

ENGAGING AND SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES



HIGHER ED
CLIMATE ACTION
◆ aspen institute

Across the country and the globe, communities are grappling with questions about how to effectively address climate change. The need for continued leadership will only expand as climate change, and its impact on society, intensifies. To fulfill its social mission, higher education can leverage its community connections, convening power, and research to support communities in advancing meaningful solutions. They can provide resources and technical assistance to community leaders and serve as a place to bring diverse groups of people together to drive equitable climate action.

Higher education has a unique ability to help communities respond to threats from climate change and advance localized solutions. As anchors in their communities and as stewards of place, higher education can help communities by creating tools and resources, facilitating dialogue, and supporting local action and decision-making. For instance, higher education can help local officials prioritize steps to reduce carbon pollution. In coastal communities, higher education institutions can help facilitate challenging conversations about increased risks to people and property from sea-level rise and the potential need for solutions including managed retreat.¹ And higher education can help individuals, community-based organizations, and local businesses understand the opportunities to leverage incentives within the Inflation Reduction Act.



WHAT WE HEARD: “Higher education has such remarkable institutional power and privilege that often goes unused. It’s not simply the ability to affect and build strong students, faculty, and staff, it’s also the ability to impact, engage, and invite communities to understand.” — Stacey Abrams, Senior Advisor, Rewiring America, Former Minority Leader of the Georgia House of Representatives

One of the challenges in addressing climate change on both a local and global level is that it requires collective action beyond any single individual or organization’s narrow interest. Colleges and universities have ample experience serving as leaders and conveners. They serve many community roles including major employers, educators, and technical assistance providers. As a result, college and university leaders frequently exercise convening power to help communities solve local challenges.

To effectively engage and support their communities, higher education institutions must meaningfully partner with communities to ensure that research, awareness, and knowledge is accessible to a wider audience. Higher education can communicate in the ways, places, and languages that reach those across their communities to spur informed action.



Partnerships with Communities to Advance Lasting Impact

Too often, research in higher education has focused on distancing itself from people being “researched.” In this moment, where large-scale and global collaboration is needed, higher education must recognize its role in working with communities to ensure long-term and meaningful change. Students and their families can be engaged together, in their language and space, on these critical issues that affect their lives. To overcome legacies of distrust, higher education has an opportunity to include communities from the beginning in research, convening, and action to ensure inclusive public engagement.

Regional Comprehensive Universities and Minority Serving Institutions, including TCUs and HBCUs, have worked to develop meaningful partnerships with their communities and can help higher education understand effective and inclusive strategies for engagement. For instance, in *Recommitting to Stewardship of Place*, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) identifies the following key strategies for meaningful community partnerships: **1) Sharing power; 2) Understanding stakeholders; 3) Building reciprocal relationships; 4) Adapting communication; 5) Learning and relearning the community; and 6) Amplifying and listening to community voices.**²



Bright Spot: Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers

The EPA recently invested \$177 million in 16 Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers (EJ TCTACs). These centers will help underserved communities learn about and apply for additional federal grants available under numerous federal programs. Public colleges and universities hosted nearly half (7) of the successful consortiums, and joined several other winning applications.



Bright Spot: The Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice

The Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University announced a research project partnering with five predominantly Black communities in the Gulf Coast region. They will evaluate how employment prospects, health care access, and income inequality can result in environmental and health harms. The project uses participatory research design to involve Black communities in research decisions about their region.

APPLIED RESEARCH GROUNDED IN COMMUNITY NEED

Applied research can be a particularly useful tool for higher education to support communities in a changing climate when grounded in community needs, culture, and values. Higher education can convene community stakeholders to understand the most pressing needs and co-design research questions to find meaningful solutions.

Dr. Beverly Wright, founder of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice (DSCEJ), developed the Communiversity model to describe an ecosystem approach that joins effective research and policy development with community input and life experiences. For instance, DSCEJ created a community advisory board for the Louisiana Mississippi River Chemical Corridor made up of grassroots community leaders, non-profits, academics, and government officials. DSCEJ provides technical assistance to community leaders as they monitor environmental hazards, evaluate risks based on the available data, and advocate for policies and government action that remedies environmental harms and prevents future damage.



Tribal Colleges and Universities frequently seek to tailor research to community needs, often by involving community members directly in their research initiatives. A core strength of Tribal Colleges and Universities is the culturally relevant programming; their missions and identities are rooted in local knowledge—including Tribal Ecological Knowledge (TEK)—cultural practices, and language. The emphasis of Indigenous values and community cultivates a student body with a kinship-based and holistic way of thinking. The 35 accredited TCUs in the U.S. are located on Indigenous lands, whether formally recognized reservations or historic territories.³ This connection fosters an environment where TCUs play a pivotal role in addressing the environmental issues and inequalities that affect the community. Dr. Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills, a senior researcher at the University of Montana and the Food Sovereignty Director at Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College, emphasized the importance of community-driven research to ensure university initiatives meet community needs.



WHAT WE HEARD: “Our research is directly the needs of our community, we’re able to include our community members and they help us to identify what are the specific needs that we need to be talking about... being able to develop sustainable practices within our communities, responsive in food development production, and what are the traditional crops that are drought resistant,” — Dr. Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills, Food Sovereignty Director at Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College and Co-Principal Investigator for the Willow AGEP Alliance

To address community challenges, higher education can examine how climate will impact the economy, health, and well-being of those in their community. The University of California, Merced is located in the San Joaquin Valley in California, the most important food producing region in the United States. As an HSI and AANAPISI, UC Merced serves a diverse student

body and many diverse communities. Climate change reduces food production, threatening livelihoods for those communities, and can have broader societal implications for food availability and affordability. To identify solutions, UC Merced has established a series of initiatives to tackle food resilience, including the Center for Food Resiliency through Equity, Sustainability, and Health (FRESH).

The Center for Food Resiliency through Equity, Sustainability, and Health launched a 45 acre farm on campus with a \$5 million state grant. FRESH aims to make this “the farm of the future” through “research on sustainable land management, regenerative agriculture, precision agriculture, automation/robotics, machine learning/AI” and more.⁴ The University also received a \$10 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to provide expertise and training on water management to local decision-makers. The project brings together a variety of stakeholders including researchers, growers, and land and water managers to provide useful data on issues, ranging from aquifer recharging to managing water resale markets.



Bright Spot: Haskell Indian Nations University

In 2022, Haskell Indian Nations University received a \$20 million grant from the U.S. National Science Foundation. The grant was used to create the Rising Voices, Changing Coasts (RVCC) Hub—a new research hub where Indigenous knowledge—holders work with university-trained scientists to address the impacts of a changing climate on their coastal communities.



WHAT WE HEARD: “We are working to advance not just the research and development aspect of developing the climate resilient food system but more importantly to work with our local community colleges to address the future of work in agriculture.” — Dr. Joshua Viers, Associate Vice Chancellor for Interdisciplinary Research and Strategic Initiatives at University of California, Merced, Professor of Water Resources Management, UC Merced School of Engineering

PARTNERSHIPS WITH GOVERNMENT AND INDUSTRY

To tackle broad societal challenges related to climate change and the transition to a clean economy, higher education can support and partner with government and industry. There are critical questions that higher education can address to enhance productive advancements in industry and to inform the government's ability to coordinate across sectors, support workforce development, and advance solutions across communities. For instance, many state and local governments have developed climate action plans to drive goal-directed climate mitigation and adaptation strategies across their states and localities. Higher education can help prioritize state and local actions, inform and implement strategies, and measure progress against the goals.



Bright Spot: State University of New York (SUNY)

In 2023, the State University of New York (SUNY) announced the establishment of a \$700 million climate campus and “living laboratory” for climate solutions on Governors Island. Led by Stony Brook University and in partnership with 40+ other universities, companies, and community-based partners, the New York Climate Exchange will accelerate climate research, solution development, education, workforce training, and public programs.⁵



Bright Spot: Indiana University's Environmental Resilience Institute (ERI)

Indiana University's Environmental Resilience Institute (ERI) partners with local communities around the state to increase climate resilience through multiple programs. Over 30 local governments have joined a Resilience Cohort to jointly evaluate and implement mitigation and resilience strategies. The Indiana Resilience Funding hub provides technical assistance to governments, businesses, and CBOs in under-resourced rural counties as they submit competitive grant applications. ERI also recently launched a “Beat the Heat” pilot program with Clarksville and Richmond, helping them hire full-time heat coordinators and lead the development and implementation initiatives to help their communities respond to extreme heat.⁶

American Climate Corps

The Federal Government has opened applications for the American Climate Corps. This initiative will support 20,000 young Americans through career training and paid service opportunities in areas of clean energy, conservation, and climate resilience. Institutions of higher education can play a crucial role in this initiative by sharing best practices for training, establishing American Climate Corps programs on campuses and in communities, and connecting Corps members to future learning opportunities upon program completion.

