



# SUSTAINABILITY & SENSE OF PLACE

“Global issues - such as climate change - urgently require a shift in our lifestyles and a transformation of the way we think and act” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 1), and higher education must play a leadership role in cultivating “sustainability change-makers ... for environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society for present and future generations” (p. 7).

## CALL TO ACTION

**“Focusing departmental work on one or more prominent community-identified sustainability goals can leverage individual faculty research efforts toward more of a cohesive whole; deepen, connect, and broaden learning environments as students may work over time ... on one complex, longer-term sustainability project; and add complementary wisdom and knowledge toward the solution of compelling community-situated sustainability problems” (Kecskes et al., 2017, p. 160).**



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# INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

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The series *Contributions of Civic and Community Engagement in Higher Education* is produced by the Community of Practice, Inquiry, and Learning (COPIL) of North Carolina Campus Engagement (formerly known as North Carolina Campus Compact). Focused on the benefits and value of civic and community engagement (CCE) in higher education, the series has two parts: (1) a Primer that provides an overview of each of 17 topical areas organized into three categories (priorities related to students, to institutions, and to communities) and that is designed as an accessible and evidence-based introduction to some of the key priorities that well-designed CCE can advance and (2) a set of more developed briefs in these 17 topical areas, intended to support ongoing exploration and inquiry in each of these areas and to guide ongoing deepening of practice.

Neither the Primer nor this set of topical briefs is comprehensive, but we do believe the topics included—selected through discussions within COPIL and consultation with CCE thought leaders—are among the most relevant for this moment in the evolution of CCE and in our nation’s history. Neither the topics nor the work of CCE fit neatly into these categories; the topical priorities and the contributions of CCE to them are as deeply interwoven as the CCE work of community members, students, staff, and faculty is interdependent. The set of topical briefs may be expanded in the coming years as additional topics seem important to include and as additional practitioner-scholarship becomes available.

Each brief includes a summary of the topic and the role of higher education in general and CCE in particular in advancing it, an annotated list of associated scholarship, and a list of references and additional readings; quotes from students, alums, community members, faculty, staff, and literature related to CCE serve to concretize the possibilities and the stakes. Both components of the series incorporate examples from across the NC Campus Engagement network; descriptions of the examples draw on information available through campus websites and personal communication with key stakeholders.

NOTE: We use the term “civic and community engagement” to include many practices and pedagogies, including service-learning, community-engaged learning, election engagement, volunteerism, social entrepreneurship, community-based participatory research, social justice activism, and deliberative dialogue.

# OVERVIEW

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Higher education institutions (HEIs) are not insulated from the challenges facing the planet, and civic and community engagement (CCE) have been tasked as key stakeholders in sustainable development (SD). A core conviction that increasingly informs CCE is that we cannot have thriving human communities and a flourishing democracy when ecological systems are ignored and degraded. Over the last five decades, there has been a movement toward the creation of a collaborative culture to contribute to SD, especially in the areas of ecological literacy, inter- and intra-institutional cooperation, and the development of interdisciplinary curricula (Wright et al., 2022).

CCE participants can develop the attitudes, skills, and perspectives at the heart of ecologically literate planetary citizenship and eco-social justice. Embracing the particularities of the specific places in which community-campus partnerships operate and exploring their connections with regional and global forces can generate insights into how natural and built environments both shape and are shaped by human culture and history and can be an important catalyst to caring for social and ecological communities wherever one finds oneself. CCE invites participants to explore their place's myriad meanings (e.g., scientific, cultural, historical, epistemological, sociopolitical, and personal) and calls attention to students' and community stakeholders' diverse relationships with the places in which they live, work, and serve (Coleman et al., 2017). Current scholarship leans toward singular case studies that meet immediate needs within multiple disciplines. Future pathways in CCE encourage a more formative approach to explore the intersection of identity, spaces, and concrete needs.

When HEIs align their institutional capacities, especially in the area of CCE, with worldwide efforts to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs) by 2030 and foster an intentionally collaborative culture, they will become better equipped to face their own unique challenges: becoming "changemaker" universities; collaborating with each other in the knowledge economy; placing students at the center of the teaching and learning process; and fulfilling their "third mission" to partner with external stakeholders and society. (Wright et al., 2022).

# ASSOCIATED SCHOLARSHIP

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- UNESCO's (2017) report on Education for Sustainable Development calls on educational institutions to widely implement innovative pedagogical practices designed to help move the world closer to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition to explicitly naming service-learning and community-based research as examples, the report recommends critical and reflective thinking exercises as well as a variety of community-engaged activities, including, to name just three examples, conducting energy-saving campaigns, developing spaces for community get-togethers, and building community and wildlife gardens. The "cross-cutting key competencies for achieving all SDGs" (p. 10) -- such as systems thinking, collaboration, critical thinking, self-awareness, and integrated problem-solving -- are often exactly those that CCE is designed to cultivate (Martin-Sanchez et al, 2022).
- CCE can encourage students to grow their sense of self and environmental responsibility, and this can catalyze civic engagement and civic responsibility for eco-social public issues facing their communities (Eisenhut & Flannery, 2005; Lovett & Chi, 2015; McDonald, 2011).
- Students are often unfamiliar with the place in which they are temporarily residing while on campus. Immersion in the local community, with its social and ecological realities, can generate a holistic, interdependent sense of identity and belonging and, in turn, deepen student engagement with the life of their campus and local public questions and concerns. It also allows students to better appreciate tensions and obstacles facing others in the community they are living in and can guide their own sustainable living practices (Erfani, 2022; Power & Bennett, 2015).
- CCE can challenge systemic and interrelated causes of inequality that dislocate people from sources of well-being associated with place, such as land, ceremonial rituals, water, language, food, and sacred living histories (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019).
- Higher education institutions are promoting an increased focus on sustainability; however, this will be insufficient to catalyze the socioeconomic transformations needed to address ecological degradation. CCE can address many barriers to effective action by connecting pedagogy, research, and publications to public actions and engaging in advocacy and activism to affect urgent and transformational change (Gardner et al., 2021).

## WARREN WILSON COLLEGE

"Grounded in [their] rich history of place and purpose," Warren Wilson College (WWC) is deeply invested in sustainability. They have been named a "Top 10 Greenest Campus," and their current Strategic Plan names Land and Environmental Sustainability as one of six priorities. 100% of their students participate in community engagement, which has as a central goal the development of graduates dedicated to fostering a just, equitable, and sustainable world. Place-engaged service-learning courses help students develop specific skills and competencies associated with a strong civic identity.

For example, students in a "Community-based Environmental Education" course partner with local high school students and first graders on the "Connecting People to Places" project. The undergraduates and high school students who study horticulture and nutrition design place-based lessons on growing and cooking healthy food and, in teams, facilitate hands-on elementary school lessons correlated to state standards, for example, transplanting kale and baking kale chips, making music in a garden, and writing recipes. After 15 years, students who were once first-grade participants in the program have transitioned to teaching as high school students.

**For more information, contact the Center for Community Engagement at Warren Wilson College.**

## WINGATE UNIVERSITY

Wingate University is leading efforts to leverage CCE to address sustainability. Two faculty members and an undergraduate student co-authored an essay (Wright et al., 2017) drawing on their institutional context to make the case for integrating these two movements (CCE and sustainability in higher education). They explored "how new ideas and perspectives can emerge when commitments to ecological health and social justice are brought together" in CCE (p. 166). The student co-author identified several examples he experienced of Wingate's use of CCE to advance sustainability priorities, including "practices, programs, and technologies that spanned many disciplines—from composting to school garden programs, from activism to solar farms, from NOAA drone research to conservation efforts building oyster shell sea walls" (p. 166).

**For more information, contact Wingate University's Collaborative for the Common Good.**

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# AUTHORS

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To learn more about COFIL please visit:

<https://nccampusengagement.org/community-of-practice-inquiry-and-learning-copil/>

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