October 2025, we conducted a similar workshop at AASHE's annual conference. AASHE is a membership-based organization that supports colleges and universities in advancing sustainability through resources, professional development, and programs.

The workshop was attended by 23 sustainability officers and university vendors who offered feedback on the validity of our findings, thus lending insight into the generalizability of our work. This feedback helped us assess whether our findings, in general, were unique to AU or similar to sustainable procurement experiences at other universities

AASHE CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL VALIDATION

23 sustainability officers and university vendors joined the AASHE session in October 2025. Their feedback helped assess whether our findings were unique to AU or similar to experiences at other universities.

The Landscape & Barriers

SECTION FIVE

Results

05

Our research reveals a complex procurement landscape at AU that is similar to what is seen at other universities, characterized by both significant barriers to sustainable procurement and promising opportunities for transformation.

We organize the findings around three key areas: AU's current procurement process, barriers to sustainable procurement, and stakeholder-generated ideas for advancing sustainability through procurement.

5.1 Understanding AU's Procurement Landscape

Through stakeholder interviews and process mapping, we identified a procurement system that can be understood by three main phases (see Figure 3 on the following page). While sustainability is not currently an explicit criterion in these phases, our analysis reveals opportunities to integrate sustainability considerations at each stage.

AU's leadership, which sets the university's procurement policy, influences all three phases of procurement at AU and thus influences the entire procurement system. AU's Finance and Treasurer Department takes the primary role for defining university's purchasing policies. This department also offers procurement rules and guidelines that academic units and other departments must follow. This guidance emphasizes cost, which can constrain whether and how sustainability is considered. Additionally, senior leadership, such as the President and Provost's office, sets the tone for how sustainability is prioritized in organizational practices and routines.

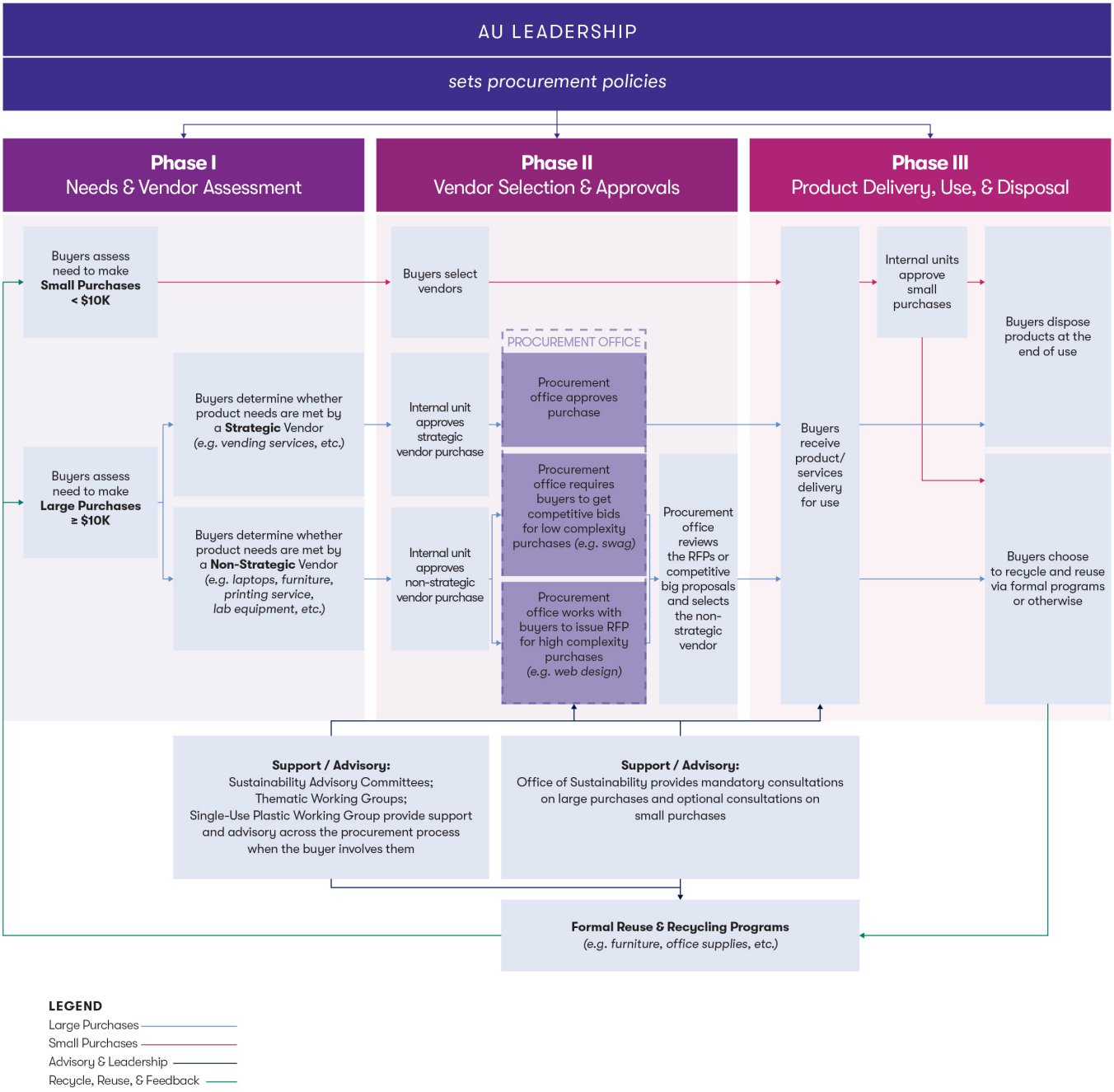
WHAT YOU'LL SEE NEXT

Figure 3 traces AU's procurement process through its three phases — and Figure 4 overlays the barriers at each stage.

FIGURE 03 · PROCUREMENT PROCESS

03

AU's procurement process across three phases



PHASE 01 Needs Assessment and Vendor Selection

The procurement process begins when a buyer identifies a need. During Phase 1, a critical distinction is made based on purchase size: small purchases (under $10,000) and large purchases ($10,000 or above). This threshold determines the level of oversight, approval requirements, and documentation needed.

During the vendor selection phase, buyers distinguish between strategic and non-strategic vendors. Strategic vendors are those with whom AU has established long-term partnerships. These vendors provide competitive advantages, help develop innovative solutions to university-specific needs, and can support AU in achieving institutional goals, including sustainability goals like carbon neutrality. The procurement office carefully cultivates and maintains strategic vendor relationships over time.

Non-strategic vendor relationships, in contrast, are more transactional and short-term, often selected to meet immediate and unique needs. Because AU does not have formal relationships with these vendors, buyers have more flexibility to select one vendor over another.

PHASE 02 Approvals and Stakeholder Input

The second phase involves both internal unit approvals and input from central offices, including the Procurement Office and advisory offices such as the Office of Sustainability.

The level of oversight and support varies dramatically between small and large purchases. For small purchases (under $10,000), individual buyers select vendors and manage products with minimal involvement from the central Procurement Office. This independence can be efficient but also means sustainability considerations depend entirely on individual buyer awareness and motivation.

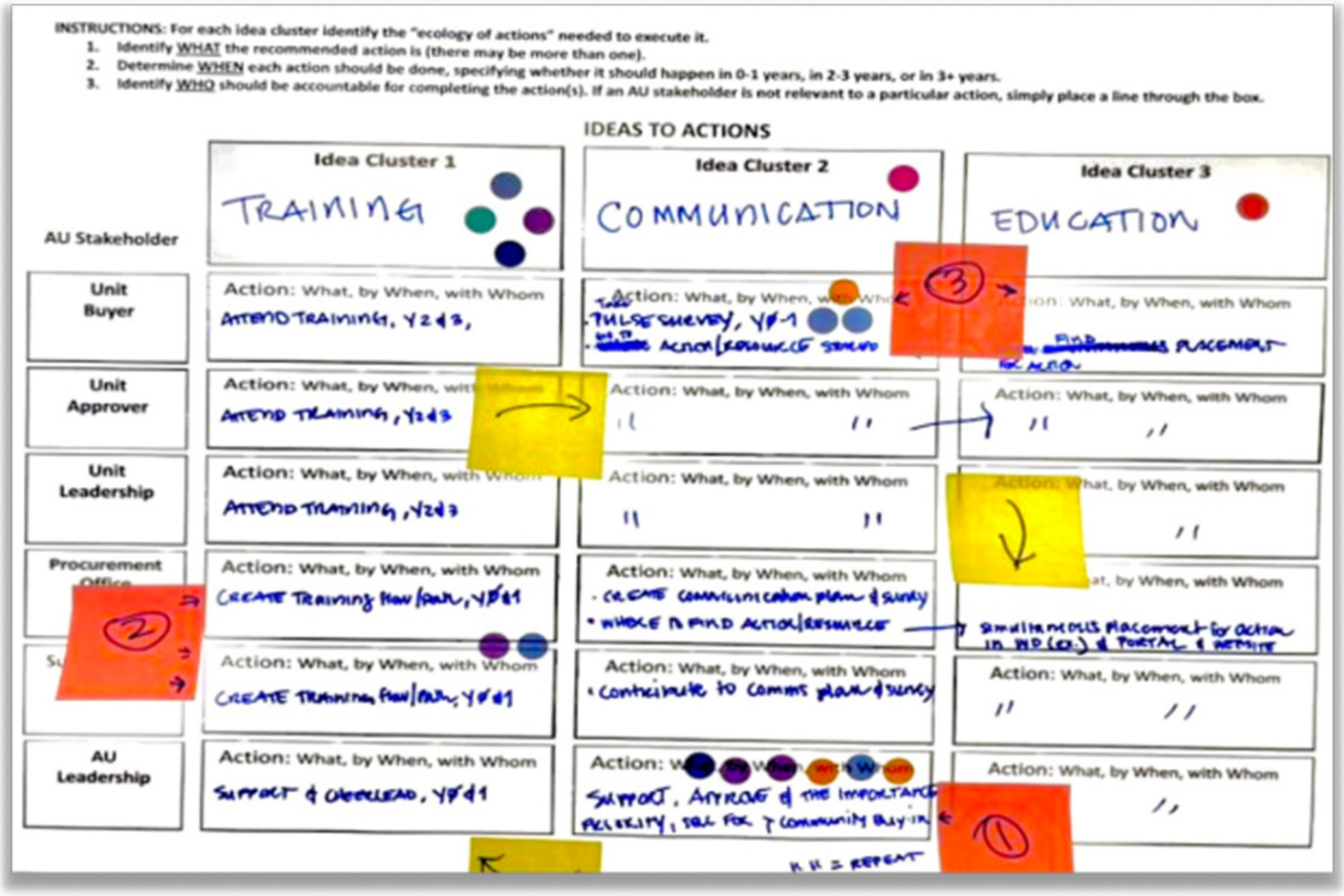
Large purchases ($10,000 or above) involve more stakeholders and formal processes, including the Procurement Office and potentially the Office of Sustainability. This increased oversight creates more opportunities to integrate sustainability criteria, but it also adds complexity and time to the procurement process.

Through partnerships with procurement staff, the Office of Sustainability helps translate sustainability goals into actionable procurement language, reviews sustainability sections in RFPs, and supports data collection for emissions reporting and institutional assessments.

A key tool in this work is the STARS rating system that measures performance across areas including procurement. The Office of Sustainability uses STARS both to collect procurement-related data and to justify the inclusion of sustainability criteria in Requests for Proposals (RFPs). By framing sustainability requirements as part of how AU is evaluated against peer institutions, the office creates institutional incentives for considering environmental and social factors in procurement decisions. However, the Office's influence is limited by AU's decentralized purchasing structure and inconsistent application of procurement standards across units.

PHASE 03 Product Delivery, Use, and Disposal

During the use phase, buyers are responsible for product stewardship. At end-of-life, buyers determine whether products can be reused, should be disposed of, or qualify for AU's existing reuse and recycling programs, such as the surplus furniture program. The decision to reuse the product directly impacts the first phase of needs assessment.



5.2 Barriers to Sustainable Procurement

Across all procurement phases, stakeholders identified numerous barriers that prevent more sustainable procurement practices at AU. These barriers operate at multiple levels: individual, organizational, and systemic, and often reinforce one another (see Figure 4).

BARRIER 01

Information & knowledge gaps

Buyers lack trustworthy guidance on sustainable options, certifications, and how to evaluate vendor claims.

BARRIER 02

Time & workload pressures

Procurement is treated as a task to complete quickly, not a strategic decision.

BARRIER 03

Decentralized decision-making

Fragmented authority produces inconsistent practices and missed economies of scale.

BARRIER 04

Cost perceptions

Budget structures reward minimizing upfront costs rather than optimizing lifecycle value.

BARRIER 05

Lack of institutional priority

No sustainability criteria in vendor selection, no training, no accountability.

BARRIER 06

Limited coordination

No shared catalog, vendor database, or mechanism to track performance.

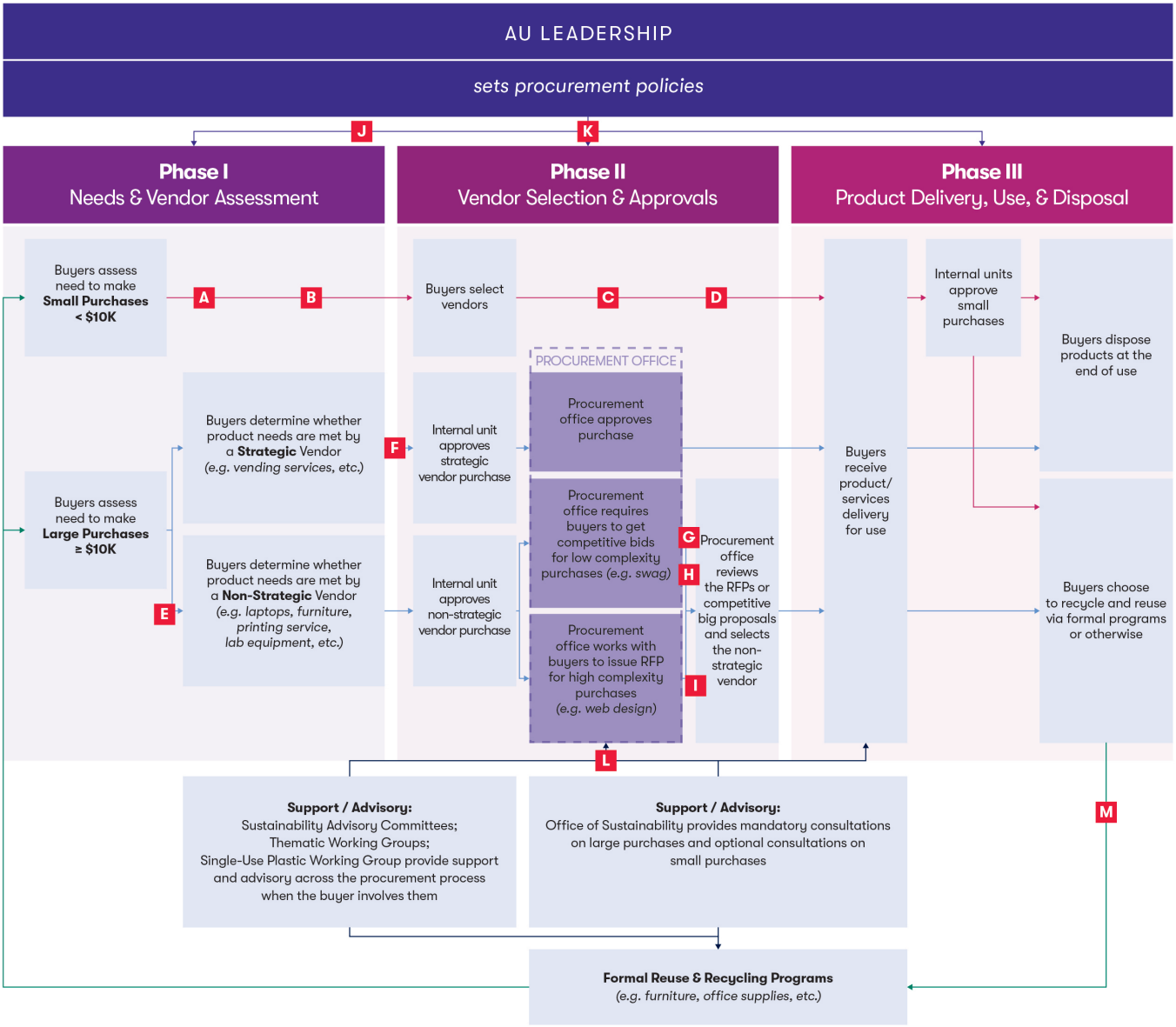
These six barriers, mapped onto the procurement process in Figure 4, create compounding friction.

The pages that follow unpack each in turn — with voices from the 47 interviews illustrating how these barriers show up in day-to-day practice.

FIGURE 04 · BARRIERS ON THE PROCESS

04

Where barriers show up across the three phases



LEGEND

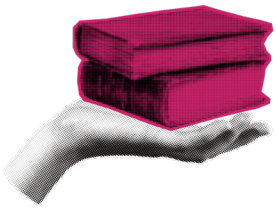
- Large Purchases
- Small Purchases
- Advisory & Leadership
- Recycle, Reuse, & Feedback
- Barriers

A	Time constraints
B	Lack of individual buyer awareness
C	Decentralized procurement: NO economics of scale, NO cross-unit learning
D	Decentralized procurement: Different units follow different process for procurement in practice
E	Decentralized procurement: Limited economics scale
F	Strategic vendors often not chosen by procurement based on sustainability criteria
G	Time constraints
H	NO process/limited buyer awareness to consider sustainable criteria
I	Not all RFPs mention product/service sustainability criteria
J	Budget related constraints
K	Sustainable procurement not communicated as a priority
L	Limited influence of Support / Advisory on procurement process
M	Siloes between units: Lack of opportunity to recycle and reuse

BARRIER 01

Information and Knowledge Gaps

A pervasive challenge is the lack of readily available, trustworthy information about sustainable alternatives. Buyers reported difficulty answering basic questions: *Which products are more sustainable? How do I evaluate competing sustainability claims? What certifications or standards should I look for? Where can I find sustainable vendors?*



As one vice president-level interviewee put it:

> *I don't have the education to tell an end user, 'Oh, you're buying this computer. Why don't you consider buying this, which is more eco-friendly or something?' I don't have the— I don't have the knowledge.*
>
> **VICE PRESIDENT · AU INTERVIEW**

This information deficit is compounded by the proliferation of greenwashing, where vendors make misleading or unsubstantiated environmental claims about their products, services, and operations. Without clear guidance or standardized criteria, buyers struggle to distinguish genuine sustainability attributes from marketing rhetoric. "Because Amazon can put a little leaf next to its product," a manager explained, "But we don't know if somebody internal to AU has vetted some of that." The cognitive burden of researching and evaluating sustainability information for every purchase is prohibitively high, particularly for buyers with limited time and expertise in sustainability.

For instance, related to small purchasing, vendor selection flexibility presents an opportunity to explicitly consider sustainability attributes of products and services when choosing among non-strategic vendors. However, in practice, most buyers do not systematically incorporate sustainability criteria during this phase. For example, a director described knowledge gaps in the vendor selection process: "I think some of it may be not having the knowledge. Who? How do you know who's a minority vendor in your area, or what that minority vendor offers?"

Lack of information about sustainable alternatives and uncertainty about how to evaluate sustainability claims, coupled with time constraints (see the next section), all contribute to sustainability remaining an afterthought rather than a central consideration. Some buyers may contact the Office of Sustainability for their inputs on the sustainability performance of product/service options. However, the Office of Sustainability influences procurement primarily through collaboration, technical guidance, and external accountability frameworks rather than by establishing formal rules.

Another example relates to the fact that a buyer's decision to reuse a product at the end of its product life may directly affect the first phase of needs assessment for another buyer. That is, the availability of surplus programs for used (or unused) purchased items can help decrease overall purchases. While AU has an "'office supplies swap"' program, knowledge of this program varies, and so most buyers default to disposal, thus diminishing the overall efficacy of the program and increasing purchasing costs.

BARRIER 02

Time Constraints and Workload Pressures

Buyers consistently cited time pressure as a major sustainable procurement barrier.

For example, a manager we spoke with explained:

> *I don't think people are making the extra effort just because I feel like a lot of processes are already kind of complicated. And so, you're trying to just get something done in the shortest amount of time.*
>
> **MANAGER · AU INTERVIEW**

Procurement is often treated as an administrative task to be completed quickly rather than a strategic decision requiring careful consideration. When facing urgent needs or tight deadlines, buyers default to familiar vendors and standard products rather than investing time to explore sustainable alternatives.

The perception that sustainable procurement requires extra effort, such as additional research, new vendor relationships, and unfamiliar approval processes, creates a disincentive when buyers are already managing heavy workloads. Even buyers and unit leaders who care about sustainability reported that time constraints often force them to prioritize speed and convenience over environmental considerations.

BARRIER 03

Decentralized Decision-Making

AU's decentralized procurement structure distributes purchasing authority across numerous departments and individuals. While this autonomy can allow units to respond quickly to local needs, it also produces uneven attention to sustainability in purchasing decisions.

As a manager put it:

> *I wish [AU Procurement] played a bigger role, just because it's so decentralized. There are so many purchasing decisions that don't go through procurement. So I think for a lot of bigger things, there is an opportunity there, to do a better job of capturing information that would allow us to weigh the things I just talked about environmental and social aspects of whatever we're buying in that process.*
>
> **MANAGER · AU INTERVIEW**

This fragmented setting also creates practical inefficiencies. Individual buyers often must research sustainable options on their own, duplicating effort across the institution. At the same time, decentralization limits economies of scale. When departments purchase independently, the university misses opportunities to consolidate purchasing and negotiate sustainability requirements with vendors. Decentralization also makes it difficult to develop standardized catalogs of sustainable products that could benefit the entire university.

BARRIER 04

Cost Perceptions and Budget Constraints

A frequently cited barrier is the perception that sustainable products cost more. While this is sometimes true, stakeholders noted that cost comparisons are often incomplete. Initial purchase price may be higher for sustainable options, but total cost of ownership, including durability, energy efficiency, disposal costs, and avoided environmental damages, may favor sustainable choices.

However, unit budget structures typically reward minimizing upfront costs rather than optimizing lifecycle value.

> *We all know there's budget constraints right? And that creates some tension where it's like, okay, I need to throw this event but now I need to do it for half the price, that means I'm buying garbage and instead of saying, I have the ability to just rethink this event.*
>
> **ANALYST · AU INTERVIEW**

Buyers are rarely incentivized or empowered to make purchasing decisions based on long-term cost-effectiveness if it means exceeding immediate budget allocations.

BARRIER 05

Lack of Institutional Prioritization and Incentives

Despite AU's commitment to sustainability, procurement stakeholders reported that university leadership has not prioritized sustainability in procurement policies, communication, budgets, performance metrics, or buyer evaluations.

One interviewee asked:

> *I think that there is a need for leadership to do some soul searching on, is [sustainability] integral to who we are? Or is it just something that we like to have the sticker for, and, you know, get to pat ourselves on the back for?*
>
> **STAKEHOLDER · AU INTERVIEW**

This lack of institutional prioritization manifests in several ways: sustainability criteria are optional or absent in vendor selection processes; there is no training on sustainable procurement; and there are no mechanisms to recognize or reward sustainable purchasing behaviors. At the core, this setting reflects a lack of leadership messaging about the importance of sustainable procurement. Without this messaging buyers face no incentives (or disincentives) around the sustainability of their purchasing decisions. So, it is unsurprising that sustainability remains peripheral. As one stakeholder noted, "If it's not required and no one is measuring it, it won't consistently happen."

BARRIER 06

Limited Coordination and Communication

Stakeholders identified weak communication and coordination across departments as barriers to both learning and implementation. Buyers who successfully identify sustainable vendors or products rarely share this knowledge with colleagues in other units. Departments may unknowingly purchase similar items from different vendors, missing opportunities to consolidate purchases and negotiate sustainability requirements.

Many of these barriers are similar to what sustainability staff report experiencing at other universities. The wordcloud below (Figure 5) represents responses from 24 AASHE workshop participants. While responses varied, the predominant barrier related to perceptions of cost and budget constraints.

One director we interviewed shared,

> *My dream in general—with consumables—is for there to be a university-wide inventory. There's a ton of waste from people purchasing things they think they need, only to find they're not the right items. Then they have leftovers.*
>
> **STAKEHOLDER · AU INTERVIEW**

The absence of a centralized sustainable product catalog or database means that each buyer must independently discover sustainable options. Additionally, there is no systematic way for the university to track sustainability performance across procurement activities, making it difficult to measure progress, identify best practices, or demonstrate impact.

Many of these barriers are similar to what sustainability staff report experiencing at other universities, and who attended our AASHE workshop. The word cloud in Figure 5, represents responses to a question which asked, "Describe the sustainable procurement barriers at your institution using 1-2 key words." While responses varied, the predominant barrier related to perceptions of cost and budget constraints.

FIGURE 5 Sustainable procurement barriers at other institutions (n=24).

Ideas & Path Forward

SECTION SIX

Solutions for *Advancement* 06

Through our workshops and interviews, stakeholders generated numerous ideas for overcoming barriers and advancing sustainable procurement at AU. These recommendations emerged from those closest to procurement processes and reflect both aspirational visions and practical solutions.

01 Centralized Information and Resources

The decision to reuse the product directly impacts the first phase of needs assessment.

- A curated database of sustainable vendors organized by product category
- A sustainable product catalog with commonly purchased items that meet sustainability standards
- Clear guidelines on sustainability criteria, certifications, and standards to look for
- Decision-making tools or frameworks to help buyers evaluate sustainability tradeoffs
- Clearly designated information about the availability of used products available for use by others.

These centralized resources would dramatically reduce the time and expertise required for individual buyers to identify sustainable options. By creating a "sustainable procurement toolkit," AU could democratize access to sustainability information and make sustainable purchasing the path of least resistance.

02 Training and Capacity Building

Stakeholders emphasized the need for systematic training to build procurement capacity around sustainability. Recommended training topics included:

- Introduction to sustainable procurement principles and AU's sustainability goals
- How to use sustainable procurement tools and databases
- Evaluating environmental and social claims from vendors
- Lifecycle cost analysis and total cost of ownership
- Best practices in sustainable procurement from peer institutions

Training should be tailored to different audiences: introductory sessions for all buyers, deeper dives for procurement professionals, and specialized training for specific product categories (e.g., IT equipment, food services, facilities supplies).

03 Embedding Sustainability in Procurement Processes

Rather than treating sustainability as an optional add-on, stakeholders recommended systematically embedding sustainability criteria throughout procurement processes:

- Include sustainability as a weighted criterion in vendor selection and RFPs
- Develop standardized sustainability clauses or checklists for contracts
- Require sustainability justifications for purchases above certain thresholds
- Create pre-approved sustainable options for common purchases
- Implement sustainability checkpoints in approval workflows

By integrating sustainability into standard operating procedures, AU can ensure that environmental and social considerations become routine rather than exceptional. This "sustainability by default" approach reduces the burden on individual buyers while increasing consistency across the university.

04 Strategic Vendor Partnerships

Stakeholders recognized the potential to leverage AU's purchasing power more strategically. Recommendations included:

- Limiting the use of non-strategic vendors in favor of developing sustainability-oriented partnerships
- Working with strategic vendors to co-develop sustainable solutions
- Engaging vendors in continuous improvement around sustainability metrics
- Participating in cooperative purchasing agreements with other universities to increase leverage

These approaches transform vendor relationships from transactional exchanges into partnerships aligned around shared sustainability goals. When vendors understand that sustainability is a priority for AU and other university customers, they have stronger incentives to invest in more sustainable practices and products.

05 Centralization and Coordination Mechanisms

While preserving some degree of decentralized decision-making, stakeholders recommended selectively centralizing certain procurement functions:

- Designate a sustainable procurement coordinator or team to provide expertise and support
- Create a centralized purchaser role for common/standard products to increase consistency and bargaining power
- Establish a shared inventory system to enable reuse and resource sharing across departments
- Implement mechanisms for cross-departmental collaboration and knowledge sharing

These coordination mechanisms would help departments learn from each other, avoid duplicating effort, and leverage collective purchasing power while maintaining appropriate flexibility for unique departmental needs.

06 Reuse and Circular Economy Initiatives

Stakeholders identified significant opportunities to reduce waste and environmental impact through enhanced reuse:

- Expand and promote existing reuse programs like surplus furniture
- Create an inter-departmental equipment and supply sharing platform
- Provide centralized support for storage, billing, and logistics of cross-unit exchanges
- Prioritize purchasing durable, repairable products over disposable alternatives

07 Measurement and Accountability

To drive continuous improvement, stakeholders recommended implementing systems to measure and track sustainable procurement:

- Develop metrics to assess procurement sustainability performance
- Track and report key indicators like percentage of spend with sustainable vendors
- Set goals and targets for improvement in specific categories
- Recognize and celebrate units and individuals demonstrating leadership in sustainable procurement

What gets measured gets managed. By creating visibility around sustainable procurement performance and celebrating successes, AU can create positive momentum and demonstrate the feasibility of more sustainable purchasing practices.

Many of these ideas were echoed by sustainability staff at other universities who attended our AASHE workshop. The wordcloud, below, represents responses to a question which asked participants to describe one big idea (or solution) that they believed would have the greatest impact on sustainable procurement at their institution. Responses ranged from topics related to training and capacity building, other important issues related to measurement and accountability, in addition to centralization, and policy (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6 Sustainable procurement solutions that would have the greatest impact

Related to the specific ways in which AASHE stakeholders believed that these solutions could be realized, many aspects of this pathway forward were also identified by sustainability staff and vendors at other universities who participated in the AASHE conference (see Figure 7). Key initial first steps to integrating sustainable procurement at their institutions included updating their sustainable procurement guidelines, improving education, and creating staff and organizational incentives.

FIGURE 7 Pathways to realize sustainable procurement solutions.

SECTION SEVEN

The Path *Forward* 07

Having achieved carbon neutrality in operations, AU stands at a critical juncture: its procurement policies have not kept pace with its sustainability commitments. Closing this gap would also position AU to achieve AASHE STARS Platinum ranking, align its purchasing with its stated values, and reinforce its credibility as an institution that demonstrates sustainability through action not just messaging.

The insights and recommendations presented in this report emerged from the collaborative wisdom of nearly 75 stakeholders across AU's procurement ecosystem and beyond. We need both a top-down mandate aligned with the university's broader sustainability commitments, and a bottom-up effort, grounded in operational realities, and responsive to stakeholder needs.

The question is no longer whether AU should advance sustainable procurement, but how quickly and comprehensively it can translate these insights into action. With committed leadership, strategic investments in infrastructure and capacity, and continued engagement across the university community, AU can transform procurement from a sustainability gap into a sustainability strength. The work presented here offers an informed and actionable pathway forward, one that already enjoys broad buy-in across the university and thus provides a strong foundation for lasting change.

The roadmap to a more sustainable American University

RESEARCH QUESTION

How can American University bolster its positive sustainable procurement impact?

KEY BARRIERS — *Six interconnected barriers, operating at individual, organizational, and systematic levels.*

01. Information & Knowledge Gaps

02. Time & Workload Pressures

03. Decentralized Decision-Making

04. Cost Perceptions

05. Lack of Institutional Priority

06. Limited Coordination

SOLUTIONS — *Proposed by 75 stakeholders*

CITED WORKS

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WITH GRATITUDE

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PARTNER
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PARTNER
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We are profoundly grateful to the 47 AU stakeholders who generously shared their time, experiences, and ideas through interviews and workshops. Their participation was essential to understanding the realities of procurement at AU and co-creating actionable recommendations. This research truly belongs to the entire AU procurement community.

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- Our colleagues in sustainable procurement research whose work informed this project

Finally, we acknowledge that this report represents one step in an ongoing journey toward more sustainable procurement at AU. We look forward to continued collaboration with the AU community as these recommendations move from ideas to implementation.

APPENDIX ONE

AU Purchasing Policy A1

AU Sustainable Purchasing Policy Language (last updated in 2014) in "University Policy: Procurement & Contracts Policy & Guidelines"

XVII · SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

"PCD actively works to support the University's commitment to provide equal opportunities through contracting and individual order opportunities for small businesses. Purchasing makes every effort to ensure the University includes the maximum practical number of small businesses in the competitive bidding process in compliance with local, district and federal laws and regulations. PCD seeks appropriate opportunities for local, small, and disadvantaged business participation through the development mutually beneficial business relationships, while also educating the University community about American's requirements in this area. PCD seeks businesses which are Certified by The District of Columbia Department of Small and Local Business Development. (page 19)"

XVIII · SUSTAINABLE PURCHASE

"American University is committed to providing a safe and healthful environment for its employees, students and visitors and managing the University in an environmentally sustainable and responsible manner. PCD works with the Sustainability Department to encourage the use of products that minimize adverse environmental and health effects and take into consideration costs associated with full product life cycles. Please see the following link for more information or contact the Office of Sustainability. (page 20)"

XIX · STATEMENT ON SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

"PCD supports the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act ("the Act"), which focuses on reforming US financial regulation, and was signed into law on July 21, 2010. Section 1502 of the Act imposes reporting requirements on US companies regarding their use of certain "conflict minerals." This section of the Act was intended to address Congressional concerns related to the exploitation and trade of conflict minerals originating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and adjoining countries. Such purchases, by US companies, would help finance the conflict, characterized by extreme levels of violence, in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and perpetuate a continuing humanitarian crisis. In an effort to enhance transparency in the minerals supply chain, Section 1502 and subsequent regulations require publicly traded manufacturers in the US to report what due diligence efforts they are taking to rid their supply chains of metals sourced from conflict-sustaining mines and areas within the Democratic Republic of the Congo and adjoining countries.

American University recognizes the humanitarian crisis in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo by supporting the intent of the legislation through the purchase of conflict-free electronic products from contracted electronic suppliers in compliance with the reporting requirements of Section 1502. In the future American University will offer preference to those suppliers who have made a commitment to conflict-free supply chains when such information as required by Section 1502 is available and when quality and cost performance is equal or superior. (page 20)"

[3]https://www.american.edu/policies/finance-business/upload/procurement-and-contracts-policies-procedures-guidelines-web-version.pdf

APPENDIX TWO

Interview Protocol

A2

for Procurement Staff (p-card holders)

PREAMBLE

This study answers the question How can organizations bolster their positive sustainable procurement impact? To answer this question, we are looking at (1) the systems of actors and activities related to procurement at AU, (2) the challenges and opportunities to move the procurement system toward sustainability, and (3) the actions needed to do that. In this interview, we will be asking questions related to these study goals.

We would like to record the interview. Only the research team will have access to the recording. You can stop the interview any time. You can ask us to stop the recording any time, and your/your organization's name will not be published anywhere in the outcomes of this study. Do you have any questions for us?

<Ask whether we have permission to record the interview and if they say yes, then let them know that this question will after we turn the recording on>

Do we have your permission to record the interview?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your title and your role at AU?

2. What does a typical work day look like for you? What are the biggest priorities in their job?

3. How do you think about sustainability as part of your job?

4. How would you define sustainable procurement?

5. Who is responsible for embedding sustainability in procurement? What structures are in place?

6. Which actors are involved in AU's procurement system, especially when it comes to sustainability?

7. How do you go about choosing where to purchase from? How do you choose and evaluate vendors? What are the ways in which you gather sustainability information?

8. What have been significant wins when it comes to sustainable procurement at AU?

9. What have been significant challenges? What are the ways to address these challenges? What outcomes (tools, databases) may be helpful?

10. How is the presidential transition influencing your thinking on sustainable procurement, especially your relationships with vendors?

11. What are the questions you would like this project to answer?

12. What have we not asked that you would like to share?

<Wrap up and share next steps>

ENGAGED RESEARCH PROJECT

Amplifying Sustainable Procurement

at American University

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