

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



HIGHER-ED
CLIMATE ACTION
◆ aspen institute

To tackle the immense challenges posed by a warming planet, we need all our social institutions to contribute to solutions, including higher education. Colleges and universities have taken the lead in many areas from commitments to reducing carbon emissions to research on scaling up clean energy production. Going forward, higher education has a critical role to play to mitigate its impact on the environment, adapt to a changing climate, train the rising generation for a new clean economy, and prepare students to lead a more sustainable, resilient, and equitable society.

Despite the large role that state governments play in America's higher education system, state leadership and support for climate action on campus is noticeably less than it needs to be. This report summarizes a range of state policy levers that could help colleges and universities reach their full potential in addressing climate change. We focus on six key areas for action on climate change in higher education: Mitigating Carbon Pollution; Adapting to Climate Change; Training a Clean Economy Workforce; Driving Climate Research and Innovation; Advancing Equity and Environmental Justice; and Sharing Knowledge, Building Partnerships.

MITIGATING CARBON POLLUTION

Overview: The higher education sector has substantial resource needs that impact the environment, including land, energy, buildings, food, water, and transportation. Like other industries, higher education must reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to tackle climate change.

Policy Levers: Bonds for net-zero infrastructure; statewide higher education climate commitments; power purchase agreements.

ADAPTING TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Overview: Higher education institutions must prepare for the consequences of climate change, including more frequent or intense extreme weather events that could impact campus operations, student enrollment, or campus well-being.

Policy Levers: Bonds for adaptable infrastructure; resources for research and technical assistance centers on climate adaptation.

TRAINING A CLEAN ECONOMY WORKFORCE

Overview: Colleges and universities have enormous influence over workforce preparation, training, and retraining. As the clean energy transition fundamentally alters our economy, creating new jobs and changing existing roles, higher education must adapt to meet society's needs.

Policy Levers: Attainment goals in clean energy industries; financial support and partnerships between economic development agencies and higher education.

DRIVING CLIMATE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Overview: Universities have led much of the research documenting the growing climate crisis as well as potential solutions ranging from new solar technologies to policy ideas. Higher education will need policymaker support to maintain and expand this critical role.

Policy Levers: Align state economic development goals with university research priorities to support regional industries.

ADVANCING EQUITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Overview: The transition to a clean economy provides an opportunity to avoid past injustices such as placing the burden of pollution on communities of color, and to advance a just economy.

Policy Levers: Funding schools that serve historically marginalized populations; information and financial aid to programs connected to quality clean economy jobs.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE, BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Overview: Colleges and universities serve as sources of trusted information for communities far beyond academic research. State policymakers can amplify higher education's role as a community partner.

Policy Levers: State higher education governing boards make information dissemination a priority; state climate action plans.