The transition needed to build a sustainable and resilient society provides an opportunity to avoid past injustices, such as placing the burden of pollution on low-income communities and communities of color. Higher education can help ensure a more just, equitable, and resilient future.

Universities in the United States are often criticized as being bastions of privilege, serving the interests of an elite few. College enrollment rates are disproportionately higher for wealthy families, and this is especially true at the country’s most elite institutions. However, recent research has identified a number of state public institutions such as the City College of New York and Texas A&M with strong track records of launching low-income students into the upper rungs of the economic distribution. Beyond economic mobility, colleges and universities can advance social justice goals by serving marginalized communities with participatory research initiatives, information, and technical assistance among other resources.

Equity and Environmental Justice in Action

The changing economy will require new skills and create new job opportunities. Higher education will play a pivotal role in ensuring young people from Black, Latino, Indigenous, and other communities of color as well as low-income rural and urban communities — who are most impacted by climate change — can benefit from these opportunities and success. As institutions change their curriculum and degree programs to match economic needs, they must also ensure they provide opportunities to a broader range of people than they have historically. Higher education will need to learn from leading institutions that serve socioeconomically diverse populations well.

The connection to climate justice goes beyond workforce preparation. In almost every aspect of climate work that institutions do — ranging from mitigation and adaptation to research and information sharing — colleges and universities can apply an equity lens to program design. That may mean prioritizing their research and partnerships with historically marginalized Black and Indigenous communities or providing additional technical assistance and information to clean energy startups led by women and people of color.
Finally, higher education will need to address its own historic inequities where HBCUs, TCUs, and community colleges that serve more low-income students, students of color, and first generation students generally operate with outdated infrastructure and fewer resources. Efforts to promote mitigation, adaptation, workforce training, and climate research on campus must address these historic inequalities.

State Policy Opportunities

State policymakers can assist higher education in ensuring a more just, equitable, and sustainable future, including by providing access to quality higher education experiences to students from a wide variety of backgrounds. Tools like state financial aid, admissions requirements, and outreach to K-12 students all provide opportunities to increase higher education access. Policymakers should also recognize that institutions such as TCUs and HBCUs are essential to the clean energy transition because they play a critical role educating historically marginalized populations. These institutions will need adequate funding, technical assistance, and connections to state economic development initiatives to reach their full potential in taking climate action and preparing students for success.

References