



THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY LAB

A Manual for Partners

The Environmental and Social Sustainability ([ESS](#)) Lab is a hub of sustainability research at The Ohio State University. Led by academic faculty and supported by a professional research staff, the ESS Lab provides policy and marketing insight to partners through professionally managed surveys, behavioral research, and targeted behavioral interventions related to environmental and social sustainability.

WHO WE ARE

The ESS lab was formed in 2014 to support the training of sustainability experts in the academic field. In recent years, we have become aware of the ongoing need of business and governmental organizations to support sustainability-related campaigns and initiatives. In 2018, the lab began branching out to utilize the expertise of its faculty and staff to solve real-world sustainability needs in domains spanning from consumer behavior, through farmer decision making, to municipal initiatives. Current partners include the Smart Mobility/Electric Vehicle Adoption Team at Smart Columbus, the ENGIE energy company, and Facilities Operations and Development at the Ohio State University.

Our team consists of academic faculty, postdoctoral researchers, graduate students, and undergraduate research assistants specializing in the research of attitudes, behavior, and the social dynamics of sustainability, employing theory and methods from marketing, behavior and communication research. The lab is led by Professors Robyn Wilson, Jeremy Brooks, and Nicole Sintov at Ohio State's School of Environment and Natural Resources, with a network of affiliated faculty and researchers across the university's departments, e.g., Psychology, Marketing, Public Policy, Communications, Geography, History, Anthropology, and Economics.



WHAT WE PROVIDE

The ESS lab provides research services to industry, government, and campus partners. A research partnership serves to answer fundamental or applied questions about people and sustainability, and can take several forms based on the partner's needs. Some examples are:

- **Interventions:** diagnose a current undesired behavior (e.g., energy overuse), identify barriers to the desired behavior, and intervene to promote behavior change
- **Surveys:** evaluate attitudes, beliefs, and reactions to the natural environment (e.g., climate change), the man-made environment (e.g., sustainable city infrastructure), and the social environment (e.g., sustainability norms) as an assessment tool or as a means to inform research, policy, business, education and outreach
- **Lab experiments:** test cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions to specific stimuli (e.g., green campaign messages) in a controlled laboratory setting to inform the design of communication and outreach
- **Scholarly reviews:** synthesize academic literature on a specified topic (e.g., response to environmental policy) to inform information and marketing campaigns, behavior-change interventions and policy decisions

We work with our partners to define and deliver research outputs that will promote both the partner's needs and the academic field. The research conducted with the partner, combined with our in-house skills and expertise, produce implementable recommendations and insights to address the partner's needs. These insights are commonly documented and shared in the form of **research reports, executive summaries, presentations, and other visualization tools.**

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

A research partnership can take several forms and is customized with the partner to meet their needs. Commonly, we refer to two types of partnerships: **ongoing** and **single-project**.

In an **ongoing partnership**, the lab aligns with the partner on their research needs. We develop an initial research plan to tackle this need, and revisit and update it on a regular basis. This type



of partnership is especially recommended for partners with a long-term research need, who prefer partnering with a skilled sustainability research lab than developing their own capacity in-house or vetting and contracting with private sector firms. Establishing ongoing partnerships produces research output in an efficient and streamlined process, minimizing time spent on administration. For example, in 2018 the lab partnered with ENGIE to provide ongoing research support for various behavioral projects in energy conservation at the Ohio State campus. These projects are supported through literature reviews, designing and conducting multiple behavioral interventions, and consulting on other associated energy conservation projects.

A **single-project partnership** focuses on a specific research question. In these single-projects, the lab works with the partner to define and execute a research project with an agreed-upon scope and deadline. The partnership is completed once the agreed-upon deliverables have been produced.

GETTING STARTED

The research partnership process will usually start with the potential partner contacting the ESS lab to describe their research interest. A connection will be made between the partner and an ESS lab faculty member with experience and expertise in the domain of interest. The initial step of this communication will be to refine the partner's research need, discuss possible research plans, and bring in a team of researchers to support the project. The next step is collaboratively producing and signing a research agreement, which describes the research scope, partners' responsibilities, timeline, and costs. This agreement will target the partner's research needs and follow guidelines from Ohio State's Office of Sponsored Programs ([OSP](#)).

Upon approval of the research agreement, a research protocol and associated research materials will be submitted to the university's Institutional Review Board ([IRB](#)) for ethical approval. With IRB approval in hand, the research can commence as specified in the agreement. Throughout the research project, an ongoing dialogue will be maintained between the lab and partner.



Ongoing partners will additionally receive annual reports of the lab's research output, providing added-value through broader knowledge sharing. Annual reports serve to communicate research insights from lab members' research activities, invite partner feedback into the lab's work, and support a transparent communication culture between lab and partners.

DATA AND PRIVACY

As an academic research lab, our research protocols are reviewed by a formal Institutional Review Board (IRB). These reviews include the procedures and tools used to collect, store, and share any data attained for research purposes (e.g., participant information and responses, institutional data). The lab shares collected data with its partners through aggregated, anonymized, technical reports, so as to protect research participants and their privacy where it is the legal requirement and best practice to do so.

We retain the right to publish scholarly research articles based on the findings of the work, appropriately anonymized and in full communication with our partners. Data sharing plans are discussed and agreed upon with the partner prior to conducting the research.

COST GUIDELINES

As an OSU research lab, ESS collaborates with industry, government, and other institutions through a sponsored project model. Sponsored projects entail payment for research services, which maintain the lab's ability to produce research output. These costs maintain our access to such necessities as skilled staff, professional equipment, and study participants. The Office of Sponsored Programs ([OSP](#)) provides guidance on partnership with both not-for-profit and for-profit organizations, suggesting pricing mechanisms for each.

As a general guideline for personnel costs, one-time projects will be priced based on the hourly salaries of involved lab members, including staffing and training of research assistants. Ongoing projects, on the other hand, can reduce staffing costs by sponsoring the recruitment of a skilled researcher (i.e., postdoc or graduate student) whose time will be devoted to the partner's on-



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going research plan. All costs will be clearly communicated to potential partners in alignment with OSP guidelines. For more detailed information, please contact our lab (email below).

GET IN TOUCH

Please visit ess.osu.edu for more details or get in touch via email:

Lab: essl@osu.edu

Faculty director, Prof. Robyn Wilson: wilson.1376@osu.edu

