



To have the lasting impact you seek, it is important that your ecosystem and its resources are sustainable. It is easy to get excited about all the possibilities involved in ecosystem building, but thriving ecosystems must be stable and consistent in the support they provide their entrepreneurs. This conversation guide will help your team think through a framework to enhance the sustainability of your ecosystem.

Start the Conversation:

- Gather some key stakeholders in your ecosystem that play roles to ensure the work of your ecosystem is sustainable. You can gather stakeholders in a face-to-face or virtual meeting. You might also consider whether it's possible to carry out this "conversation" asynchronously via email, a discussion board, or across a series of one-on-one or small group discussions.
- Be sure to include at least one entrepreneur in your conversation. As the primary beneficiaries of the value that your ecosystem creates, it's vital that entrepreneurs participate in the conversation.
- Start by asking conversation participants what comes to mind for them when they think about "enhancing ecosystem sustainability." Ask participants what is working in other organizations/collective efforts to keep the work sustainable.
- We often talk about sustainability in terms of financial resources. While fiscal sustainability is important, resources are also a byproduct of relationships and priorities. In that vein, we want to focus the conversation on funding sources within a relationship paradigm that can improve your long-term success.
- Chris McGoff wrote the book [The Primes](#) which are "universal patterns of group behavior that outfit you to work with any group to solve any problem—especially the big ones." We recommend the full book but will focus on the [Big Hat, Little Hat](#) prime for this conversation.

Just Getting Started?

If you and your colleagues are just beginning to engage your college or university in ecosystem building, you may feel the need to do some groundwork before you dive into conversations. Take a look at [Getting Ready for Ecosystem Conversations](#) for ideas and considerations for engaging both your internal ecosystem as well as with external partners.

Build an Equitable Ecosystem!

Ecosystems thrive when they are inclusive, fostering connections, conversations, and cultures that embrace the entire community. Before undertaking this or any of the conversations on C-CUBE, review [Centering Access, Belonging, Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity in Ecosystem Building](#). Apply the five questions under "Putting it into Action" as you plan this conversation.





- Big Hat, Little Hat reminds us that people come to your ecosystem with different priorities and perspectives that are equally valuable. It often isn't right v. wrong but right v. right, as different paths forward can accomplish different goals. To get the full picture, you need to involve and support both big-hat people (people seeing the full picture) and little-hat people (people representing a specific group, focus, or subsection). Knowing the difference and knowing when and where to empower (and fund) people wearing these hats can help you engage all parts of your ecosystem while managing its complexity in a sustainable way.
- Complete the discussion guide on the next page to see how.





BIG HAT, LITTLE HAT

1. Take account of all the people and their organizations that are participating in this conversation. Write each organization down on a sticky note.
2. Add post-it notes for any organizations that contribute to the ecosystem but were not able to participate in this discussion.
3. Sort your sticky notes onto two boards or sheets of large paper, one titled “Big Hats” and one titled “Little Hats” based on [the definition from The Primes](#).
4. Starting with the Little Hats, attach each organization to their responsibilities and impact. Map out what they are doing for the ecosystem.
5. With the Little Hats mapped, switch to the Big Hats and attach these organizations to their responsibilities and impact. Look for duplications as you do so. How can Big Hats free themselves up by empowering Little Hats?
6. Consider the resources coming into your ecosystem.
7. Starting again with your Little Hats, evaluate their access to funding and resources. Then do so with your Big Hats. Understanding that funding at both levels is essential to sustainability, look for opportunities to streamline resources, increase collaborations, or shift, share, or raise new funding to meet the needs at all levels.
8. Based on this evaluation, develop a resource strategy that addresses any gaps revealed through this activity.

