

IDEAS

Higher education needs a new mission. How about climate justice?

Our colleges and universities aren't holding up their end of the social bargain. Here's how to change that.

By **Alaina D. Boyle & Jennie C. Stephens** Updated September 1, 2022, 2:59 a.m.



This aerial view of construction in Allston has Harvard's new Science and Engineering Complex in the foreground. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

In Boston, we're proud of our "eds and meds"-driven innovation. Metro Boston has more

universities per capita than any other region in the world. Given that colleges and universities claim to advance innovation for the public good, one might assume their

density here would place us among the most healthy, equitable, socially just urban areas. Instead, Boston consistently ranks as one of the most unequal, segregated cities in the country, with extreme disparities in health, wealth, and climate vulnerability.

Could our institutions of higher education be doing more with their abundant resources to promote a better future for all? As concerned academics, we see huge opportunity for colleges and universities to help build a more just, equitable, and climate-resilient society. We think a commitment to climate justice would provide the necessary framework.

Climate justice confronts the urgency of the climate crisis by prioritizing transformative social and economic changes to promote equity and redistribute resources. It recognizes that those who are least responsible for climate change have the fewest resources to face its impacts and that most climate policies so far — like Massachusetts' solar incentives that have subsidized renewable energy for single-family homes in the suburbs — have disproportionately benefited privileged, wealthy, whiter communities. Rather than focusing narrowly on technologies to “fix” the climate, climate justice prioritizes adaptive investments in what all communities need for healthy lives: access to housing, food, health care, good jobs, transportation, and education. This includes investments that will end our reliance on fossil fuels, in order not only to reduce carbon emissions but to reduce the pollution and other health burdens afflicting low-income households.

Because climate justice prioritizes society's most vulnerable — and disrupts the systems that are concentrating wealth and power among elites — a commitment to climate justice would entail major shifts in higher education. It would change what is taught and researched on campuses and how universities are governed and financed.

Despite the renewed commitments to social and racial justice on campuses in 2020, talk hasn't translated into transformative action. The links between racism and climate

injustice are not typically taught outside environmental studies courses. Rather than gearing students toward individual financial success, a climate justice commitment would reorient all degree programs toward impact for the public good. Colleges and universities committed to climate justice could ensure that all students — no matter their major — gain practical experience in civic responsibility and learn to understand growing vulnerabilities.

Beyond preparing students to advance climate justice, schools can demonstrate leadership by committing to nonexploitative jobs, accessible to those from historically marginalized communities, that provide a living wage and equal benefits for all campus workers, including food service, custodial, administrative, and instructional staff. Universities could also commit to energy innovations that end fossil fuel reliance on campus and beyond — and invest in renewable projects with and for local communities.

Climate justice also demands investments in social innovations that strengthen community access to health care and sustain long-term collaborative relationships. For example, community health initiatives could connect university resources and students to medically underserved neighbors. Universities could scale up sustainable local or fair-trade procurement policies, strengthen community-supported agriculture, and better support worker unions. Higher ed also could help pioneer cooperative business models, community-owned infrastructure, and nonextractive finance — including zero-interest loans for local low-income families to buy efficient, renewable-powered homes.

A commitment to climate justice would change higher education governance. Endowments can be divested from fossil fuel corporations. Fossil fuel influence on boards of trustees and research funding can be eliminated.

Boston and Cambridge universities' endowments totaled more than \$90 billion in 2021, according to data compiled by the National Association of College and University Business Officers. This institutional wealth and its returns are typically kept on campus — invested in a school's infrastructure, faculty, and students. But rather than becoming

ever-more-distant islands of privilege as local climate vulnerabilities get worse, schools should invest more of this money in community initiatives like providing shade and cooling in urban areas, reducing food and water insecurity, and innovating housing policy to reduce displacement from gentrification.

Although some smaller schools are struggling financially, prosperous universities have become centers of resource aggregation. Through investments, real estate, tax breaks, and public funding, many large universities accumulate financial and physical capital at the expense of their surrounding neighborhoods. By displacing local families and increasing housing costs, expanding campuses are devastating some communities. Universities focused on financial success concentrate wealth and power for themselves and corporate partners, but that prosperity is not trickling into local disadvantaged communities. Boston-area universities could reverse this pattern by committing to climate justice and investing in their communities accordingly.

In the Boston area, schools have particularly exciting opportunities to engage with municipal and state climate justice initiatives. As part of her Green New Deal plan, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu aims to make integrated investments in health, housing, green jobs, education, and transportation. With a state Legislature and likely next governor committed to climate and equity, Massachusetts will be well placed to lead on climate justice. It's an ideal moment for academic institutions to join in with their resources.

Boston University, Harvard, and MIT have strong presidential-level support for integrated university-wide climate action. Northeastern is updating its climate action plan with a climate justice lens. UMass Boston hosts the Northeast Climate Justice Research Collaborative. Harvard just accepted a gift for a new climate and sustainability institute, and BU and Harvard have committed to divesting from fossil fuels. Each of these institutions, however, continues to accept fossil fuel research funding, expand its land holdings by pushing out neighbors, and promote primarily technological “solutions” rather than urgently needed social and economic transformations

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Without transformational action, we will continue to face worsening inequities that raise vulnerabilities to increasingly harmful climate impacts. But universities are uniquely positioned to catalyze a more equitable, healthy future. Climate justice is an opportunity, not a cost, for academic institutions. As many question the high price tag on higher education, now is the time for our institutions to demonstrate their value to society.

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