KNOWLEDGE & PARTNERSHIPS

HIGHER ED CLIMATE ACTION
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Colleges and universities are stewards of their communities, serving as hubs of coordination, learning, and trusted information. Higher education can support a clean energy transition by increasing societal climate literacy, sharing expertise about how to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and partnering with other social institutions in the public and private sector to drive climate action.

Higher education serves a critical social role beyond preparing students for jobs and supporting academic research. Land grant colleges, for instance, have an explicit mission to engage within their communities and offer broad populations access to information and education. Colleges routinely do this through reports and analysis aimed at a public audience, providing access to libraries and museums, sponsored events on and off campus, continuing learning courses, offering free technical assistance and more. Further, higher education serves the broader public good alongside other social leaders in government, community-based organizations, and business.

Knowledge and Partnerships in Action

As climate change progresses, communities will increasingly see major changes to how they work and live. Whether increased frequency or intensity of extreme weather such as floods, hurricanes, and wildfires or increased public health risk of heat-related illnesses — universities are frequently looked to by community leaders, government officials, and the public as trusted advisors that can identify problems and provide recommendations about how to respond. Colleges often provide technical assistance in a wide variety of areas. For instance, the federal government has chosen multiple universities as hubs for technical assistance on implementation of the Inflation Reduction Act.[1] Communities can also look to partner with higher education as they plan, implement, and evaluate their climate goals and strategies.[2]

State Policy Opportunities

State policymakers can take multiple steps to encourage colleges and universities to step into their role as purveyors of trusted climate information. State higher education executive officers and governing boards can set community outreach as an explicit priority for their public institutions and allocate resources accordingly. State policymakers can also involve universities in broader climate action planning. This can include inviting university representatives to commissions that develop statewide plans, as well as establishing an explicit role for higher education in providing public information and technical assistance related to climate adaptation, energy efficiency, farming, and the clean energy industry.

BRIGHT SPOT: VERMONT

The University of Vermont established a Farming and Climate Change program to help local farmers adapt to dryer summers, milder winters, and a longer growing season. The program provides educational and technical assistance with these challenges to local farmers and performs research to continually develop new solutions.[3]

BRIGHT SPOT: NEW YORK

Universities frequently partner with government and business to analyze local workforce needs. For instance, in 2019, the University of Buffalo published a Clean Energy Workforce Assessment for Western New York. Working with an advisory panel of local clean energy business leaders, the project team analyzed data to identify industry trends, employer needs, and educational opportunities. The analysis is intended to help local industry and higher education coordinate in the face of a dynamic energy transition.[4]

BRIGHT SPOT: ARIZONA

The City of Phoenix forged a partnership with Arizona State University (ASU) to define baseline emissions levels and create tracking and monitoring systems for the city's climate action plan. With ASU's ongoing advisory role, Phoenix benefits from academic expertise and rigorous scrutiny of their climate action strategies. Their continued relationship highlights the value of sustained partnerships for ongoing adaptation and evolution of Phoenix's climate action plan, allowing the city to more ably and sustainably manage its implementation.[5]

References

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