Sustainable Tulsa: How sustainable is the sustainability business?

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ABSTRACT

Corey Williams, the founder and executive director of the small non-profit, Sustainable Tulsa, is faced with uncertainty and challenges as she contemplates making major changes to their flagship Scor3card® program. The membership-based program is designed to help organizations benchmark and improve sustainability efforts across a wide spectrum of categories. The case puts students in the shoes of Ms. Williams and provides students the opportunity to consider whether fundamental shifts in the program should be made and, if so, how to do so without alienating the vital support of key stakeholders. This challenging situation is described in detail and supported by primary and secondary data.

Keywords: sustainability, networks, organizations, volunteers, processes



A. NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS

This case explores the difficult decision faced by the founder of a small, non-profit organization and traces the history of the organization. It highlights how the network connections that were vital to the growth of the organization may be unable to fully support further growth, and the challenges in shifting to an alternate support system. The case allows students to put themselves in the shoes of the founder, Corey Williams, and make difficult decisions on how best to proceed.

The case is well-suited for the following undergraduate or graduate courses: non-profit management, corporate social responsibility/sustainability, or strategic management. A teaching note may be obtained by contacting the author.

B. INTRODUCTION

Corey Williams left the two-hour meeting with more questions than answers. Corey, two volunteers, and Sarah Hicks (her only full-time employee), had been discussing how to increase the price of the Scor3card® program (Scor3card, 2019) sufficiently high to make the program sustainable, while not alienating long-time supporters of the non-profit, Sustainable Tulsa, in doing so. Central to the discussion was whether they should transition the Scor3card® program from a proprietary software platform to one managed by a national leader in platform management, and if so, how to adjust the pricing model to cover the increased costs. The hope in moving to the new platform is that it would usher in a new era of stability, flexibility, and growth for the program and create opportunities for expansion beyond the regional boundaries of Tulsa, Oklahoma, where Sustainable Tulsa (Sustainable Tulsa, 2019a) is headquartered (Appendix A). The concern in doing so is that it might alienate long-standing supporters of the program, be financial unsustainable, and could derail the momentum of the organization. It was imperative to get the decision right.

When the Scor3card® program was introduced in the fall of 2015, there was an idea that it would provide a tangible tool for Tulsa-area companies to incorporate sustainability practices. What started with a handful of participating companies, operated by a small army of volunteers, was now either going to take off beyond the metro area, or crumble under the weight of its own success. After investing a substantial amount of financial resources create a custom-built program of Scor3card®, Corey was now contemplating an even larger financial investment to transition the program to a nationally-known software platform provider to re-launch Scor3card®. While the move seemed necessary, how to price the program, and how to best communicate the value proposition of the Scor3card® created questions she did not know how to answer. Would the move to the new platform create new opportunities for educating individuals and organizations on sustainability, or would the move bring their momentum to a grinding halt?

C. COREY WILLIAMS AND SUSTAINABLE TULSA

The driving force of Sustainable Tulsa is its founder and Tulsa native, Corey Williams. Engaging and energetic, Corey was exposed to recycling, gardening, and environmental stewardship throughout her formative years. In fact, she was first struck by the simplicity and power of sustainability principles in her third grade science class when the teacher brought in a solar cooker. That warm spring day, Corey ran around the playground with her friends and periodically checked on the progress of the baking cookies. At one such check-in, Corey was struck by the simplicity of solar power baking cookies for them while they played. It felt like "magic" to her; her life has revolved around bringing such realizations to others since then.

Demonstrating a natural bent towards recognizing and taking advantage of entrepreneurial opportunities, Corey created (and completed) a one-of-a-kind undergraduate major dubbed "grass roots environmental organizing." (Williams, 2019a) Foreshadowing what was to come, Corey would end up starting Sustainable Tulsa, an organization based on that very concept. Prior to starting the non-profit, Corey expanded her knowledge base with employment in a variety of sustainability-related organizations, ranging from water conservation to research on illicit waste dumping, to industrial waste-water testing, to local food bank administration. During these early career stages, she held onto a sense that she "wanted to have a positive impact on the world" (Williams, 2019a) but did not know quite what that would look like. While there was tremendous value in all of the organizations in which she had worked, none of them felt quite right for her.

Still searching for the right opportunity, she started one of the first chapters of the Oklahoma Sustainability Network (OSN). The formation of that chapter would turn out to be the threshold step in bringing volunteers together to create the grassroots support for drawing attention to sustainability in the Tulsa region in an inclusive, welcoming, safe environment. Located in a state created to house displaced Native Americans, where the primary economic driver is fossil fuels, Corey held a belief that there were people and organizations that cared about sustainability. She reflected that she did not necessarily plan to stay and raise a family in Tulsa; it was not a community that clearly reflected their sustainability values in the late 1990's. However, she and her husband ultimately decided that they wanted to create a community that they wanted to live in. She believed that she could find like-minded individuals and that together, they could educate others on sustainability principles and spur them towards action. Her beliefs would soon be justified.

In a pattern that would repeat itself, several of her Board members caught Corey's vision and rallied to help her. One of those members, a successful business person wanted to help financially and encouraged Corey to incorporate a new organization as a 501(c)(3) non-profit capable of accepting financial contributions. It was the opportunity she had been waiting for and she jumped at the chance, incorporating Sustainable Tulsa in 2006 (see Appendix B). Early efforts focused on promoting local businesses that practiced sustainability and bringing awareness of the existence of this growing segment of Tulsa commerce to the general public.

One of the early programs was a monthly "Green the 918" series, which highlighted ways to promote environmental stewardship in the greater Tulsa area. To prepare for the monthly "Green the 918" presentations, she would meet with a small group of volunteers to discuss details for the upcoming presentation and to also discuss what else they could do in the Tulsa area. After the "Green the 918" series completed, they continued meeting to discuss sustainability-related topics, started inviting others to come, and eventually brought in guest speakers. What started out as simple, five-person planning meetings evolved into Sustainable Tulsa's "First Thursdays" (1st Thursday, 2019) program, which has now outgrown three different meeting spaces and created a platform for over 100 different presenters since 2009.

These monthly, free-to-the-public, bring-your-own-lunch events, highlight various individuals from "local, regional, and national sustainability leaders" (1st Thursday, 2019) and served as a way for people to learn more about sustainability without having to necessarily

commit themselves or their organizations to anything. As these events kept outgrowing their meeting spaces (Williams, 2019b), so did the awareness (to all involved) that there was a larger interest in sustainability in the oil and gas industry that dominated the Tulsa area.

While these events were well received and successfully attracted interest in sustainability, their no cost and no commitment features placed a natural ceiling on the effectiveness of networking opportunities and how to potentially monetize them. Encouraged by several board members who felt a particular need "to get businesses involved in the sustainability discussion," (Williams, 2019b) Corey took the next major step and started 'B2B Case for Sustainability' (B2B, 2019) quarterly events in 2012 that would showcase organizations (for-profit and non-profit, alike) that were benefitting from sustainability practices.

These membership driven events typically comprised of a panel of three representatives from local organizations that shared a few specific ways that they implemented sustainability practices and the benefits derived from them. Supported by the local Rotary Club and moderated by local area experts on sustainability, audience members were able to ask questions of the presenters to learn more about the company and their practices. Regional merchants also set up booths that attendees could visit and learn more about other companies that offered sustainable products and services. These events provided unique networking benefits for members and allowed Corey to charge for various membership and sponsorship levels and helped increase and stabilize a revenue stream for the organization.

The initial goal of the meetings was to make a compelling case to area businesses that they should adopt sustainability principles. Though a modest goal by current standards, at the time, it was nerve-wracking for Corey. Would these principles she believed in and promoted at an individual level and in the non-profit sector actually translate to for-profit entities? Was "sustainability" something that could work here in Oklahoma, or was it a concept that could only survive on the east and west coasts?

Her fears were quickly allayed as business leader after business leader took the stage and described, in detail, how sustainability principles had saved them money, created new sources of revenue, or both. These testimonials were validating to Corey that, indeed, there were many others in Tulsa that shared her values and wanted to help champion the cause of sustainability. As this group of regular attendees and supporters from a variety of backgrounds and industries got to know each other, it became apparent that there was a tremendous level of expertise within the Tulsa sustainability community that was just waiting to be ignited.

E. SCOR3CARD®: THE TRIPLE BOTTOM-LINE STRATEGY

Inspired by these business-to-business discussions, business leaders began approaching her in 2013 and asked how they would know if they were sustainable. It was a question that got Corey's attention because it indicated the goal of education-to-action was gaining traction. It also got her attention because she knew they did not have answers. She again sensed a ripe opportunity for growth. Always eager to dig into challenging questions, Corey tasked a couple of student interns to research what resources other cities around the country were providing to help businesses answer this question.

As they were examining this question, a business member asked if Sustainable Tulsa would run a local version of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)-sponsored program called "Battle of the Buildings" (Energy Star, 2019) that focused on energy, water, and waste reduction. It seemed like a logical step, so Corey jumped at the opportunity, approached a donor

to fund it...and was promptly denied. Evidencing the classic resiliency of successful entrepreneurs, Corey was unphased. As she poured over the findings from her interns' research, she realized they could create a tool that measured much more than energy, water, and waste.

However, to create their own type of tool, one tailored to the specific sustainabilityclimate within the Tulsa business community, she would need additional resources. Prior to this point in Sustainable Tulsa's history, Corey had been raising two young children and only working ten hours per week. However, beginning in 2014, she ramped up to full-time and began leveraging the expertise and commitment of the members in the group. She knew the demands of creating a proprietary tool would be extensive, but had no idea how much work it would require, nor how enthusiastically volunteers would respond. By the time the project was complete, close to 50 individuals would spend a combined 2,500 hours sifting through the best practices from various sustainability tracking tools around the county and identifying the raw materials for what would go into their own tool (Williams, 2019b). Their efforts culminated in the creation of the Scor3card®: The triple bottom-line strategy, an on-line tool comprised of around 150 specific aspects of sustainability that spanned seven different categories: community stewardship, energy, water, transportation, communication, materials management, and health work environment. The most foundational of those items are the Cornerstones, which include 13 action items centered on four key areas (see Appendix C).

The typical process of Scor3card® participation is for organizations to appoint one person that leads a sustainability team to interface with others within the organization who has specific knowledge of each sustainability-linked area. This person sorts through all of the potential response areas and works with knowledgeable colleagues to create answers of 100 words or less that are responsive to each item. The duration of a given Scor3card® cycle runs from approximately October through May, which allows organizations time to research their sustainability practices, implement new ones, draft or revise policies, collaborate with stakeholders, make capital-investment decisions, and record their answers. At the end of each Scor3card® cycle, the responses are reviewed by Sustainable Tulsa, given credit (or not), and appropriate feedback given to the participants on how to improve their sustainability practices.

Additionally, to help bridge the knowledge gap between participants in the pilot year and the specifics of the program, 18 individuals volunteered as 'coaches' to assist the organizations (Williams, 2019b). These unpaid coaches were asked to allocate approximately ten hours per month to the Scor3card® program: five hours of training on the program and five hours interfacing with the client. The coaches worked with the clients, asked and received answers from the program area experts and, at the end of the cycle, helped the participants finalize answers in the program.

The coaching, which seemed more of a necessary "crutch" to help organizations limp through the growing pains of the new program, ended up turning into a unique and differentiating feature for the Scor3card® program. No other programs Corey and her team studied in other cities or on-line had anything similar to the one-on-one coaching aspect Sustainable Tulsa could provide. What felt like a band-aid was quickly revealed as a source of strength (Williams, 2019a).

In the pilot year, 28 companies participated to try out the system, helped clean up bugs in the system, and provided suggestions for future improvement (Williams, 2019b). Although the on-line tool was barely functional and maddeningly erased participants' data on occasion, the Scor3card® program was met with enthusiasm by the early adopters, who generated 573 total responses (Williams, 2019b). Since that pilot year, Scor3card® participants grew steadily,

resulting in the 2018-2019 Scor3card® cycle which enrolled 45 verified companies that generated a combined 2,699 action items (See Appendix D).

F. GROWTH CHALLENGES

For the first four years of the Scor3card® experience, the experts were invited back to help evaluate the appropriateness and responsiveness of the items submitted by participating organizations. It was in these committee meeting that the entirety of a categories' responses were reviewed, points were awarded (or not), and feedback was generated for participants. This process, which only took 1-2 hours per meeting in the pilot year, grew to an unwieldy 4-8 hours per session in just a few years; the model was quickly becoming unsustainable. The amount of time and energy allocated to manage the Scor3card® program ballooned, resulting in the hiring of only the second full-time employee (besides Corey) of Sustainable Tulsa, Sarah Hicks (Sustainable Tulsa, 2019a).

While the Scor3card® did generate increased revenues (see Appendixes E and F), it was not enough to cover the cost of employing Sarah and managing the Scor3card® program. The program was operating at a loss in order to provide proof of concept, work out any flaws, and build a strong support structure. However, the growth trajectory of the program suggested that, sooner rather than later, the program would require an unsustainable amount of time from volunteers and may no longer be financially viable. Something needed to be done, but Corey did not know exactly what to do.

Corey wondered if a more sustainable model for managing the program would be to hire independent raters to evaluate all of the responses from participating organizations, and have the raters resolve discrepancies among themselves. Volunteer committees would then only be needed to review any unresolvable differences amongst the raters and to randomly review some of the answers in a form of quality assurance. This process could increase the reliability of the reviewing, since the raters would be reviewing all of the responses, as opposed to seven different committees composed of nearly twenty unique volunteers with varying standards completing the work in a make-shift process.

Although the shift towards independent raters would alleviate demands on volunteers and likely increase consistency in the reviewing process, the shift was not without its challenges. A key part of the success of Sustainable Tulsa was the network benefits and sense of community that was generated by participation in the First Thursday, B2B, and Scor3card® programs. With the shift towards independent, paid reviewers, it was uncertain what the effect would be on the sense of community and *esprit de corps* derived from the Scor3card® program.

Because the program was created, supported, coached, and maintained by a large group of volunteers, there was a strong sense of community ownership of the program; their combined efforts created a uniquely tailored program of which they were proud and wanted to remain involved. This sense of pride was noticed by Corey and Sarah in the committee meetings when the reviewers would cheerfully spend hours reviewing the hundreds of Scor3card® responses. They reflected that many of those that were directly involved in creating the original items for the pilot year were *still* involved in reviewing participants' responses to them. Moreover, many of these individuals also financially supported Sustainable Tulsa through sponsorships and referrals to the program; maintaining their support was vital to Sustainable Tulsa's ongoing success (Williams, 2019a).

A challenge with a shift towards independent raters was that this new model would incur additional expenses to implement: payment of the raters. She estimated that, at current levels of participation, it might take someone 20 or more hours to individually analyze each of the responses at a potential cost of nearly \$1,500 (Williams, 2019b). She also estimated that to make sure this new reviewing process was legitimate, she would need at least 3 reviewers to do the work. That many reviewers would allow for beneficial comparisons of responses, resolution of discrepancies, and create a small buffer for the inevitable recusals of reviewers due to conflicts of interest (e.g., when a reviewer's organization was a Scor3card® participant).

Yet another concern with the growth of the Scor3card® program was how to maintain interest in it by organizations that had previously participated. Some organizations reported that by participating in the program, they had invested in various financial projects that reduced energy consumption, resulting in hundreds of thousands of dollars of savings. For example, decisions to install energy-efficient windows, purchase adjustable-height workstations for employees, and eliminate single-use utensils were all forward-looking, sustainable decisions that cut cost, benefitted the environment, and improved employee morale and productivity. Yet, once organizations made those decisions, they did not need to be made again; they became part of the fabric of the organization. Given that, what was the motivation for organizations to continue their participation in the program?

Under the current model, enrollment was included with the \$750 standard business membership, so the emphasis was simply on encouraging participation. For some organizations, because it was a free benefit, they tentatively participated and each year tried to add a few more aspects to their sustainability portfolio. For others, they viewed the program inclusion as a great selling feature for continued membership and support of Sustainable Tulsa and fully participated. Many of the companies in this later group were further motivated to continue participation because of the potential to differentiate themselves amongst their competitors at a regional and even national level. With the ability for their organizations' logo to be listed on the Sustainable Tulsa website as a sponsor or business member (Sustainable Tulsa, 2019a) and also for organizations to be able to include a "Sustainable Tulsa" logo on their own website, organizations could use their affiliation as a point of differentiation. Corey could sell companies on the notion that, given the ever increasing competitive landscape of modern business, finding new ways to standout was critical; participation in Scor3card® could help them achieve that. Moreover, for those that performed exceptionally well, there was an opportunity to gain recognition as a Bellmon Award (Sustainable Tulsa, 2019a) winner, a prestigious, local sustainability-themed award sponsored by Sustainable Tulsa.

For a smaller subset of companies, participation in the program could also be used as an information gathering tool for larger-scale sustainability reporting requirements. Typically, only produced by publicly-traded companies, annual 'responsibility' reporting was a growing trend pushed by many shareholder advocacy groups (Governance & Accountability Institute Inc., 2018). While the Scor3card® tool, itself, did not generate publishable reports, the items within the program were similar to those that would be included in an annual report produced by following standards such as those produced by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, 2019).

Despite the validity of these motivating factors, there were non-trivial caveats to consider that worried Corey. If they transitioned to the new software platform and independent raters, to cover its cost, the program would no longer be an automatic benefit to members and there would be a substantial price increase for participants – particularly large, for-profit organizations. The standard pricing model charged all organizations (for-profit, non-profit, and government) the

same base price (\$750 in 2019) (Sustainable Tulsa, 2019a). In the new format, they contemplated lowering the price for smaller and non-profit organizations, leaving the middle-sized ones roughly at the current price, and making up the difference (and then some) on larger, for-profit companies. Alternately, they considered differentiating between smaller organizations that rented office space versus those that owned (or had substantial control over their location). With either format, they would face challenges in billing companies that did not neatly fit into one of the predetermined categories. There was also the non-trivial concern of convincing business members that a tool that was previously free was now an expensive add-on and for some large organizations, the price of participation could be dramatically more expensive.

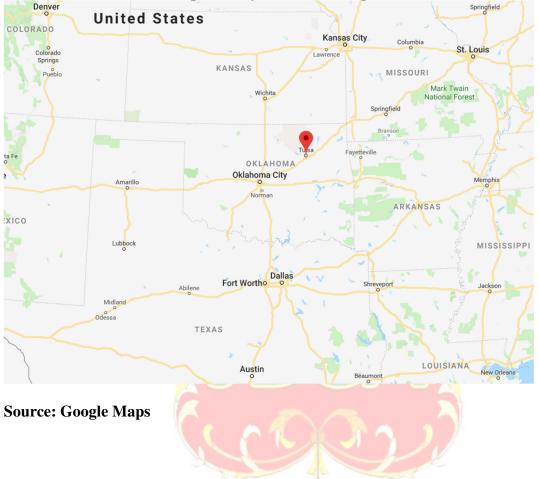
There was also the challenge of making the tool sufficiently robust without being burdensome; a tricky balance. Many of the organizations that used the program were small and rented office space, some were quite large who owned their own buildings and even multiple sites in and beyond Tulsa. From its inception, the Scor3card® tool was thorough for a local community-focused sustainability education-to-action tool (e.g., 34 items were allocated to the energy dimension, alone). However, for those organizations that rented their facilities, they often had little ability to influence major energy reduction programs, creating feelings of frustration and powerlessness.

At the other extreme, the program fell short of what publicly traded companies needed to produce comprehensive GRI-based reports. To create publishable responsibility reports that would meet the rigorous industry-level demands of analysts and institutional shareholders, companies in this category typically also subscribed to higher end consulting services (such as Measurabl, which could cost up to \$25,000 per month, per site) (Measurabl, 2019). While the cost for those professional services were substantially higher, they delivered finished products that Scor3card® could not. However, Corey and her team could point to the community-centric nature of the Scor3card® that encouraged sustainable practices in many areas in which even the most expensive sustainability-tracking programs did not touch.

J. LINGERING QUESTIONS

Many more questions arose as she considered expanding beyond the Tulsa region, as well. In the Tulsa area, Corey leveraged her network (and her connections' connections) to methodically build support for sustainability that revolved around monthly and quarterly events. It was out of those events that the Scor3card® program was born. If they were to expand to other cities, how would the organizational networks be created? Without those personal connections, how would interest in the Scor3card® be generated? If Sustainable Tulsa was not well known in other communities, what value would there be for those organizations to be affiliated with it? How would coaches be identified and trained to help Scor3card® participants navigate the program? What if Sustainable Tulsa offered certification programs for coaches and individuals; could that be a way to continue attrating volunteers? If they did raise the price of the Scor3card[®], how high should they raise it and should there be different prices depending on the size and profit-status of the organization, or base pricing on ownership status of the location? Now that she was employing three full-time and one part-time people for whom she felt personally responsible, would the potential disruption in funding negatively affect them? These questions, and many more, kept Corey up at night, realizing that the future of the Scor3card® program and Sustainable Tulsa, itself, hung in the balance.

APPENDIX A:



Location of Tulsa, OK and proximity to other metropolitan areas.

APPENDIX B:

Sustainable Tulsa Milestones

2006	Incorporates as 501(c)(3) non-profit.
2007	Creates the first version of the Green Directory.
2008	Launches the "All Local Foods" and "Eat Local Taste of Tulsa" events to support the development of the Green Directory and promotion of local foods.
2009	Starts "Green the 918" series in association with Tulsa Mayor, Kathy Taylor. This event later evolves into Sustainable Tulsa's 1st Thursday program.
2010	Starts the Henry Bellmon Sustainability Awards through a partnership with the Rotary Club of Southside Tulsa.
2012	B2B Case for Sustainability quarterly series begins as an effort to reach the business community.
2015	Launches the pilot version of the Scor3card® program with 28 Tulsa area businesses.
2016	Begins a partnership with the Monarch Initiative of Tulsa. Hires first Projects Coordinator.
2017	Finished first full year of Scor3card® with 31 verified companies.
2018	Launches Re-Charge fundraiser.
2019	Re-launches Scor3card® under new platform.

Source: Presentation at Scor3card® Final Event on August 22, 2019. Tulsa, OK.



APPENDIX C:

Scolocarae cornerstone	
Communication and Vision	Incorporate sustainability into core values and company culture.
Benchmarking	Baseline use of resources such as energy and water, as well as employee health and safety.
Employee Engagement	Engaging employees through a healthy work environment and community involvement.
Material Management	Identify efficient practices to reduce, reuse, and recycle.

Scor3card® Cornerstone items

Source: www.sustainabletulsainc.org/cornerstones



Sustainable Tulsa how sustainable

APPENDIX D:

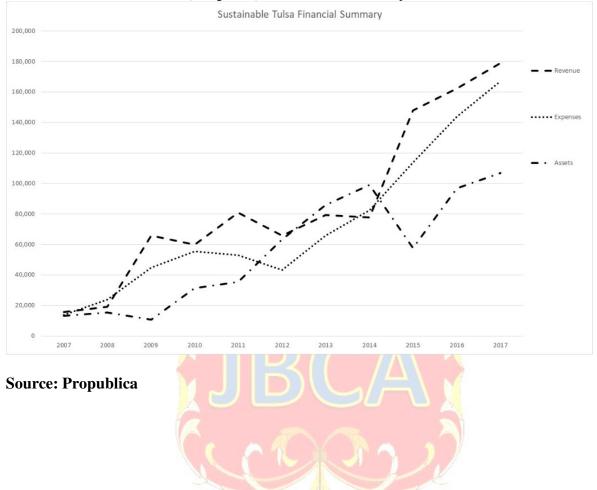
Growth of Scor3card® program

2016	Pilot Year: 573 action items completed by 28 verified companies.
2017	873 action items completed by 31 verified companies.
2018	1,333 action items completed by 34 verified companies.
2019	2,699 action items completed by 45 verified companies.

Source: Presentation by Sustainable Tulsa at Scor3card® Final Event, August 22, 2019, Tulsa, OK



APPENDIX E:



Sustainable Tulsa Revenue, Expense, and Assets Summary

APPENDIX F:

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Sustainable Tulsa Tax Return Summary

Source: Propublica

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