



ITHACA
COLLEGE

What Is Sustainability?

Signs of our “*positive growth*” are everywhere on the Ithaca College campus, but we have come to understand that there is no endpoint with sustainability.

That’s because sustainability is not a “*what*” - it’s a “*how*.”

We have re-framed sustainability as *a decision-making framework for continuous improvement*, one that mindfully balances the concerns of the members of the community for equity and justice with financial realities and protection of the environment and responsible use of resources. Sustainability requires a different way of thinking, one of mindful decision-making - thinking carefully about the choices we have to make, and choosing ever more sustainable options over time.

As a guide to making better, smarter choices, our sustainability decision-making framework breaks down simply into asking ourselves three questions about a given situation or course of action.

First, how will my proposed action impact *people*? How you will personally be affected is part of this calculation. But how a decision impacts other “*people*” means thinking more broadly about how my action affects my employees, my customers, folks in the neighborhood around my business, my suppliers and collaborators. It may also mean the likely impact on the workers who help to mine my raw materials, assemble my parts, package my product, and safely dispose of the waste products from my production.

Second, how will my action impact the *environment*? Am I mindful of my impact on air and water, the greenhouse gas emissions from my operations, the ways in which my product or service is delivered to market, and the end-of-life impacts of my products?

Lastly, how will this action impact *business*? Will something cost ME more? Will it cost more to pay my workers and offer benefits to retain them? Does it cost more to use more environmentally-friendly materials? Will making “*smarter*” decisions gain me positive attention?

The three possible answers to these questions are:

- + The impact of this action will be **positive**, having a beneficial effect.
- ~ The impact is **neutral**, having neither a positive nor negative impact of which I am aware.
- The likely impact is **negative**, causing harm to others or the environment, or costing more.

If all three areas will be impacted in a neutral to positive way – you can have a higher degree of confidence that you just made a more sustainable decision, one that can probably stand the “*test of time*.”

- + Social impact
- + Environmental impact
- + Financial impact

A more sustainable choice!



Please note that for the questions about social impact or environmental effects, if your answer is that your choice will have a negative effect or if you simply can’t be sure about the impact, the “*precautionary principle*” urges great caution or even abandonment of your plan so you don’t hurt others through your action or cause unintended environmental damage.

But, over time, if you routinely utilize this kind of mindful decision-making framework each time you are faced with making a choice – which is almost constantly! – you are bound to make ever more sustainable choices. Remember, we said that sustainability is all about continuous improvement.

~ Marian M. Brown, Special Assistant for Campus and Community Sustainability, Sustainability at Ithaca College (2012)