



TRACE: Frequently Asked Questions

Three Rivers Assessment of Carbon Emissions

March 2024

Why the 350 Pittsburgh TRACE?

- Southwestern Pennsylvania’s large institutions have a clear responsibility to citizens to lead the region’s journey to a carbon-free future. Among these institutions, universities and colleges play a unique role as leaders in the transition.
- 350 Pittsburgh has created TRACE to connect those schools’ efforts towards carbon neutrality with the larger regional community including other institutions, governments, the environmental community, students, and the general public.
- TRACE publicly recognizes the schools that are already demonstrating a commitment to tackling the Climate Crisis.
- TRACE encourages a stronger and faster effort by all to reduce their carbon footprint.
- TRACE prompts our region’s universities to expand and deepen their climate-related curricula for educating future leaders.

Why focus on the universities and colleges?

- Our region’s higher education institutions are a cornerstone of regional economic transformation and are molding the next generation of citizens.
- Elimination of GHG emissions at the higher education institutions has a measurable impact on the emissions of the region.
- Perhaps more importantly, these schools provide leadership to other non-education institutions through the visibility of their carbon reduction efforts and of their research and education programs.
- They also play an important role in educating the public on the causes and impacts of the climate crisis.
- Because of these roles, their own actions to achieve GHG elimination deserve public visibility and scrutiny.

What is TRACE?

- TRACE is intended to be a simple and understandable assessment of each school’s progress toward greenhouse gas reduction and carbon neutrality.
- TRACE assesses the school’s results in five categories. These five categories are weighted based on the degree of impact they have on operational, financial, and educational results.



- Our intent is not to replace the methods and approaches these schools are already using to plan and track their progress but rather to “see the forest for the trees” and to make it easy for the public to know what they’re doing.

What does TRACE measure?

- Commitments, Goals, Objectives -- Has the school committed to carbon neutrality with clear timelines and milestones?
- Structures, Plans, and Progress -- Is the school organized for success and tracking its progress?
- Transparency -- Is the school making the right information easily accessible to the public? Is all of the information used to score the school available publicly?
- Education and Research -- Is the school providing its students with the educational and leadership opportunities necessary to lead the carbon transition? If a research institution, does that research focus on climate science, renewable-energy technologies and associated societal change?
- Regional Leadership -- Is the school reaching beyond its boundaries to lead the community and the region toward carbon neutrality?
- Each of the five assessment categories has one to three individually scored attributes. Each attribute is given a score from 1 to 100 and combined to a weighted total. Each category and attribute is given a weight according to our priority assessment. The total score is then assigned a letter grade from A to F based on where it falls within predefined bands. We expect the categories, attributes, weights, and bands to evolve as needed from year to year.

How was TRACE produced and administered?

- 350 Pittsburgh identifies a scorer or scoring team who collects available information from and about the school from websites, news reports, public presentations, and other public sources. They create a preliminary score from this information which 350 Pittsburgh reviews.
- The scorer contacts an appropriate school representative to gather and clarify any missing information and then updates the score based on new information.
- Once this step is complete, 350 Pittsburgh reviews the scoring before publishing final results. While schools get a preliminary review of their own score, 350 Pittsburgh determines the final score.
- We have made each attribute as objectively scorable as possible. Where not possible, the 350 Pittsburgh Carbon Neutrality Action Team discusses the attribute score with the scorer to assure scoring judgment is consistent across schools.



How were students involved in TRACE? Why?

- When possible, we've used an on-campus student group to undertake the scoring as a group activity. When a student group was not available, we identified an interested and engaged student to do the scoring.
- With both groups and individual students, 350 Pittsburgh has provided support and guidance and is solely responsible for the scoring.
- Students have embraced the activity and found it a valuable way to learn about their own school's actions. It has also enabled them to develop constructive relationships with the school's sustainability leadership.

Which institutions are included in TRACE?

- In this March 2024 pilot edition of TRACE, we have scored four schools: Carnegie Mellon University, Robert Morris University, the University of Pittsburgh and Middlebury College. These schools were chosen based on our ability to identify student scorers at the school.
- In future editions, we plan to include all of the schools participating in the [Higher Education Climate Consortium](#) (HECC):
 - Carlow University
 - Carnegie Mellon University
 - Chatham University
 - Community College of Allegheny County
 - Duquesne University
 - La Roche University
 - Penn State Center Pittsburgh
 - Point Park University
 - Robert Morris University
 - University of Pittsburgh

What are the future plans for TRACE?

- TRACE is intended to be an annual process providing updated scoring for each of the ten HECC schools in an annual report published by 350 Pittsburgh.
- We will evolve TRACE scoring criteria as we learn more but still retain scoring consistency across years.
- While we are focused on higher education now, we do expect expansion to other institutions in the future.



How can I get involved in TRACE?

The TRACE information can be found on the 350 Pittsburgh [website](#). Please contact 350 Pittsburgh via email 350pittsburgh@gmail.com:

- If you are a student at one of the HECC schools and are interested in participating in scoring
- If you are faculty or staff at one of the HECC schools and would like to discuss how to support scoring at your school
- If you'd like to volunteer with 350 Pittsburgh on future TRACE editions
- If you have comments or questions

Who is 350 Pittsburgh?

- 350 Pittsburgh was founded in Spring 2015 by local environmental activists who wanted to build on the momentum of the 2014 People's Climate March and form a Pittsburgh group dedicated to climate issues. We envision a future where policies and actions at the local, state, federal and international levels will have ensured a stable climate that provides an opportunity for all people to achieve health, prosperity and fulfillment.
- Through public education and collaborative civic activism, 350 Pittsburgh:
 - Promotes understanding of the devastating impact of climate change on the urban and rural communities in our region and elsewhere.
 - Demands that the region's decision makers take all possible steps to help diminish climate disruption by ending our reliance on fossil fuels and investing in good jobs in a renewable energy economy.
 - Encourages people in our region to become actively involved in the urgent struggle to reverse catastrophic climate change.