



# Tracing Carbon Elimination Leadership in Regional Higher Education

350 Pittsburgh  
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Southwestern Pennsylvania’s large institutions have a clear responsibility to lead the region’s journey to a carbon-free future. In particular, our region’s higher education institutions are a cornerstone of regional economic transformation and are molding the next generation of citizens. We have created the 350 Pittsburgh *Three Rivers Assessment of Carbon Emissions* (TRACE) to connect those schools’ own efforts towards carbon neutrality with the larger community.

## Why TRACE?

At 350 Pittsburgh, we have noticed a recent behavior shift toward climate change action at many of southwestern Pennsylvania’s large institutions. Rather than resisting or avoiding action, they are beginning to act. Many of these institutions have taken substantial steps toward reducing their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and achieving carbon neutrality.

To be sure, there are very clear leaders in moving to carbon-free operations and finances. Others are just beginning. And, while setting goals and creating plans to achieve carbon neutrality is important, putting these plans into action is even more critical. We also believe it necessary for these major institutions to play an active role in leading the region as a whole toward carbon neutrality by making their actions and results visible to other institutions and the public at large. Among these institutions, 350 Pittsburgh decided to focus first on institutions of higher education.

Given their size, visibility, and importance to the region, 350 Pittsburgh has paid particular attention to the ten schools that make up the [\*Higher Education Climate Consortium \(HECC\)\*](#).

These schools represent the “Eds” portion of the “[\*E\*ds and \*M\*eds” transition that is so critical to the regional economy.](#)

- HECC Schools**
- 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*



Over the last three years, we have engaged with many of these schools to understand their goals, plans, and actions toward reducing their own GHG emissions and their dependence on funding from fossil fuel industry sources.

Additionally, given their important missions toward educating the next generation and researching solutions to the challenges facing our society in its transition to a carbon-free existence, we have also looked at their curriculum, student engagement, and research agendas.

What we found was a mixed bag. Each school is responding to this challenge in different ways. In 2022, the University of Pittsburgh published its comprehensive [Climate Action Plan](#). Carnegie Mellon University completed a 2020 [voluntary university review](#) that led to establishment of its own [Sustainable Development Goals](#). Chatham University has been at the forefront in [establishing commitments](#) for achieving carbon neutrality.

But while some of the HECC schools are leading, some are barely responding at all. And, regardless of their responses, most schools are doing a poor job of communicating their goals, actions, and progress to the other institutions and residents in the region. Thanks to recent grants from the Hillman Foundation and Second Nature, HECC is now stepping up to provide greater communication and support between the institutions. We applaud HECC's direction but still believe there is a need for clear and transparent communication of their results to the region as a whole. This requires an independent assessment of the schools' progress.

## What is TRACE?

Given these needs and what we've learned from engaging with the schools, we have created 350 Pittsburgh TRACE. TRACE is intended to be a simple and understandable assessment of each school's progress toward carbon neutrality.

### TRACE Categories

#### ***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?

#### ***Engagement and Education***

Is the school providing its students with the educational and leadership opportunities necessary to lead the carbon transition?

#### ***Regional Leadership***

Is the school reaching beyond its boundaries to lead the community and the region toward 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.

Since it has been lacking and is critical to providing an accurate assessment of progress, we place a high priority on *transparency*. Simply put: “Does the school make it easy for the public to know what they’re doing?” Our intent is not to replace the approaches these schools are using to plan and track their progress but rather to “see the forest for the trees.” Neither do we aspire to mandate the ways that the schools achieve their goals, but we are sensitive to “greenwashing.” As a result, the scorecard values some approaches over others (e.g., direct power purchase agreements over carbon offsets).

## Student engagement in scoring

We’ve found it rewarding to enlist students at each university in scoring their own schools. Where we’ve done this, 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. When possible, we’ve used an on-campus student group to undertake the scoring as a group activity. When not possible, we’ve sought out an interested and engaged student to take it on with the support and guidance of 350 Pittsburgh. We plan to expand this student engagement approach to all ten schools.

## How the scorecard works

Once fully operational, TRACE is intended to be an annual process providing updated scoring for each of the ten schools in an annual report published by 350 Pittsburgh. In the 2024 launch year, we are publishing the first four schools in a pilot report and will publish additional schools as each school’s score is completed with a summary report once all schools are assessed.

A school is scored through a straightforward process. 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.

In a world of perfect transparency, this score would be accurate and final. However, given the current state of school transparency, a second step is needed. The scorer contacts an appropriate school representative to gather and clarify any missing information and then updates the score based on new information. If the school does not respond, the original scoring stands. 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.



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.

We have made each attribute as objectively scorable as possible. Where not possible, 350 Pittsburgh discusses the attribute score with the scorer to assure scoring judgment is consistent across schools.

As a final step, when the scorecard is complete, the student scorers and 350 Pittsburgh prepare a report that combines the scorecard with a qualitative assessment of the school's strengths, areas for improvement, and recommendations.

## About 350 Pittsburgh

350 Pittsburgh was founded in Spring 2015 by local environmental activists to build on the momentum of 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.

TRACE information can be found on the 350 Pittsburgh [website](#). To contact 350 Pittsburgh, email [350pittsburgh@gmail.com](mailto:350pittsburgh@gmail.com).



## Appendix: Scorecard Attributes

### Commitments, Goals and Objectives

- Has a target date commitment and interim milestones to carbon neutrality for all 3 GHG Protocol scopes
- Has published target dates for divestment from fossil fuel interests
- Is making visible documented progress toward stated goals

### Institution Structures and Plan

- Has a formal sustainability office/initiative/director
- Has a formal/public climate action plan with implementation underway
- The plan meets 350 Pittsburgh Quality Standards

### Transparency

The institution is reporting at least annually via public documentation and presentation:

- Progress toward climate action plan targets
- Progress toward carbon neutrality
- Progress toward divestment

### Education and Research

Curriculum:

- Offers a climate-related degree
- Offers a climate-related certificate
- Publishes a list of climate-related courses

Students:

- Has at least one active student organization
- Student organization(s) have direct access and engagement with administration and sustainability office

Research (where applicable):

- Is a signatory to the fossil free research letter (or equivalent)
- Has received significant grants for climate action research in the most recent calendar year

### Regional Leadership

- Publicly visible engagement and advocacy with regional higher education and non-education institutions
- Peer Institutions: HECC—leading, member, monitoring; AASHE—leading, member, monitoring
- Local Community: Has at least one active outreach program to engage with local community groups and/or city/county government on climate related issues and projects