

Becoming Catalysts for Climate Action: Sustainability and the Anchor Mission

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Abstract

University sustainability commitments, initiatives, and strategic planning efforts can transform neighborhoods and regional economies, facilitate powerful cross-sector collaborations, and help tackle cities' most urgent public challenges. Our central inquiry explores why it can be daunting for university-based anchor and sustainability professionals to collaborate and how they might do so more effectively. We argue that by creating internal and external networks, sustainability and anchor staff have more opportunities to create shared language, metrics, and goals. In this way, projects at the intersection of anchor and sustainability work are not shouldered by a handful of individuals, but rather borne forward by a web of relationships that doesn't overtax one office or institution. Through networks of anchor and sustainability-focused staff, faculty and partners, sustainability can be more effectively integrated into anchor institution strategies, borrowing productively from an anchor framework that considers multiple lenses: physical plant and infrastructure, procurement, workforce development, public engagement, community-engaged learning and research. Drawing on insights from practitioners who joined a series of five webinars focused on sustainability and anchor institutions, we offer recommendations for how to begin or accelerate the work of collaborative, place-based climate action by anchor institutions.

Keywords: sustainability, anchor institution, climate action, networks, collaboration

Introduction to Context and Methods

Over the course of 2025, we convened a “huddle” consisting of five conversations focused on “Sustainability and the Anchor Mission.” As co-leads of the huddle, which was co-sponsored by the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) and the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), we crafted topics for the conversations based on our different, but thematically linked, experiences and roles at our respective institutions. Burkholder is a sustainability expert and officer, focusing on both sustainability programming for the campus and strategic projects, such as Temple’s Climate Action Plan. Yow facilitates community-engaged research collaborations and programs related to sustainability education at Georgia Tech’s Center for Sustainable Communities Research and Education. The way we understand and define “anchor professional” and “sustainability professional” is necessarily a function of both our own roles and how these offices are defined in higher education broadly. “Anchor” professional refers to staff - and sometimes faculty – who lead programs, initiatives, and coalitions related to the impacts of the “anchor institution” (an urban or metropolitan institution with an outsized effect on its city) on the surrounding community, including: the physical plant and infrastructure, procurement, workforce development, public engagement, community-engaged learning and research. Sustainability officers and professionals can have similarly broad scopes, and in its comprehensive annual staffing report, AASHE includes roles related to research and curriculum, buildings and grounds, energy, dining, procurement, waste and recycling, campus engagement, social equity and well-being, and coordination and planning. The huddle cohort reflected a broad cross-section of higher education sustainability and anchor institution work, spanning senior leadership (e.g., chief officers, vice presidents, executive directors), faculty across disciplines, and a wide range of professional staff roles in sustainability, community engagement, procurement, research, communications, and operations. Together, they illustrated how sustainability and anchor strategies are embedded across institutional functions—from academic leadership and teaching to community partnerships, infrastructure, and organizational strategy. This piece is the result of discussions among these eclectic professionals in each huddle meeting and draws on questions and examples that animated our co-led sessions at the CUMU conference in October of 2025, themed “The Power of Place.”

In both the five online huddle meetings and one in-person session, our focus was on stimulating dialogue through case studies and interactive presentations. We began our first session with an exercise inviting participants to define both “sustainability” and the “anchor mission,” and to track overlapping trends and major developments in those fields over the last 20 years. The second session focused on anchor mission indicators – such as affordable housing and equitable hiring - in the AASHE STARS (Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System), which offered clear ways, using STARS indicators, to find links across our session topics and among our participants. In our third conversation, on community-engaged research models, facilitators discussed a set of Principles for Engaging in Equitable Research Partnerships with Communities

created at Georgia Tech and piloted in a variety of community-based sustainability-related settings, such as research with a local environmental justice nonprofit. Moving toward cases that exemplify collaborative successes, the fourth session highlighted “accelerators” of regional action through place-based sustainability work, specifically: the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development (PHENND) Sustainability regional subnetwork of sustainability leaders across the K-16 spectrum. In our fifth and final online session, we invited sustainability champions from anchor institutions who leverage networks of higher education institutions, community partners, governments, and industry to advance scalable climate solutions. At the in-person session, we were able to craft and refine the four key recommendations that this paper offers: 1) discovering shared focus areas; 2) overcoming silos and institutionalizing collaboration; 3) addressing data and coordination challenges with existing tools; and 4) connecting through shared values and leveraging networks. We suggest that movement in even *one* of these areas will lay the groundwork for more impactful, coordinated climate action by anchor institutions. We also share case studies here that were important fuel for discussion during the huddles.

We worked from the principle, in both the huddle and conference settings, that higher education is a climate action solutions accelerator. University sustainability commitments, initiatives, and strategic planning efforts can transform neighborhoods and regional economies, facilitate powerful cross-sector collaborations, and help tackle cities' most urgent public challenges. By beginning with small initiatives that create linkages between sustainability and anchor offices and professionals, universities can fortify channels that lead to long-term relationships and that create opportunities for co-learning and cross-fertilization. With robust relationships between anchor and sustainability offices in place, and with strong connections to external networks where expertise is shared, sustainability can be more effectively integrated into anchor institution strategies.

Purpose

We propose that many existing structures can effectively build coalitions to advance joint sustainability and anchor aims, such as climate action, but sustainability and anchor professionals must both prioritize strategic collaboration to make shared goals legible. By creating internal and external networks, sustainability and anchor staff have more opportunities for regular relationship building and collaboration. In her 2019 piece on “The Transformative Power of Anchor Institutions,” Emily Sladek describes what anchor institutions will have to do to meet their potential:

[A]dopting a truly transformative and authentic anchor mission . . . requires an “all in” commitment, calling for greater coordination across campus, from external relations to diversity and inclusion. It will also rely on expanding the set of external stakeholders, and joining place-based, collective-impact initiatives. Building a movement to embed the

anchor approach across the higher-education field will mean continuing to invest in building the body of evidence and monitoring progress on goals. We will need to change day-to-day policies and set the stage for long-term system change. We will need to integrate anchor strategies into teaching and learning and develop curricular innovations. As universities and colleges deepen their implementation across these areas, a shared commitment to identifying and sharing best practices can help revolutionize and reorient institutional power, in order to build just relationships with local neighbors (4).

When brought into conversation with each other through the Sustainability and the Anchor Mission CUMU Huddle, anchor and sustainability professionals at institutions across the country articulated challenges and opportunities that map powerfully onto Sladek’s vision. Some obstacles are unique to this political moment – such as the dramatic constraining of the language we use to describe our work –and others are endemic to higher education institutions generally and reflect what Sladek offered as the areas in which HEIs must rise out of the institutional and societal grooves in which they are stuck. Challenges identified by anchor and sustainability professionals included: getting high-level commitment to anchor and sustainability initiatives; building relationships and community among staff who are stressed and stretched by the contemporary moment; supporting local communities facing climate-change-related crises; avoiding the duplication of efforts through shared reporting and benchmarking; successfully resourcing programs through university budgets or external funders; making the assets of the university available to communities; incorporating community voices and representation at the highest levels; and demonstrating impact to elected officials and other decision-makers.

Stakeholders

This section reviews key stakeholders, whose roles and capacity shape both sustainability and anchor strategies on campus. It is important to note that in the space of sustainability and anchor institution activities, there is no established framework for building and scaling initiatives at the intersection of sustainability and anchor work. There is a broad spectrum in how universities embrace this opportunity – the priorities of climate preparedness, economic development and racial equity are examples of rich sites of sustainability-anchor activity, but they are nowhere codified in the ways that we find community engagement or sustainability made legible via the Carnegie Elective Classifications or AASHE STARS, respectively; both of which are discussed below. The intention in highlighting these stakeholders and different dimensions of institutional governance and policy is to acknowledge the clearly overlapping priorities that underlie key approaches and concepts that anchor and sustainability professionals use to structure their collaborations.

The Anchor Mission

Funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and facilitated by the Democracy Collaborative, the Anchor Dashboard established a set of metrics to track both the conditions of communities surrounding universities and the efforts of anchor institutions working within them (Dubb et al., 2013). The Higher Education Anchor Mission Initiative, a continuation of the initial research and action endeavor, was launched in 2018 by the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) and the Democracy Collaborative with continued support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. CUMU states the goal of the Initiative is for participating institutions to develop “new tools that will positively benefit the economic and social well-being of their communities” (CUMU, 2018). As mission-driven organizations, such urban institutions are uniquely positioned and incentivized to actively support and grow their local economies. There are very clear overlaps, as well, between “anchor” identified institutions and those bearing the Carnegie classification, an “elective designation” awarded by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching that indicates an institution’s commitment to community engagement and their ability to prove, through a rigorous application and assessment process, the robustness of that commitment (Carnegie, 2026).

Strategic emphases of the Higher Education Anchor Mission Initiative and CUMU’s Anchor Learning Network include workforce development, purchasing, and real estate development to equitably benefit the local economies they call home. The Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania’s foundational publication, “Anchor Institutions Toolkit: A Guide for Neighborhood Revitalization,” offers a series of exercises for institutions to initiate anchor work, outlining three primary functions of an anchor institution: serving and learning, operating, and investing. In the prescribed model, there are two dimensions of the role for each categorical strategy. Serving and learning includes workforce development, addressing local and regional workforce needs, and advising or channeling expertise to increase local capacity. Operating includes the redirection of institutional purchasing toward local business and employment opportunities for residents. In the context of campus operations, investment refers to infrastructure and facilities maintenance or using real estate development to anchor local economic growth. Investing also includes the provision of incubator services, typically by faculty, to support start-up business and non-profit community organizations.

University Campus Sustainability Planning

Sustainability, or the concept of a *green campus*, involves looking at the campus and its setting as an ecosystem. Green campus initiatives are generally focused on implementing sustainable infrastructure, reducing environmental impacts and economic costs, and raising student awareness of climate change and sustainable development practices (Ribeiro et al., 2021). Within the context of university planning, changing travel behavior, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, decreasing consumption, increasing natural resource conservation, and adopting sustainable landscaping practices, including green stormwater management and facilitating ecosystem

health, are common goals (Evans, Jones, Karvonen, Millard, & Wendler, 2015; Dalton, Hajrasouliha, & Riggs, 2018).

Defining a sustainable campus is a multifaceted endeavor. There are three primary elements of a university sustainability agenda: aspects of infrastructure; aspects of community; and aspects of learning (Thomashow, 2014). Aspects of infrastructure or the physical plant can include energy procurement and capital projects; campus development, renovation, and construction; and facilities management. Aspects of community include institutional governance, climate and culture, investments or divestments, and local economic development and public engagement. Aspects of learning include facilitating the integration of sustainability into curricula and degree program learning outcomes, growing a scholarly community of practice, and cultivating thought leadership among community-engaged researchers and practitioners.

Measuring Performance: AASHE and Carnegie

The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) is an international association of colleges and universities working to create a sustainable future. It has about 800 members, including higher education institutions, businesses, and non-governmental organizations. AASHE oversees the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS), a transparent, self-reporting framework that hundreds of colleges and universities use to measure and communicate their sustainability performance. The comprehensive assessment evaluates sustainability efforts with varied topical scopes: academics, engagement, operations, planning and administration, and innovation and leadership. The framework not only enables understanding of sustainability across all sectors of higher education but also provides meaningful comparisons over time and across institutions using a common set of measurements developed through broad participation by the international campus sustainability community. STARS also serves to facilitate information sharing about higher education sustainability practices and performance.

During the course of the huddle planning and execution, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education (ACE) developed the Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability. This classification and STARS share a purpose but employ different approaches that reflect different institutional strengths, priorities, and goals. Carnegie offers a context-driven, narrative-based recognition that highlights institutions' unique sustainability stories across diverse types and stages, while STARS provides a standardized, metrics-based benchmarking system that enables peer comparison and tracks performance over time through consistent measures. Importantly, the Carnegie classification offers an opportunity to highlight an institution's leadership in workforce development for sustainability-related careers, demarcating strategic alignment with the anchor mission.

Institutional Governance and Policy: Second Nature

In Abbott and Kasprzyk's 2012 piece, "Hot Air: University Climate Action Plans and Disarticulated Federalism," the authors diagnosed a fundamental flaw in the United States' policy response to the climate crisis, arguing a federal climate policy vacuum prompted local climate change policy within public and private institutions, such as states, municipalities, and most relevant to our discussion, higher education institutions. The most obvious non-governmental policy that affirms this development is Second Nature's American College & University Presidents' Climate Commitment (ACUPCC).

Second Nature is a non-governmental organization established in 1993 with the mission to "accelerate progress towards climate neutrality and sustainability by empowering the higher education sector to educate students, create solutions, and provide leadership-by-example for the rest of society" (ACUPCC 2007). The higher education sector possesses key distinctives—knowledge creation, knowledge transfer, credentialing, trusted voice, trusted convener, living laboratory, and loyal alums—which can be applied directly to address climate challenges (Toweh & Carter, 2023). Second Nature's leadership advocates for a scaled, "whole-of-higher-education approach to climate action [which] involves network designs that identify complementary strengths across institution types and personnel roles" (Madia et al, 2024). Second Nature's "Higher Education Complementarity for Climate Action" argues that climate action in higher education is most effective when distributed across roles and functions rather than confined to a single sustainability office. While senior leadership may determine the ceiling of an institution's ambition by articulating commitments and cultivating a shared sense of responsibility, it is administrative staff, operations teams and academic units that translate a vision into policies, infrastructure and learning experiences.

Theory Development: Climate Action and Institutions of Higher Education

Despite burgeoning scholarship on the roles and impact of universities as transformative anchors and universities as climate action accelerators, there is not yet a coherent field of work that joins these two impact areas, although practitioners in both spaces find abundant areas of overlap in values, approaches, and focus areas. As Cantor et al. write, "Practices like anchor institution frameworks and intentional hyperlocal partnership approaches are moving the needle for community engagement." They are similarly moving the needle for coordinated campus-university climate action. Cantor et al. usefully share the Loyola anchor institution graphic that orients their work; its 15 spheres of influence can be easily mapped onto higher education institutions' climate action initiatives and include areas such as livable and safe communities, academic research, endowments and investments, community partners, and government relations. To this end, higher education institutions (HEIs) often seize a "solutions" mantle, claiming to take on the urgent challenges of our moment – but how often, ask Kinol et al., do

universities make good on such aspirations, especially in this critical space of sustainability and climate work? Citing Sladek (2019), they write, “As anchor institutions, colleges and universities are among the most stable and forward-looking organizations in many communities” (Kinol et al., 2023, p.15). This role makes HEIs uniquely positioned to – and responsible for – advancing climate justice: “to reimagine what is possible, the climate crisis must be addressed within higher education in conjunction with systemic change for social justice and structural change focused on economic justice, racial justice, and energy justice” (Kinol et al., 2023, p.15). While universities have traditionally championed sustainability goals that reflect a focus on carbon reduction or research agendas that advance impressive technological solutions, a “transformative climate justice” agenda will be oriented firmly toward equity, participation, and access. A useful example of work at the intersection of sustainability and the anchor mission are the green homes that Cantor et al. describe in an article that is not explicitly focused on sustainability, but rather on Syracuse University’s efforts to deliver concretely for surrounding communities as part of the university’s “overarching strategy on a regional level.” They describe this strategy as an effort to “catalyze the formation of reciprocal, multi-sector partnerships with other anchor institutions and with residents, bringing to bear its signature strengths in broad, multidisciplinary areas such as environmental sustainability, entrepreneurship, inclusive education reform, and art, technology, and design” (Cantor et al., 23).

While HEIs may sometimes struggle to realize their ambitions at the intersection of anchor and sustainability work—fulfilling the vision that Kinol et al. set forth around a commitment to climate justice—there are many encouraging examples of university-community partnerships that “strengthen social ties . . . and community resilience—our ability to collectively cope with and recover from crises” (Kinol et al, 15). David Maurrasse and Victoria Bortfeld describe two compelling examples of multi-sector partnerships that involve universities and address climate change impacts and environmental crises in North Carolina and Florida (2021). Both examples share the quality of sustaining collaborations through a network that extends existing internal, cross-departmental partnerships. The anchor institution’s responsibility when it comes to sustainability and climate action, if undertaken with integrity and attention to short- and long-term impact as suggested above, is profound. The sharing of models, resources, and expertise required for powerful anchor work in the sustainability arena makes networks critical, an idea we elaborate on, as Principle 4, below.

Recommendations: Principles for Activating the Integrated Anchor and Sustainability Framework

The stakeholders and theories of change shared above highlight the structures and tools universities use to wed the anchor and sustainability mission and advance climate action. Here, we share four principles from huddle participants, many of whom harbor the same ambitions and navigate similar hurdles. They are framed not as constraints or challenges, but as opportunities

to use the resources and relationships at hand to shape new futures in sustainability anchor work. They are also informed by the literature, existing frameworks that guide either sustainability or anchor activities, and by cases offered in the preceding section. We believe that turning even one of these principles into tangible action will enhance internal coordination and, by extension, externally facing coordination for climate action; that is: it will produce an internal network that situates the university to better create, join, or strengthen external networks.

Principle 1: Discovering Shared Focus Areas

Sustainability offices, academic departments, and community engagement offices can all be home to powerful, place-based work that advances sustainability priorities and climate action. Discovering those areas of overlap and coordinating on shared projects that bridge offices too often working in parallel can be challenging, though strong examples are scattered through the literature (Rosing, 2012). If a cursory scan reveals that several offices are working on similar goals, finding ways to convene their staff and leadership monthly or even quarterly can enhance the work of each, and often leads to the strengthening or even creating of thematic coalitions and institutional change. Identifying, connecting and mobilizing the expertise and experience of these individuals - drawing on an Asset Based Community Development framework – can help create lasting structures that draw them together and amplify their impact (“ABCDI”). Many models exist; Georgia Tech’s Community Engaged Research (CER) Council is one example of a way to structure interactions among sustainability-focused staff from a diversity of offices, all of which share a commitment to deepening institutional impact as an anchor (External Relations). A huddle session dedicated to community-engaged research and place-based partnerships highlighted the work of Georgia Tech’s CER Council by bringing a community partner and a council member focused on technology and partnerships – one of 8 members representing different sustainability-focused research units - and a food systems researcher together. The huddle surfaced ways that Council members are collaborating in various ongoing community-based initiatives –such as an undergraduate course that supports three simultaneous long-term place-based sustainability collaborations. Although Haarman and Green (2023) have pointed to the limitations of place-based initiatives in significantly altering classroom instruction, innovations in sustainability education that bring together disparate offices can build momentum for interventions that aren’t specific to the classroom (Hirsch et al., 2023). Those interventions include – in the case of the CER Council - the development and institutionalizing of an adaptable set of principles for equitable research, creative funding coalitions to address federal funding shortfalls in community-based projects, and training for leadership in research units about the importance of community expertise and collaborative priority setting in forming and funding sustainability research teams.

Principle 2: Overcoming Silos and Institutionalizing Collaboration

Even offices with aligned missions often operate in silos, with faculty, community engagement, and sustainability staff working independently rather than collaboratively. Often the most powerful projects emerge from sharing relationships. Joining our “Scaling Action” setting was Lane Frazee of PHENND (Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development), a network of over 25 colleges and universities that strengthens service-learning, civic engagement, and community partnership in Philadelphia, connecting academics with community involvement, and specifically, the PHENND Sustainability subnetwork. PHENND Sustainability catalyzes and supports regional partnerships among HEIs, community organizations, business and industry, and K-12 schools. Conveners like PHENND can provide essential levers for higher-ed-based staff and external teams to plan and execute collaborative sustainability anchor work drawing on PHENND resources, programming, and networks. PHENND’s reach and its wide and diverse web of relationships across higher education institutions and community-based organizations make otherwise daunting sustainability projects possible, such as a “Solar on Schools” initiative for which PHENND provided technical assistance sourced from its member universities and operated as a “regional broker” to bring solar projects to K-12 partners that would not have been able to execute the project aggregation alone.

Principle 3: Addressing Data and Coordination Challenges with Existing Tools

Without shared data systems or frameworks (like those tied to the Carnegie Elective or AASHE STARS), it’s harder to map existing efforts or create a unified roadmap. Key questions emerge about who is responsible for reporting progress to fulfill a climate commitment. Who owns the goals? Do they live in one place or multiple units, and who is accountable for reducing redundancy or ensuring sustainability is present in the highest level of strategic planning? In the session that spotlighted the role of the sustainability officer, Julian Dautremont, Director of Programs at AASHE, reviewed how the Anchor Dashboard indicators, developed by The Democracy Collaborative at the University of Maryland in 2013, align with STARS indicators. Further discussion explored where sustainability shows up in reporting anchor impact and vice versa. University of Missouri-St. Louis Sustainability offered a powerful example of replicable data coordination wherein their data tracking for energy performance and GHG reporting also includes the monthly spend on municipal taxes. Here the impact of the university as an economic anchor is conveyed as an investor in the public utility and subtly models a more holistic account of the university’s total socio-ecological impact, insinuating more hyperlocal context beyond operations metrics.

Bringing together a few committed stakeholders who are willing to collaborate on an agreed-upon reporting structure or platform can have the doubly positive effect of producing data on internal progress and sharing – and being held accountable to – data on outward-facing projects. One such model is at Temple University, where shared sustainability objectives are leveraged

both internally and externally. The institution's sustainability action plan contains a set of goals for local partnerships developed collaboratively with the Office of Sustainability and the Community Impact and Civic Engagement unit. These indicators borrow language directly from STARS 3.0 and include initiatives such as increasing public access to university facilities and universal guidelines for community partnership assessment and joint evaluation. A milestone for joint collection of community engagement activities ensures not only shared data management through an in-house community engagement platform tool, but regular coordination between the two units as the institution reports progress toward goals featured in the action plan document. These shared data and reporting frameworks are utilized for elective Carnegie classification applications, AASHE STARS submissions, and the Times Higher Education (THE) University Impact Rankings.

Principle 4: Connecting through Shared Values and Leveraging Networks

In recent years, university offices committed to equity and justice initiatives have been increasingly under fire. It is particularly important, then, to convene broad conversations around social justice that incorporate overlapping sustainability and anchor priorities. The zeal that partners, staff, faculty and students bring to social justice initiatives can be a powerful adhesive for long-term collaborations across a city and a region; finding language for this work that invokes anchor missions, such as “place-based” networks, can offer ways for member institutions and partners to connect social and environmental concepts of resilience and unite actors from diverse geographies and cultures (“Place Based Justice Network”). These are networks that can expand relationships kindled in annual convenings and can share models for maintaining hope, momentum, and inspiration among anchor and sustainability staff.

Why are networks ideal for joining the anchor mission with sustainability priorities and bridging the silos that often keep natural collaborations from success - or even discovery? We explored this question with the members of the huddle; themes that emerged from that discussion underscore the power of networks to supercharge anchor institutions' climate work. Networks lend themselves to interstitial spaces where bureaucracies cannot serve us. They can also lead us into the deeper analysis of the systems in which the routine work of our days unfolds; networks are bigger than and outside of our universities, community-based organizations, and governments. In this way, they provide a perch, of sorts, for perceiving gaps and opportunities. In the words of UK-based research analyst Adam Jones, “systems thinking and collaboration aren't the same thing. Many may think that by collaborating, they're approaching things systemically. They most likely aren't. In order to develop systemic solutions, yes, you need to collaborate and convene systemically, but you also need to ensure stakeholders are thinking systemically” (Jones, 2020). The relevance to collaborations for climate action and the fundamental duties of anchor institutions emerges: anchor work and climate action unfold in the space of challenges that are both urgent and long-term. The editors of *Nonprofit Quarterly* offer a

similar sentiment: “Networks are often built or cohere to take on complex problems over time. They are a form that offers a great deal of potential leverage and that can evolve and adapt quickly to changing times—passing a portion of that adaptability along to its members while being continuously informed by them” (NPQ, 2013).

In the case of some successful university-led collaborations focused on climate action, or sustainability broadly, there is a visionary leader who leverages an eclectic network of decision makers, experts, residents, and - often - industry or philanthropic contacts. Sometimes, we see this in university leaders, elected officials, or galvanizing community leaders who chart a course across existing boundaries in order to build the coalitions that have the influence and scope to enact long-term systems change. However, the limitation is obvious; a single visionary has a career only so long and a sphere of influence only so wide. Networks, however, link together individual actors who are each willing to commit some time, creativity, and labor to a shared vision. The global network of United Nations affiliated universities – called United Nations Universities Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs) – is a compelling model.

RCEs are composed of anchor institutions, nonprofits, government offices, and businesses who come together in pursuit of specific sustainability goals, undertaken through the lens of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and with the sponsorship of the United Nations University, based in Japan. Typically, RCEs focus on goals that are of special urgency to their region; coastal RCEs may focus on Life Under Water (SDG #14); RCEs in energy-strapped regions may focus on Affordable and Clean Energy (SDG #7). Ultimately, most RCEs in the U.S. and across the world pursue a mosaic of SDGs, rather than a single goal, given that the goals and solutions that advance them are interlocking. Anchor institutions can flourish in the context of and through the relationships afforded by an RCE. A huddle session dedicated to the role of networks – and the specifically catalyzing potential of RCEs – featured founding members of the RCE Greater Atlanta and the RCE Saskatchewan.

Founded in 2017, the RCE Greater Atlanta was initiated by leaders at Spelman College, Emory University, and Georgia Tech; it is composed of 10 HEIs from across the city and region. Representation of HBCUs in the network is greater than any other North American RCE, and because RCEs are such effective capacity-builders and resource multipliers, the engagement of HBCUs is a welcome remedy to the concentration of resources in Atlanta’s Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). RCE Greater Atlanta also has, as active members, numerous community-based organizations, offices at the City of Atlanta, and businesses (“About RCE Greater Atlanta”). The network has served as a critical means for members to share information through a podcast, quarterly meetings and a newsletter; collaborate on projects that draw together partners, students, and faculty such as the SDG Futures Fellows Program (in which students support partners on sustainability projects), and build bridges among HEIs and partners on issues such as PFAS testing or technical assistance for nonprofits (“SDG Futures Fellowship”). Also

active in the RCE Americas conference is RCE Saskatchewan. It is composed of seven universities – including the First Nations College of Canada – and two city governments; its flagship projects embrace topics ranging from engagement with potash mines (which produce potassium salts and degrade the surrounding ecosystems) to pesticide reduction and plant health. Taking a regional approach, RCE Saskatchewan has enabled its member institutions to advance sustainability projects too sprawling for just one university or government office and has also served as an exemplar in the RCE Americas network – supporting newer RCEs and guiding would-be applicants through the process of founding and growing their own networks with the support of the United Nations University. These forms of collaboration lay the groundwork for universities, government offices, business, and community-based organizations to work together on matters of regional urgency –such as climate action planning—and ensure that network members are constantly learning from each other’s models and continuing to pool their resources.

Conclusion

The core principles of the proposed new hybrid framework for sustainability and anchor collaboration laid out in the previous section yield strategies applicable to all university communities seeking to advance place-based climate action. The promise of HEIs’ power to accelerate local sustainable development and climate resiliency depends not only on the strength of individual commitments, but on the depth and durability of partnerships. While collaboration between sustainability and anchor professionals can be complex and difficult to initiate, it is precisely through this intentional cultivation of internal and external networks that these efforts gain traction, coherence, and longevity.

By fostering shared language, aligned metrics, and collective goals, institutions can move beyond siloed initiatives toward more integrated strategies that embed sustainability across core anchor functions. The insights from practitioners revealed this work is most effective when distributed across a network of actors, rather than concentrated within a single office or role, allowing institutions to respond and adapt to dynamic challenges, both urgent and long-term. Joint initiatives create healthier communities, bolster social equity, facilitate sustainable economic development, and increase the environmental resilience of a region. Universities with strong internal and external networks for sustainability anchor work – bound together by shared language, metrics, and articulated goals – are well positioned to be regional drivers of sustainable development and transformative climate action. These networks begin with a few relationships, modest resources, robust frameworks, and a vision not for individual valor but for a web of change-making within and beyond the university’s walls. By investing in these networks and embracing the multidimensional role of anchor institutions, universities can more fully realize their potential as catalysts for equitable and resilient regional transformation.

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