

EQUITY & ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE



HIGHER ED
CLIMATE ACTION
◆ aspen institute

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.¹ 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.² 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.



BRIGHT SPOT

The HBCU Climate Change Consortium³

was launched in 2011 to diversify leadership in the environmental movement and raise awareness about the impact of climate change on marginalized communities. The Consortium seeks to develop HBCU student leaders into scientists, policymakers, and community leaders who take action to address climate change.



BRIGHT SPOT

The American Indian Higher Education

Consortium (AIHEC)⁴ is pioneering multiple climate resilience initiatives. Its partnership with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Tribal Resilience Liaison program meets tribal science needs, supports climate adaptation planning, and coordinates federal agency and Tribal collaboration on climate programs. Meanwhile, the Climate Resilience Summer Research Program offers Indigenous students a blend of modern science and traditional knowledge to tackle climate concerns on Tribal lands.

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.



BRIGHT SPOT

The EPA has selected 16 Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers (EJ TCTACs) in partnership with the U.S. Department of Energy that will receive \$177 million to help underserved and overburdened communities across the country. Several institutions of higher education, including the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico-Metropolitan Campus, the University of Minnesota, and San Diego State University, were selected as awardees to collaborate with local partners in order to bring needed support to their state and region.



BRIGHT SPOT: MARYLAND

The Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore was designed to increase diversity among future leaders in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics by supporting students who intend to pursue a Ph.D. or combined M.D./Ph.D. in STEM. Since 1993, the program has graduated over 1400 students and alumni from the program have earned 426 Ph.D.s.

References

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3. HBCU Climate Change Consortium - Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. (n.d.). Enmasse - Deep South Center for Environmental Justice (DSCEJ) - Website. <https://www.dscej.org/our-work/hbcu-climate-change-consortium>.
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