

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



HIGHER-ED
CLIMATE ACTION
aspen institute

Our society is in a moment of transition. The effects of climate change are harming people and communities across our country and the globe. These effects will only worsen in the decades to come. We have an opportunity to advance the urgent and lasting solutions we need to foster a climate safe, just, and vibrant future. Yet, we need to empower people with the knowledge, awareness, skills, and mindsets to support our societal transformation. There is a critical opportunity for higher education to leverage its strengths to build knowledge, foster innovation, enhance communities, and model solutions to help build a sustainable, resilient, and just world.

In this action plan, we identify the opportunity for the higher education sector to advance climate solutions, adapt to our changing climate, and prepare students for success in a sustainable, resilient, and just society. Every higher education institution, from community colleges and regional public universities to private institutions and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), are affected by climate change and have the opportunity to contribute to solutions. To maximize impact, federal, state, and local policymakers, businesses, philanthropy, and community based organizations must work jointly with higher education. This action plan provides a roadmap to support comprehensive action across higher education and outlines recommendations for different stakeholders to catalyze and scale these efforts across the country.

We envision a future where higher education leverages its strengths to collaboratively support our social transformation to a sustainable, resilient and just world. For this vision to occur, America's 4,000 institutions of higher education can engage, prepare, and support the 19 million students enrolled in colleges and universities for success in a changing climate and economy. They can engage and support the communities they serve through meaningful partnerships, knowledge sharing, and applied research. They can model, research, and develop innovative climate mitigation and adaptation solutions. Higher education—the students, faculty, institutions, governing boards, and systems—can act collaboratively with each other, communities, policymakers, business, philanthropy, and more to foster a climate safe, just, and vibrant future.



Higher Ed Climate Action Task Force

In the spring of 2023, we came together to chart a course for the higher education sector to reach its full potential in building our societal capacity to address climate change. We are students, faculty, college presidents, state higher education system leaders, policymakers, researchers, and more. We believe people will drive the urgent and lasting solutions we need to thrive in a changing climate, and we must empower them with the awareness, knowledge, skills, and mindsets necessary to advance a more sustainable, resilient, and just society.

We hosted a series of public listening sessions to learn from leading experts working at the intersection of higher education and climate action. We met with leaders across the sector, identified colleges and universities taking action, and evaluated a range of innovative policy ideas to support climate action. We learned how institutions of higher education are currently leading and the urgency and opportunity for higher education to expand its reach and impact. From our learnings, we created a roadmap to guide action across the sector.

To unlock the power of the higher education sector, we must build on existing successes to catalyze and scale further action to address climate change. We have identified the need to:

EDUCATE AND SUPPORT STUDENTS

With about 19 million students enrolled annually, higher education is uniquely positioned to engage students in learning across a variety of contexts, interests, communities, and languages. Through undergraduate education, workforce training, and graduate education, higher education can engage students in learning about climate change and solutions. To ensure student success in a changing climate, higher education must support necessary services outside of the classroom from basic needs to mental health to help students navigate a climate changed world. **To educate and support students in a changing climate, the higher education sector can ensure that all students have a foundational level of climate literacy, an opportunity for deeper learning about climate across disciplines and through workforce development, and access to services and support in the face of climate disruptions.**

ENGAGE AND SUPPORT COMMUNITIES

Higher education institutions, from community colleges and regional comprehensive universities to MSIs and research institutions, have deep connections to the communities they serve. **Institutions can leverage these connections—engaging students, families, and community members in their language and space—to support broader action on climate change.**

MODEL SOLUTIONS

With about 4,000 institutions located in communities across the country, higher education institutions can model, research, and develop climate mitigation and adaptation solutions. To mitigate impact on the environment, higher education must reduce carbon pollution from operations. To build resilience, higher education must prepare for climate-related impacts and adapt to reduce the potential risks to students, communities, and institutions. **The higher education sector can model, research, and develop climate mitigation and adaptation solutions that reduce carbon pollution, build resilience to potential risks, and foster innovation.**

ADVANCE EQUITY

Black, Indigenous, Latino, and other communities of color, as well as low-income rural and urban communities, are disproportionately impacted by climate change and educational inequities. We recognize that the imperative to center and advance equity crosscuts all strategies to accelerate action in higher education. **To advance equity and climate justice, higher education can ensure equal opportunity for all students, institutions, and communities to benefit from a more sustainable, resilient, and equitable society.**

For the higher education sector to effectively educate and support students and communities, as well as model, research, and develop solutions while advancing equity and climate justice, all aspects of higher education—institutions, systems, faculty, students, and statewide networks—must drive this response. But they cannot do it alone. Federal, state, and local policymakers, business, philanthropy, and community-based organizations must work collaboratively with higher education to maximize opportunities to spur climate action.

Opportunities for Higher Education

RECOMMENDATION

1

Prioritize the development and implementation of a plan for equitable climate action and ensure accountability across systems and institutions.

RECOMMENDATION

2

Educate, engage, and support all students to ensure success in a changing climate and economy.

- 2.1:** Engage students in building climate literacy and baseline understanding of climate change, its causes, consequences, and solutions.
- 2.2:** Develop pathways to clean economy jobs in a sustainable, resilient, and equitable society.
- 2.3:** Support student needs and well-being in a changing climate.

RECOMMENDATION

3

Engage and support communities, particularly the communities most affected by our changing climate and the transition to a clean economy, in advancing meaningful solutions.

- 3.1:** Bring together community leaders to solve local climate challenges.
- 3.2:** Provide technical assistance to community members.
- 3.3:** Advance research efforts tied to communities' needs and meaningfully include community members in project design.
- 3.4:** Center equity in efforts to engage and support communities.

RECOMMENDATION

4

Model, research, and develop solutions to reduce carbon pollution, adapt to a changing climate, and advance sustainability goals.

- 4.1:** Model mitigation solutions to reduce carbon pollution.
- 4.2:** Model adaptation solutions to build resilience in a changing climate.
- 4.3:** Model mission-aligned investment decisions to promote a more sustainable future.
- 4.4:** Test and develop innovative climate solutions.
- 4.5:** Involve students in creating and implementing climate action plans.

RECOMMENDATION

5

Communicate higher education's knowledge more effectively and model solutions to spur broad, equitable climate action.

- 5.1:** Develop a robust communications strategy.
- 5.2:** Make climate expertise available to policymakers, community leaders, industry, and others.
- 5.3:** Open in-person and virtual events to the public.

Opportunities for Federal Policymakers

RECOMMENDATION

1

Elevate and amplify the role of higher education in climate solutions.

- 1.1:** Coordinate cross-agency collaboration to create opportunities for higher education to advance climate solutions.
- 1.2:** Establish climate change as a U.S. Department of Education priority.
- 1.3:** Center higher education student voices in developing national plans for climate action.
- 1.4:** Elevate the role of Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) in advancing climate solutions.

RECOMMENDATION

2

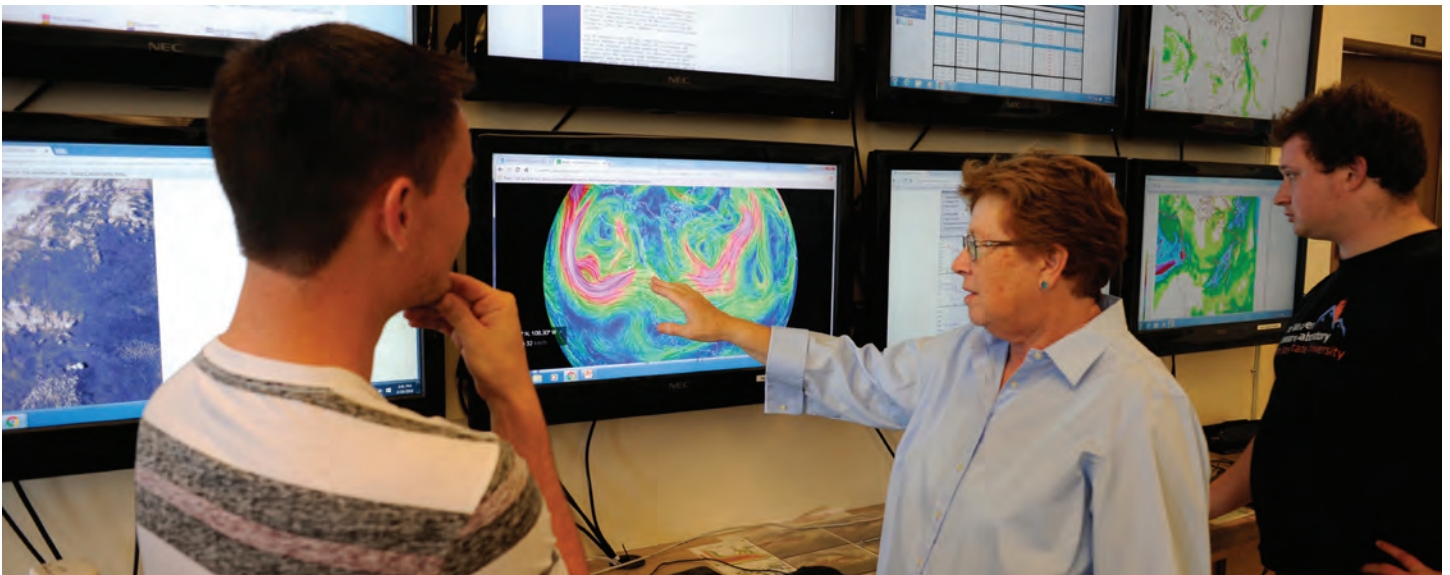
Support institutions, through federal policies and programs, in preparing students, engaging communities, and modeling solutions.

- 2.1:** Support institutions of higher education in accessing federal funds, including from the Inflation Reduction Act.
- 2.2:** Ensure ambitious federal efforts to prepare a climate-ready workforce and to research and test innovative solutions.
- 2.3:** Expand federal opportunities for students to pursue climate careers and climate experience, including through the American Climate Corps.
- 2.4:** Allocate research funding for adaptation and mitigation strategies that engage local communities and community leaders in planning and execution.
- 2.5:** Consider opportunities for accrediting agencies to support higher education in taking climate action.

RECOMMENDATION

3

Partner with higher education to communicate the impacts of a changing climate on communities and the effectiveness of solutions to inspire and build support for broader climate action.



Opportunities for State Policymakers

RECOMMENDATION

1

Develop a comprehensive statewide plan and policies to address climate change and advance solutions within and beyond higher education.

- 1.1:** Define the role of higher education and leverage higher education partners to develop and implement state climate action plans.
- 1.2:** Prioritize students and communities most impacted by climate change and education inequities.
- 1.3:** Center student voices in developing statewide plans for climate action.
- 1.4:** Appoint higher education leaders committed to climate priorities and ensure climate leaders recognize the importance of leveraging education in solutions.

RECOMMENDATION

2

Support institutions, through state policies and programs, in preparing students, engaging communities, and modeling solutions.

- 2.1:** Coordinate state agencies with higher education to prepare students for clean economy jobs.
- 2.2:** Support institutions in efforts to model, research, and develop climate mitigation and adaptation solutions by ensuring sufficient resources.

RECOMMENDATION

3

Ensure higher education is eligible for state capital investments and that those investments prioritize climate mitigation, adaptation, and sustainability.

RECOMMENDATION

4


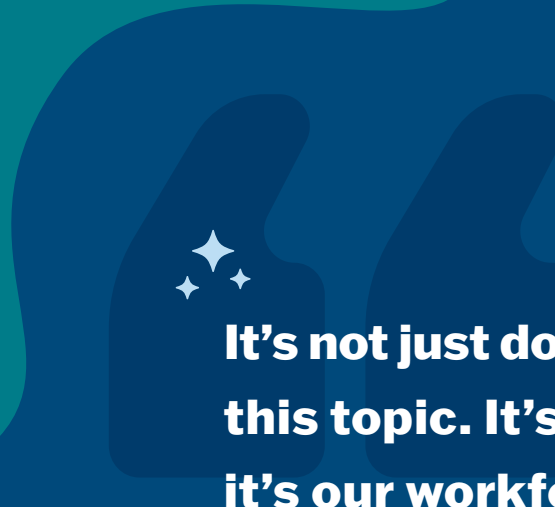
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Opportunities for Local Policymakers, Business, Philanthropy

Local policymakers can incorporate higher education in the development, framing, and implementation of local climate action plans (CAPs), submit joint grant applications in partnership with higher education institutions, partner to create accessible public transportation routes to campuses, and create formal coordination roles between local government and higher education institutions.


Businesses can partner with higher education to prepare students for clean economy jobs, support equitable pathways to clean economy jobs, and hire the next generation of climate leaders.

Philanthropy can signal to the field and to grantees the importance of advancing projects at the intersection of climate and higher education, equitably invest in efforts that help institutions educate, engage, and support students in a changing climate, engage local communities, model climate solutions, and communicate to the broader society about how we can address climate change.



It's not just doctors who need to be educated on this topic. It's college students, it's companies, it's our workforce. Everyone needs to have a thorough understanding of climate change and how it impacts our world. I urge you to recognize the wide-ranging and multifaceted ways that climate impacts your students, your organizations, your missions, and your communities."

— **Kanika Malani**, Medical Student,
Brown University and Medical Students
for a Sustainable Future



"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