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Deloitte Center for Higher Education Excellence™



Advancing sustainability in higher education

A holistic approach for colleges and universities

Introduction

The higher education sector has no shortage of challenges. Diminished enrollments, declining public trust, and questions about the value of a degree all pose serious threats, spurring efforts by some institutions to reconsider who they are, who they serve, and how they serve them.

As they craft strategies for the future, these institutions should consider the larger context in which they operate. Colleges and universities are no longer insulated from the rhythms and pressures of the outside world. Their success increasingly depends on their ability to adapt to change. As societal expectations for responsible stewardship of natural resources grow, colleges and universities should consider sustainability practices that span the institution as a whole.

Higher education plays many roles for immediate stakeholders. Each of these roles has implications for how a school should approach sustainability.

As **recruiters**, colleges and universities compete with one another for new learners. The "traditional" student who matriculates from high school is in high demand but short supply. They increasingly arrive with high expectations for a school's sustainability practices.¹ Likewise, adult learners with a background in industry understand the economic advantages of sustainable operations.²

As **educators**, institutions of higher education prepare tomorrow's workforce for a rapidly growing sustainability sector. Learners increasingly assert that they are pursuing postsecondary credentials to access quality jobs.³ Sustainability is important to higher education's mission to prepare students for business, as well as to explain scientific advances in long-term, interacting systems.

As **research hubs**, universities are in constant search of applied innovation. Discoveries can enhance an institution's reputation and create opportunities for commercialization. As the demand increases for sustainable innovations, institutions will compete for the brightest minds in sustainability research.

As **property owners**, many institutions have outdated infrastructure and deferred maintenance.⁴ As institutions invest in facility maintenance, equipment upgrades, and capital projects, sustainable infrastructure solutions may benefit their long-term budgets.

As **employers**, colleges and universities compete to attract and retain a talented workforce.⁵ Historically, staff and faculty in higher education tolerate relatively low pay out of a commitment to the mission. Adopting a strong sustainability orientation with clear opportunities for employees to contribute in meaningful ways could reinforce a sense of purpose and help stem attrition.

Finally, as **investors**, institutions often direct millions or billions of endowment dollars into funds that power their operations and longterm solvency. The choices they make with these investments reflect institutional values, signaling priorities in more indirect but no less impactful ways.

A holistic approach to sustainability



Higher education has historically managed these roles separately. Academics rarely incorporates campus operations, and employee HR practices don't often appear in recruitment messaging.

A school can help encourage sustainable initiatives by aligning its priorities across these separate roles. The same efficiency goals that attract talented staff should inform academic programs and recruitment. A shared institutional mission can simplify decisions and ensure efforts reinforce, rather than stymie, each other.

Sustainability principles should be considered in four contexts: academics, research, community engagement, and campus operations.

The academic program is the heart of any college or university. The concepts embedded in sustainability are transferable across academic disciplines. Sustainability colors discussions from ethical philosophy, to economics, to the chemical properties of biodegradable plastics. In almost every subject, sustainability links academic theory to real-life application.

Corporations once generated most commercialized research in America, but now, the vast bulk of it happens in academic research environments.⁶ Underutilized by the private sector, researchers often gravitate toward universities for opportunities. That means institutions can set their research agenda with dollars and lab space. Funding decisions can integrate sustainability goals into the faculty recruitment process.

Learners who enroll at colleges and universities come from many backgrounds and belief systems. They often adopt a deeper and more developed sense of self through their educational experiences. The swirl of new people can facilitate self-discovery. Since young people will likely face decisions about how to deal with climate change, the topic's urgency and relevance can bridge communities and unearth deeper questions, the kind with no right answers.

Campus operations offer perhaps the most direct opportunity to demonstrate commitment to sustainability. From how energy is sourced to how natural light reaches new buildings to how the vehicle fleet is powered, campus operations can reduce an institution's carbon footprint.

The role of academics in addressing sustainability

The academic curriculum defines the character and quality of an educational institution. Students expect education to touch on the issues they expect to face in their futures. In a world increasingly unable to ignore the consequences of complex patterns of consumption, universities should provide young people a basic familiarity with the challenges of sustainability.

As an interdisciplinary topic, sustainability can apply to traditional curriculum as a shared topic, accessible to students regardless of major. Likewise, majors focused specifically on sustainability can prepare learners for entry into the "green economy."

Why a sustainability focus can benefit higher education

As sustainability grows in importance, higher education finds itself in the middle of a national conversation. Schools should educate young people on how to meaningfully engage these topics, regardless of what career they eventually choose.

Applicants care. The Princeton Review recently released their *Guide* to *Green Colleges for 2023*. A survey revealed that 77% of applicants consider a college/university's commitment to the environment when selecting a school; 37% of respondents said the school's sustainability approach would "strongly" or "very much" impact their decision.⁷ A commitment to sustainability can be a powerful recruiting tool.

What actions can higher education take now?

 Include sustainability in the curriculum: By embedding sustainability into curricula, institutions can give students the opportunity to develop fluency in a topic directly related to many industries and disciplines. As climate change spurs mass migrations and becomes central to issues from political science to agriculture, sustainability can provide a common entry point into how scientific theories relate to real world issues.

Allegheny College, a private liberal arts college in Meadville, PA, for example, has a long history of sustainably-focused curriculum, starting with one of the first environmental science departments in the country. The school is the eighth institution in the nation to achieve carbon neutrality. Allegheny College infused its carbon neutrality journey into the classroom, engaging students in practical aspects of geothermal heating and energy-efficient engineering. Allegheny works with carbon offsetting projects in the community, like methane capture at a dairy farm, that offer students experience beyond campus walls. $^{\rm 8}$

- 2. **Experiential education beyond the classroom**: Institutions looking for quick progress on sustainability can start with programs that raise awareness. These can include:
 - Eco-rep programs: Learners research specific sustainabilityrelated issues and act as ambassadors for them on campus
 - Experiential education: Learners have opportunities to understand sustainability concepts in context
 - Conferences: Students exchange ideas with sustainability professionals
 - Speakers and events: Departments invite specialists to provide new perspectives and share leading practices
 - Study abroad: Trips to ecologically significant locations (e.g., Costa Rica) can have a deep impact on participants' perspectives
 - Independent study: Students conceive for-credit research in partnership with faculty
 - For-credit/paid internships: Learners apply their education in professional contexts
- 3. Creating interdisciplinary courses, degree programs, and schools focused on sustainability: Institutions can imagine new curricula that span entire departments, schools, and colleges. Reinventing curricula to emphasize sustainability could involve interdisciplinary collaboration, faculty development, and pursuing new methods of course development.

Arizona State University's (ASU) College of Global Futures is an example of this approach. The college offers majors in the School of Sustainability, the School for the Future of Innovation in Society, the School of Complex Adaptive Systems, and the School of Ocean Futures. Students have the opportunity to gain in-depth, sustainability-driven, and career-oriented educational experiences.⁹

Further east, Florida Gulf Coast University's Water School is an example of an academic entity encompassing several teaching and research units, field facilities, and community relationships. It is explicitly focused on issues related to waterways and water quality, which are critical stressors to the ecosystems in Florida. This focus can engage learners in the pressing challenges of their local environment.¹⁰

The role of research in addressing sustainability



Research and innovation are critical to addressing climate change. New technologies can help countries meet net-zero commitments and achieve the rates of decarbonization needed to limit severe warming.¹¹ According to the International Energy Agency, reaching net-zero by 2050 will be possible only with considerable advancements in clean technologies, especially advanced batteries, hydrogen electrolysers, and direct air capture and storage. Further innovation is needed in infrastructure, international collaboration, public policy, and financial incentives.¹²

Institutions of higher education can help drive such technological advancement. They contribute about half of the basic research conducted in the U.S. and between ten and 15% of total U.S. research and development.¹³ A focus on sustainability and climate from leading research institutions can help with the progress needed on mitigation and adaptation.

Why a sustainability focus can benefit higher education

Focusing research on sustainability can serve institutions' broader strategic goals.

- Advance recruiting: By becoming leaders in research fields related to sustainability, such as natural capital, energy, and water conservation, universities can improve their capacity to attract innovators, researchers, and designers. Faculty contributions can have an impact, developing reputations and helping the institution attract more talent.
- Increase research funding: Climate initiatives continue to proliferate across the public and private sectors. The Inflation Reduction Act, passed in August 2022, provides over \$20B in

grant funding.¹⁴ In the private sector, corporate investments in climate technology reached well over \$11 billion in 2021.¹⁵

3. **Enable opportunities for climate-tech revenue:** University research can unearth commercial applications. American patent law enables inventors and institutions to collect revenues from their research. Universities have long profited from sponsored research, and tech transfer has generated billions of dollars for the US GDP.¹⁶ Given the corporate appetite for funding climate innovation, universities could reap benefits from climate tech research.

For two decades, The University of Connecticut (UConn) has profited from offering technology commercialization services to faculty. They help license new companies, enable industry partnerships for ongoing research projects, and provide patent assistance, including for green tech. UConn has helped faculty create dozens of start-up companies, and has raised over \$1B through its incubator companies.¹⁷ Recently, UConn faculty patented technology that "recycles waste paper, waste clothing, and waste fabric materials, converting them to new, structural materials that can mimic plastic, wood, ceramics, and metal."¹⁸

What actions can higher education take now?

- Embed sustainability and climate research leadership in overarching campus strategies. Establishing public commitments to sustainability research signals a new, explicit role for institutions: to challenge tough problems facing society.
- 2. **Prioritize sustainability and climate opportunities in research strategy.** Administrative infrastructure can support research in emerging fields. University research strategies can prioritize sustainability and climate research.
- 3. Encourage interdisciplinary and cross-institution research. Incentives for cross-disciplinary studies can help unite historically disconnected parts of a university. Strategies to address climate change will likely incorporate a breadth of factors, including science, technology, policy, and culture. Establishing institutional frameworks to support crossinstitutional research can help. For example, the University of California, San Diego has made an institution-wide commitment to addressing climate change, with a major focus on interdisciplinary research. Seventeen climate-change focused research centers and departments, like a wildfire modelling lab and a center for energy research, reflect that focus.¹⁹

The role of community engagement in addressing sustainability

While climate change is a globally shared challenge, it's experienced locally. Countless variables affect communities' lived experiences of climate change—like geography, age, socioeconomic status, and cultural beliefs. Though the array of variables complicates the challenges of climate change, it also diversifies the available toolkit of responses. As the next generation addresses these challenges, it is essential to access as many types of expertise as possible. Expanded community engagement can better equip humankind to solve complex problems.

Why a sustainability focus can benefit higher education

In addition to the content of their coursework, students acquire numerous life skills simply from entering new situations and learning to connect with people from different backgrounds. Climate change is often an inter-disciplinary challenge that requires engagement across communities, employing the types of communication and problem-solving that are valued across industries. Studying sustainable solutions often trains highly desirable intangible skills.

Sustainability is relevant to learners regardless of major or background. The gravity of the topic, and its wide range of applications, connects it to even the most abstract academic subject. It provides an entire community of learners a shared topic on which to relate.

Sustainability also strengthens communities. Campus sustainability efforts can invite a local community on a shared mission.



What actions can higher education take now?

- Connect students with sustainability professionals: At Indiana University, the McKinney Climate Fellows program matches students with experienced sustainability professionals.²⁰ Numerous institutions have an office of sustainability that serves some engagement function, whether tabling at campus events, organizing group service opportunities, or providing internships on campus. Internships at UConn's Office of Sustainability, for example, are structured to offer real work experience in sustainability, helping prepare students for "green economy" jobs.²¹
- Look to the community when defining sustainability goals: Sustainability is a chance for productive collaboration.²² Sustainability initiatives can engage community members meaningfully as peers. The approach can help inform sustainability goals and strengthen relationships.
- 3. Expand the function of the campus sustainability office beyond campus operations: Though many institutional offices of sustainability were created to address the sustainability of the campus' physical footprint, it has become increasingly common—even expected—for the campus sustainability office to serve as a community engagement hub. The Sustainability Tracking and Rating System (STARS) gauges success in several engagement and inclusion categories. A widely used sustainability scoring framework for higher education institutions, STARS even offers measurement tools for such fields as support for underrepresented groups, student life, and participation in public policy.²³
- 4. Incorporate a broad range of views in decision-making: Traditionally, the board of trustees holds the highest level of decision-making power at an institution. Boards may take advice from committees comprised of stakeholders. The Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing at Columbia University, for example, codifies that institution's commitment to community.²⁴ Since 2000, the group has advised the institution's trustees on ethical and social issues. Incorporating input from campus communities into sustainability goals can not only result in more informed decision-making, but stronger buy-in.

The role of operations in addressing sustainability

Globally, carbon emissions from buildings operation account for nearly 30% of emissions.²⁵ Institutions looking to make a commitment to sustainability by way of reducing emissions should pay particular attention to facilities operations. To make progress toward carbon neutrality goals, institutions need to address emissions across three major scopes²⁶:

- Scope 1: Those directly created on campus (e.g., emissions produced from operating campus boilers and vehicles)
- Scope 2: Those created indirectly due to operational needs of the physical plant (e.g., emissions from electricity consumed on campus)
- Scope 3: A broader category encompassing all emissions created by institutional activity (e.g., purchased goods, air travel, food/ water/physical waste)

The first two are directly related to campus infrastructure and operations, while the third relates more to campus life and the institution's supply chain, which can be trickier to address.

There is no one prescription for how to achieve net zero. Institutions across the country have found creative ways to tackle emissions reduction while adding to the richness of their academics and culture.

Why a sustainability focus can benefit higher education

A campus's facilities are the physical embodiment of the postsecondary experience. Sustainable operations can serve as a recruitment and retention tool, provide students with real-time education and research opportunities, and reduce institutional spending.

Investment into sustainable operations doesn't need to threaten the budget. Higher education institutions can acquire tax credits and incentives through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) for sustainability initiatives. Clean fuel vehicles, clean energy investments, and efficient capital improvements and buildings may all qualify.

What actions can higher education take now?

Target building operations emissions: To target scopes

 and 2 emissions, institutions may explore an array of
 decarbonization projects: modernizing building systems such
 as HVAC, finding sustainable alternatives for campus vehicles
 (e.g. police cars, maintenance vehicles), using sustainable fuels
 and electricity sources (e.g. geothermal, biofuels, and solar),
 and exploring opportunities to green IT infrastructure (e.g.
 energy efficient data centers, cloud computing/virtualization,
 lifecycle management).





Because students are living and learning on campus, higher education institutions have an opportunity to use their spaces as living laboratories. Even uncomplicated projects can help. The University of Washington retrofitted a legacy facility with LED lighting. The project was spurred by faculty research and advocacy, emboldened by student involvement, and culminated in significant energy savings.²⁷

Construction projects are highly visible, but approaches to decarbonization can be quiet and budget-conscious as well. Take power purchase agreements (PPA), a form of off-campus green energy project. American University uses a PPA to source renewable energy while avoiding the capital investment of creating and maintaining a solar field on their space-dense campus.²⁸ Likewise, five small New England liberal arts colleges sourced green energy from the Farmington Solar Project, a solar farm in Maine, at a controlled price.²⁹

- 2. **Audit IT practices:** Sustainability considerations in IT reduce the cost of almost every department. They can include:
 - Procurement (e.g., biodegradable toner ink, Energy STAR-rated products)
 - Energy-efficient data centers, including cloud-based operations to reduce an institution's physical infrastructure footprint
 - Efficient and responsible hardware lifecycle management
- 3. Find creative ways to address emissions resulting from campus supply chain and culture: Addressing scope 1 and 2 emissions can be straightforward. Scope 3 is murkier. Assessing scope 3 emissions requires a more comprehensive analysis of institutional activities.

To tackle scope 3 emissions, institutions need to consider their entire supply chain, targeting procurement, travel, and waste. The University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB) is experimenting with Nearly Carbon-Neutral conferences.³⁰ UCSB Professor Ken Hiltner recognized the significant carbon emissions that stem from air travel to conferences, and wanted to find a greener way to provide academics the same interactions. His virtual "Nearly Carbon-Neutral" conference structure eliminates most air travel and welcomes a diverse subsection of participants who can't afford the expenses of a typical, in-person conference.

4. Building sustainability-focused collaborations: Tackling scope 3 emissions is often a journey undertaken alongside key partners. For example, some vendors are adjusting their portfolios to offer sustainable options at reasonable cost. This can be a win-win for institutional clients.

At the moment, cutting emissions in supply chains is more easily said than done. Supply chains are notoriously opaque. Vendor claims of sustainable practices can be difficult to verify. Assessing sustainable practices and procurement is complex and time-consuming, something even major corporations don't always have the resources to pursue. Despite these difficulties, centering sustainability goals during vendor selection can help provide an important foundation for the future.

9

Conclusion

The higher education sector is at a sharp turning point. Legacy approaches to recruiting students are showing their age, the relevance of curricula has drawn increasing public skepticism, and the physical footprints of college campuses are in need of modernization. A focus on sustainability doesn't need be an additional chore. The intersection of sustainability with learners' priorities and its interdisciplinary relevance can help higher education evolve to meet the moment.

Absent a commitment to sustainability, higher education could deepen the divide between how it operates and what society and stakeholders expect. By making sustainability a prominent commitment in their shifting missions, institutions could instead expand public capacity for much needed R&D, engage a wider range of stakeholders in critical dialogue, and integrate the student experience across the curriculum in a way that matches student values.

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Deloitte's Higher Education Practice

The path forward is rarely well-paved. Time-tested practices may guide the journey, but they can only map the ground they have covered. Moving forward requires fresh thinking, the courage to venture beyond, and a capable partner to guide you on the way.

As a leading provider of higher education professional services, we offer the fresh perspective and unique skills needed to address complex challenges and explore promising opportunities. We bring big ideas and practical solutions to advance teaching, learning, research, and community service. On every step of your transformation journey, we're here to serve as collaborative partners on your path forward.

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In the face of a growing global imperative, Deloitte is committed to helping clients advance their sustainability, climate, and equity (SC&E) objectives. As drivers of change, leaders in research, and educators of tomorrow's workforce, higher education institutions play a unique role in SC&E. Whether aspiring to become a carbon-neutral university, creating action plans to tackle the climate crisis, or developing collaborations to drive engagement, innovation and research, Deloitte partners with institutions on setting institutional vision and strategy, evaluating and assisting with campus decarbonization and resilience initiatives, driving student and community engagement, and providing finance and reporting expertise.

Center for Higher Education Excellence™

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