Campus Climate Action Toolkit

A guide to cultivating environmental awareness and climate action on your campus and in your community
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This toolkit was developed and distributed by the Campus Climate Action Corps, an initiative of Campus Compact and AmeriCorps.
The Climate Crisis

The climate crisis stems from human activities like burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial processes, which release greenhouse gasses such as carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere. These gasses trap heat, causing temperatures to rise at an unprecedented rate. While Earth’s temperature has fluctuated throughout history, it is now rising at a significantly higher rate than ever recorded. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the planet’s average temperature is warmer than what has been recorded over the past 100,000 years, with substantial warming occurring since the late 1950s (IPCC). Atmospheric carbon dioxide levels remained at or below 300 parts per million for millennia; however, since 1911, these levels have exponentially increased (NASA).

Climate scientists agree that the spike in atmospheric carbon dioxide is due primarily to the burning of fossil fuels. The Energy Information Administration (EIA) reported that in 2022, fossil fuels produced 81% of the energy consumed within the United States (EIA). If society’s reliance on fossil fuels continues, the global average temperature will surpass its two-degree Celsius threshold – the maximum allowable increase in global average temperature compared to pre-industrial levels. Crossing this threshold will lead to catastrophic impacts on ecosystems, biodiversity, weather patterns, sea levels, human societies, and more.

The reality of the climate crisis is undeniable, but amidst the challenges lies an opportunity for transformative change. Rapid actions taken at all levels – individual, local, state, national, and global – are needed to reverse the warming trend and keep the planet from reaching its tipping point. In their book “The Future We Choose,” Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Cormac state, “Every time you make an individual choice to be a responsible custodian to this beautiful Earth, you contribute toward major transformations” (pg 44). As a student on a college campus, your commitment to prioritizing climate action can spark transformations that will shape the trajectory of campus policies, behaviors, and attitudes toward sustainability. Your voice and actions have the power to inspire fellow students, faculty, and administrators to take meaningful steps toward mitigating climate change.
Higher Education's Role In Addressing Climate Change

Higher education institutions are vital agents of change with the ability to leverage their distinctive capabilities and resources in the greater community to enable a just, equitable, and sustainable future (Campus Compact). They serve as hubs of knowledge and innovation, housing experts across disciplines who collaborate to tackle environmental challenges. By facilitating collaborations with local governments, businesses, and non-profit organizations, these institutions form extensive networks within their communities. They inspire and empower community members to adopt eco-friendly practices and support climate action through outreach programs, sustainability events, expertise sharing, and educational resources.

Students, as integral members of these institutions, are positioned to lead efforts in tackling climate challenges. They are the future leaders, innovators, and policymakers who will navigate the complexities of a changing world. Empowered with knowledge and guided by mentorship from faculty and experts, students can spearhead impactful projects that will contribute to reducing carbon emissions and increasing environmental awareness.

How to Use This Toolkit

This Campus Climate Action Toolkit offers valuable information tailored to the unique needs of campus communities. As climate change continues to be a pressing issue, all institutions of higher education must be involved in climate action and mitigation. By equipping students and campuses with practical resources and guidance, this toolkit supports strategic planning processes to increase on-campus environmental stewardship. Throughout this toolkit, students will learn the benefits of creating asset maps, advisory committees, environmental clubs, and campus-led, community-based initiatives, mobilizing collective action for a more sustainable and resilient future.

Regardless of an institution’s size or capacity, this toolkit can be an effective resource to improve climate action. For campuses without a sustainability office, environmental studies/sciences department, or eco-club, this toolkit serves as a supportive guide to building a presence of environmental stewardship. It prepares students and campuses to identify and utilize existing assets to support and inform their goals. It also provides multiple avenues that can be taken to promote environmental work and garner support from other students, faculty, and community members. This toolkit is ideal to help serve as
a general guideline for steps that may be taken to advance environmental action. Feel free to utilize whichever components are most helpful for your campus!

Institutions with existing environmental resources can also find value in the Campus Climate Action Toolkit. A campus may not need guidance in how to create a club, for example, but could gain insight into the value of student advisory committees or updating environmental asset maps. Various suggested actions within the toolkit can be employed to review the success of the campus’ programs and initiatives to determine where improvements are needed. In addition, many of these action items can be utilized to create larger-scale projects. For example, if your campus does not have a long-term climate action plan, this toolkit can serve as a guide to help plan one in collaboration with the appropriate staff. Campus climate action plans are critical tools that allow institutions to evaluate their environmental impact and explicitly state how they will reduce their emissions and improve campus operations. Overall, it is encouraged to utilize the sections of the toolkit that are most applicable to your campus based on its level of resources, capacity, and involvement.

**Asset Mapping**

When broadening environmental stewardship on campus, it is essential to use proper procedures to first identify existing efforts that already engage in similar work. The goal is not to reinvent the wheel or overstep but to draw inspiration from and amplify their success. This identification process is called asset mapping, which involves cataloging available resources within your institution to reveal strengths and weaknesses. To advance awareness of climate change and environmental stewardship on your campus, utilize these steps to uncover ongoing initiatives and identify potential collaborators among individuals.

1. **Define the Purpose**
   To start, determine the core issue you aim to address and what actions you hope to take. Do you want to gain insight into existing environmental resources and initiatives, create a new sustainability project, or establish foundational relationships that improve existing and future campus efforts? By devising a clear purpose, you can tailor your search to individuals and organizations whose experiences align with your goal.

2. **Identify Assets**
Identify various student organizations, offices, departments, and councils that have previously engaged in environmental work or have expressed interest in implementing more green programs on campus. These could include faculty members across various disciplines, the sustainability or facilities office, or student-led clubs e.g. engineering, sustainability, art, or social justice.

3. Evaluating Asset Capacities
   Evaluate each identified asset to gauge its potential contribution to your goals. Uncover its strengths and where there is room for collaboration. For each resource, list the various assets they can provide, including physical, human, financial, and social, and strategize how to leverage them for your cause.

4. See if Other Asset Maps Already Exist
   If someone has previously created asset maps for the campus, access them to determine if any groups would be valuable to include in your own. Even if an environmental-focused map does not exist, you can broaden your search to include maps related to energy, food distribution, disaster services, or any other sector related to climate change. This strategy can assist in seeking a potential partner already familiar with your campus and enhancing any outdated sources.

5. Familiarize Yourself with Previous Events and Initiatives
   Peruse the school’s calendar and published articles to discover past initiatives hosted on your campus. For instance, the calendar may list past Earth Day events or a conversation series hosted several years ago. Use these events to locate those who planned and implemented the series and list them as potential partners. You can apply a similar approach when searching for community partners.

6. Use a Unique Approach
   While researching professors on campus, it is common to find individual faculty members with degrees in environmental studies/sciences teaching across various departments. You may discover someone who received a degree in environmental studies but teaches sociology or anthropology. Moreover, do not hesitate to include those who may seem unrelated to your cause. For example, students in the drawing club are impacted by climate change because one day the natural landscapes that inspire their art may be destroyed by forest fires or droughts. They could also spread awareness of your mission through artwork portraying the effects of climate change on people and the environment. Everyone, regardless of their background and experience, has a role to play in combating climate change. You just may be the one who ignites their passion and reveals that role to them.
7. **Map the Assets**

Once you have compiled a detailed list of assets on your campus, use Excel or Google Sheets to arrange this information to be clear, concise, and easily navigable. Include a contact person’s phone and email, the club or organization they are involved with (if applicable), a description of their work, and how they can assist you in reaching your goal. You can also elect to use GIS to create a physical map of the assets in your community, like the one seen to the right. By creating a map, you can better visualize where your assets are located within the campus and wider community and begin working towards filling any identified gaps.

**Developing an Action Plan**

Crafting a meaningful action plan isn’t just about addressing the immediate challenges we face; it’s about shaping a sustainable future where nature and humans thrive together. Now that you have mapped out the resources on your campus and in the community, you’re ready to develop your action plan. An action plan is most effective when it outlines specific, practical steps and addresses short-term and long-term goals to ensure the sustainability of your efforts. This plan isn’t just a document; it’s your blueprint for making a real impact, demonstrating your commitment to leaving a healthier planet for yourself and future generations.

Begin by identifying a faculty or staff mentor who shares your passion for climate action on campus. This mentor will serve as your liaison, advocating for your initiatives amongst colleagues and ensuring approval from campus leadership. With the support of your mentor conduct a campus-wide assessment to understand current sustainability practices and identify areas for improvement. Utilize this data to establish achievable goals in reducing energy consumption, waste, and carbon emissions.

Consider starting with smaller initiatives on campus that lay the foundation for larger-scale projects by demonstrating the feasibility and effectiveness of eco-friendly practices. Many
students start by implementing a recycling/composting program, community garden, conservation campaign, or reusable water bottle program. At Florida International University, faculty and students hosted a Food Waste Prevention Week filled with educational events, activities, and projects, highlighting how reducing food waste is a simple yet effective action to protect the environment. If your campus already has these practices in place, consider partnering with the administration and staff to implement advanced efforts such as renewable energy projects, zero waste campaigns, sustainable transportation programs, green building certification, or a carbon neutrality commitment. For campuses with significant resources and high capacity, an action plan can be created for large-scale projects. For example, Cornell University is actively expanding and improving existing strategies and actions of its Climate Action Plan to ensure they are on track to net zero by 2035.

Convening a Focus Group

Now that your action plan is in progress, it is time to engage and strategize goals with campus groups to help inform the next steps. Begin by hosting a focus group—a gathering where participants discuss a specific topic and brainstorm solutions or improvements. This tool is invaluable for setting environmental goals, focus areas, and priorities on campus. When organizing, reach out to faculty, staff, alumni, and students for diverse perspectives, enhancing the discussion's impact.

Craft an elevator pitch highlighting the purpose of your focus group, reasons to attend, and desired outcomes. Emphasize it as a conversation among concerned individuals to identify missing community resources and gather input on desired changes. Highlight that their feedback will directly shape on-campus sustainability goals and initiatives. After creating your pitch, email it to the campus community along with a flier for sharing on social media and bulletin boards.

In preparation for your meeting, create a draft of guiding questions that will steer the conversation of the focus group. Keep them centered around climate change, stewardship, sustainability, and higher education institutions’ roles in climate action. This is an opportunity to identify the need for environmental action on your campus, so keep the conversation about the subject. Here are a few questions you may incorporate into your discussion:

- How do you see climate change affecting our campus and community? Does our campus need more capacity to address this issue, and if so, what might that look like?
- What do you believe is the role of [college/university name] in mitigating climate change? Where is it lacking in its role?
- What does environmental stewardship mean to you?
- What initiatives do you want to see on campus?
- How can we mobilize students to take action on our campus and in our community?

On the day of the focus group, provide a space for participants to sign in and elect into future communications. During the conversation, take note of highly engaged individuals and ensure to follow up with them about future opportunities. It is also best practice to take notes of the conversation, including any relevant concerns or suggestions that arise. You may want to assign this role to one of the participants in the session. Following the focus group, compile a summary of your notes and distribute it to the participants with any additional resources you would like to provide. In the email, outline your next steps for advancing campus environmental and climate change awareness, inviting participants to be involved.

Campuses without an existing sustainability plan may consider convening a focus group consisting of school leadership, including department chairs, deans, the facilities department, the sustainability office, the president (or someone from their office), and even a career advisor. For this conversation, you want to share insights from the initial focus group and encourage participants to discuss the benefits of being an environmentally conscious institution and the feasibility of various projects. Share statistics and published studies regarding the importance of climate action on college campuses and the associated economic benefits. The goal is to garner support from the school’s leadership and consistently demonstrate how to improve the campus’ carbon footprint, inspiring them to make significant operational changes and support your action plan.

**Creating a Student-Led Advisory Committee**

The next step is to build a student-led environmental advisory committee. An advisory committee is a body of people who serve as mentors and support an organization by spearheading projects and providing feedback and suggestions. It should focus on identifying ongoing, impactful initiatives that elevate environmental knowledge and action.
on campus, and assist in informing and finalizing the action plan. The committee will also serve as a body of people who will maintain momentum once you have left the campus.

To start building the committee, create a one-pager detailing its purpose, how often it will meet, the various roles available, and the requirements to be a member. Once created, the group should brainstorm ways to generate excitement for climate action across campus and complete the action plan. Drawing from insights gained during the focus group, members can discuss how to implement new environmental programs and clubs or collaborate with various departments/offices on campus. They can conduct research to determine best practices in implementing sustainability initiatives in higher education and how to develop strong, lasting relationships and initiatives to continue a legacy of environmental action.

The committee will be led by a chair responsible for leading meetings and applying what is discussed. They will serve as the primary point of contact and maintain consistent communication within and outside the committee. The other members will be expected to disseminate information throughout the campus and the broader community. When recruiting for members, identify anyone interested in driving change on campus, including those who participated in your focus group. It may be beneficial to create a brief nomination form for department heads to nominate students they believe would thrive in a leadership position.

Establishing an Environmental Student Club

At this stage, you have determined the need for more environmental awareness on campus, pinpointed various assets on and off campus that could serve as valuable partners, and created an advisory committee to support your efforts. Now, it’s time to explore establishing a student club that will be instrumental in executing the action plan. Student organizations are a fantastic way to have direct student involvement and leverage campus resources to support the club’s initiatives. As each campus has its own procedures for creating a student club, you can consult the student life website to understand the specific steps you must take. However, the general process is as follows:

1. Define the Club’s Purpose
First, identify why you are creating this club and draft a purpose statement. It should be a clear and concise idea of the reason behind the club. Here is an example of a purpose statement from EcoReps at the University of Rochester in New York:

"By giving the EcoReps the skills and knowledge needed to promote environmentally responsible behavior in freshmen residence halls, our program strives to create an environmentally literate student population."

2. **Find a Faculty Advisor**
   Now, identify a faculty or staff member to serve as the advisor for your club. They will assist in the planning and oversight of the club and serve as a point of contact. Consider asking the faculty or staff member assisting you with your action plan since they are already involved and aware of your goals.

3. **Generate More Student Interest and Involvement**
   With a strong purpose statement, the next step is to demonstrate that there is sufficient interest on campus for this club to be created. An effective approach is to table or provide a brief pitch to various classes, collecting student signatures. It is common for there to be a required minimum number of signatures, so confirm you have gathered at least that amount.

4. **Determine Officers**
   Before recruiting students and writing the club’s constitution, officers need to be elected. These students should be passionate about environmental work and willing to dedicate ample time to the club. Be sure to include a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer.

5. **Create a Constitution and Bylaws for Your Club**
   When drafting the club’s constitution and bylaws, utilize a template provided by the school or refer to those of other organizations for guidance. Organize it into different sections using articles, including the purpose, how officers are elected and their roles, qualifications for membership, member expectations, and the role of the faculty advisor. Remember that this is a living document to be modified through amendments and redrafting in the future, so it is acceptable if it is shorter during the first year.

6. **Register the Club with Student Life**
   Once you have gathered all the required materials, submit the application or registration form through the appropriate office for approval. Some schools have a
timeframe for when new organizations can register, so submit all your materials before the final deadline.

7. **Schedule the First Meeting**
   After your application is approved, it is time to schedule your club’s inaugural meeting! The initial meeting typically consists of administrative tasks and discussions to establish the club’s goals, environmental projects, and activities for the upcoming school year.

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**Planning Your Key Initiatives and Implementing the Action Plan**

With your action plan and club created, you are now prepared to put them into practice and plan your first initiative. Begin by defining the goal of your initiative. Is it to educate students about climate change in their community, reduce the campus’ carbon footprint, promote individual climate action, or something else? Use insights gained from the focus group and advisory council to inform it. Once the goal is clear, identify your target audience – are you focusing on a specific group of students or the entire campus? The more specific your audience, the easier it should be to create targeted content and advertisements to pique their interest. Understanding your target audience is critical in developing an impactful project or campaign. From here, the environmental club may start planning the necessary actions to achieve it – feel free to reference the [Event Planning Guide](#) from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Here are a few different projects that have been implemented at universities across the country:

- **Earth Day Event**
  - [Arizona State University](#) hosts events throughout Earth Week to “focus on making our planet a priority”.

- **Campus-Wide Cleanup**
  - Students at [Virginia Wesleyan University](#) host cleanups to pick up trash and keep it out of the natural environment.
- Mass Tree-Planting
  - As stated by Arbor Day Foundation’s Tree Campus, trees make campuses more beautiful, relieve stress, and absorb carbon, mitigating climate change.
- Documentary Showings
  - MIT hosted a screening of “The Condor and the Eagle”, a documentary raising awareness of the work of Indigenous climate activists.
- Clothing Swap, Used Bookstore, Campus Thrift Shop
  - When students leave campus, they also leave a variety of items that they no longer need. Events like the Bates College Clean Sweep keep these out of the waste stream and provide high-quality items for a discounted price.
- Eco-Fair
  - Bowling Green University hosts an Eco-Fair that provides interactive experiences for students to learn more about sustainability.
- Free Peer-Taught Classes
  - The University of Wisconsin–Madison PLARN Project teaches individuals how to make mats out of plastic bags for those without housing.

Whatever you plan, ensure you are mindful of the initiative’s carbon footprint and identify ways to limit plastic production and other potential negative impacts. For example, if you host a clean-up event, refrain from using single-use gloves or bags, instead electing to use grabbers and buckets.

To support your initiatives, develop a public awareness campaign to educate the campus about climate change and environmental action. Campaigns can assume a variety of formats, such as tabling on rotating topics, sharing infographics on social media, or putting “This comes from trees” stickers on paper towel dispensers. Regardless of the format, the campaign should result in a call to action that will inspire and empower students to support your cause.

Examples of CCAC Eco-Initiatives

To provide more insight into different initiatives that you can create, here are three examples of projects planned and implemented by our Campus Climate Action Corps (CCAC) AmeriCorps members during the 2023–2024 service year.

At Stetson University in Florida, the Climate Action Leader and Energizers created the year-long “Reduce Our Carbon Footprint” campaign to increase environmental knowledge and individual climate action. Content is organized into monthly themes and
within each month are specific weekly topics. Every week, members carry out the campaign by posting information on Instagram and the school’s sustainability web page, tabling in high-traffic areas, and hosting deep dives on the current topic. For example, during “Waste Reduction Month” in March, one week was devoted to plastic waste in which members tabled and hosted a beach cleanup event to demonstrate how prominent plastic waste is within our society. For this project, the goal was to increase awareness and involvement in climate change and environmental action.

In New York, the Climate Action Leader at St. Lawrence University created a month-long energy use competition between the different Theme Cottages on campus to provide insight into how much energy students consume and incentivize them to reduce their energy use. Energy use was determined through readings of the electric meters attached to each building and comparing the data with that of the previous year. The cottage that decreased its energy usage by the greatest percentage won a prize and bragging rights for the rest of the school year. This competition presented students with a more compelling way to think about energy efficiency and receive hands-on experience in making energy-efficient choices. This included installing LED light bulbs, turning off unused devices, and taking shorter showers. In the end, the Theme Cottage Challenge not only raised awareness about the importance of being energy efficient but also created excitement around it.

Lastly, the Climate Action Leader at Central Connecticut State University hosted an hour-long presentation for students to learn about biomass as a renewable energy resource. Compared to solar and wind, biomass is not nearly as discussed, but is still one of the many ways to assist in the transition away from fossil fuel reliance. In the presentation, they discussed how biomass energy is sourced, the benefits and barriers of its use, proposed initiatives to promote renewable energy, and discussed how scientists are actively working to improve the technology used to convert biomass to energy. The goal was to educate students about the oldest source of renewable energy and how it can be used to create a more sustainable energy sector.

**Toolkit Summary & Call to Action**

Now that you are equipped with the skills necessary to establish a strong presence in environmental stewardship and climate action, it is time for you to take action. As you know,
climate change poses a significant threat to global ecosystems and human well-being. On top of that, vulnerable populations, including low-income communities, are disproportionately affected by its impacts despite their minimal contributions to the abundance of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere. Climate change is an issue of environmental justice, and we need to take immediate action to protect the planet and its inhabitants. You are already doing what is necessary by building environmental momentum on your campus, whether you elect to employ one of the recommendations of this toolkit or all of them. The Earth needs passionate and inspired individuals like you to protect its resources and ensure social and environmental justice.

One program supporting the efforts of environmental stewards is the Campus Climate Action Corps (CCAC). CCAC is a Campus Compact AmeriCorps program that aims to build the capacity of campuses and their community partners to create change that leads to increased energy efficiency and improvements for at-risk ecosystems by implementing local solutions for underserved households and communities. Its approach centers on educating community members and college students about energy efficiency as a dual strategy to combat climate change and reduce utility costs. If your campus is already a CCAC host site, apply to be a Climate Action Leader. In this role, you will leave a lasting impression of environmental stewardship and gain invaluable experience in civic engagement. CCAC AmeriCorps members are catalysts for change in their communities, sharing knowledge and resources to inspire more people to take individual action and empowering members of low-income communities to manage their energy consumption and save money. You can serve as a CCAC AmeriCorps member while still a student, a recent graduate, or a community member.

If your campus is not a CCAC host site, communicate with your on-campus partners about the opportunity to implement the program. Host sites receive numerous benefits, including access to a team of AmeriCorps members, resources to be at the vanguard of innovative civic engagement practices to address climate change, networking opportunities, and the chance to make a positive impact on campus and surrounding underserved communities. Emphasize the impact the program would have on the campus, the community, and the students who serve as AmeriCorps members. If your campus has an environmental studies/sciences department, you can also promote CCAC in alignment with a capstone opportunity or internship. With CCAC host sites across the country, you can apply to become a member
with a CCAC host site in a different state as your first post-graduate professional experience as you wait to apply to graduate school or enter your career field.

Individual action is imperative to combat climate change. Research has shown that social influence, how people change their behavior to conform to society, is powerful and can be a great motivator. For example, if you act in climate-friendly ways, you can help to positively influence those around you to join you—such as bringing a reusable coffee cup to the coffee shop on campus can inspire others to do the same. Hosting a small dinner party with sustainable vegetarian options can showcase how food can be delicious and satisfying with less impact on the environment. By setting an example of how to make sustainable choices, you are inherently inspiring those around you and reaffirming your commitment to climate action. We hope that this Campus Climate Action Toolkit has provided you with inspiration, resources, and ideas to take action to protect our precious planet. Whether participating in making personal lifestyle changes, a campus project, or global action, remember you have the passion and power to make a difference!

**Resources**

1. [CCAC Homepage](CCAC Homepage)
2. [Become a CCAC AmeriCorps Member](Become a CCAC AmeriCorps Member)
3. [Become a CCAC Host Site](Become a CCAC Host Site)
4. [Campus Compact Resources](Campus Compact Resources)
   a. Learn about campus-community partnerships and civic engagement
5. United Nations’ Individual Action Recommendations
   a. [Actions for a Healthy Planet](Actions for a Healthy Planet)
   b. [10 Ways You Can Help Fight the Climate Crisis](10 Ways You Can Help Fight the Climate Crisis)
6. EcoReps Achieving Various Goals Across the Nation
   a. [University of Rochester, NY](University of Rochester, NY)
   b. [University of Northern Michigan](University of Northern Michigan)
   c. [Temple University](Temple University)
7. [Florida International University’s Food Waste Prevention Week](Florida International University’s Food Waste Prevention Week)

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