

Oberlin College and Conservatory

Environmental Policy

Guiding Principles and Strategies

Adopted by the General Faculty of Oberlin College and Conservatory on May 14, 2025.

Overview

Since its founding, Oberlin College and Conservatory (hereafter referred to as Oberlin) has worked to lead courageously on morally sensitive issues of social justice. Consistent with this history, Oberlin adopts this Environmental Policy as a guide to decision-making throughout the institution.

Environmental sustainability is defined as “the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony, that permit fulfilling the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations” (EPA ref). Pursuing sustainability is not only consistent with Oberlin’s educational mission but essential to it, as environmental crises such as global climate change fundamentally define and impact all disciplines and all aspects of our lives. Oberlin’s sustainability efforts are a powerful educational tool that prepares students to be leaders in humanity’s response to current and future environmental threats.

This document outlines the guiding principles (goals and aspirations that serve as compass points to guide decision-making) and high-level strategies (processes and methods for achieving goals) that shape the sustainability efforts of Oberlin College and Conservatory at every level. It is supplemented by a suite of policies that guide practice in particular areas, as well as an Implementation Plan (still in preparation) that identifies concrete goals and action steps for a specified period of time.

The policy presents Oberlin’s institutional commitment and highest-level guiding principles and addresses seven specific domains: education, energy use and production, facilities management, grounds maintenance, investing, purchasing and disposal, and transportation.

Institutional Commitments

Oberlin has long been an early adopter and leader in sustainability and climate action. Public commitments and institutional benchmarking have been a central means of signifying to stakeholders that sustainability is part of Oberlin’s mission and that Oberlin takes climate action leadership seriously. It has made the following commitments:

Talloires Declaration 1990

Oberlin became a signatory of the [Talloires Declaration](#), the first official statement made by university presidents, chancellors, and rectors of a commitment to environmental sustainability in higher education. It was composed at an international conference in Talloires, France.

Carbon Neutrality by 2025

Oberlin signed the [Carbon Neutral Commitment](#) (previously the American College & University Presidents' Climate Commitment, or ACUPCC) in 2006. Oberlin is committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to zero or otherwise balancing emissions to zero through sequestration and offsets. [Second Nature](#), an educational nonprofit that supports higher education climate action through education and engagement, monitors the commitment. Oberlin's commitment includes Scope 1, 2, & 3¹ Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions.

Green Building Commitment

The Board of Trustees resolved in 2006 that all new construction and major renovations would meet U.S. Green Building Coalition Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver certification or higher. The use of third-party verification ensures that the building design and operation support Oberlin's other climate and sustainability commitments. LEED sets performance standards for indoor/outdoor air quality, water and energy use, occupant experience, building material sourcing, and site use and development, among other criteria. Oberlin has five certified LEED projects and the Adam Joseph Lewis Center (AJLC), construction of which contributed to the creation of LEED standards.

Clinton Foundation Climate Positive Development Program

In 2010, Oberlin College and Conservatory and city of Oberlin each signed on as one of 18 Climate Positive Development cities. The immediate result was the creation of the Oberlin Project, from which several initiatives emerged. Successes include the development of the Green Arts District and hotel, renewable energy sourcing for the city and college, 20,000 acres of green space, an expanded farmers market, the city's first Climate Action Plan, and integration of sustainability throughout the K-through-college curriculum.

Climate Resilience

Oberlin signed the [Climate Resilience](#) commitment in 2015 with [Second Nature](#). The framework encourages schools to go beyond simply managing extreme and potentially catastrophic weather events resulting from climate change. Signatories also proactively enhance overall resilience and adaptive capacity to build a positive future.

City of Oberlin Climate Action Plan

Oberlin College and Conservatory participated in the development of the city of Oberlin's [Climate Action Plan](#) in 2011 and to updates in 2019 and 2025. The plan identifies a path to carbon neutrality by 2050 and seeks to address

¹ Scope 1 Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions are direct greenhouse (GHG) emissions that occur from sources that are controlled or owned by an organization (e.g., emissions associated with fuel combustion in boilers, furnaces, vehicles). Scope 2 emissions are indirect GHG emissions associated with the purchase of electricity, steam, heat, or cooling. Scope 3 emissions are the result of activities from assets not owned or controlled by the reporting organization, but that the organization indirectly affects in its value chain. An organization's value chain consists of both its upstream and downstream activities.

existing and forecasted regional impacts of climate change to avoid the worst impacts. The college and conservatory account for approximately 25 percent of the city's GHG emissions. As a major land owner and employer, the institution is committed to close coordination with the city to ensure the best outcomes for all stakeholders.

Fossil Fuel Divestment

In 2022, the Board of Trustees committed to an orderly [divestment](#) of indirect investments in companies that support fossil fuels development as part of affirming the carbon-neutral commitment and approving the Sustainable Infrastructure Program, the key campus initiative that would bring carbon neutrality within reach. The adopted policy states that, in accordance with Oberlin's history of action in response to "instances of human suffering, natural calamity, and injustice," the board will consider proposals for divestment from entities that contribute to activities that "shock the conscience." The resolution seeks to align Oberlin's financial management with its infrastructure investments and mission-related public statements on climate action.

Expand Impact Investment Platform to \$100 Million

In 2013, the Impact Investment Platform was developed by the Board of Trustees to make investments that generate measurable positive impact or change in addition to financial returns. The seeded \$5 million initial allocation was subsequently expanded to a \$70 million target. In 2024, the Investment Committee announced a commitment to expand the endowment's Impact Investment Platform to \$100 million. This renewed commitment reflects the values of Oberlin and its stakeholders in aligning environmental and social impact with financial growth.

Cross-Cutting Guiding Principles

- Oberlin serves as an **educator, leader, and model** for addressing sustainability and climate challenges locally, regionally, and beyond.
- Oberlin strives for an ever-more **comprehensive and transparent assessment** of the social, economic, and environmental costs of its operations.
- Environmental, social, and economic factors are considered in concert with each other. Decision-making is guided by the goal of **minimizing social, economic, and environmental costs** of Oberlin's operations and **maximizing social, economic, and environmental benefits**.
- **Planning processes and decision-making** throughout the institution are a reflection of its sustainability commitments and the pressing need to **reduce carbon emissions and to build community resilience in a changing climate**.
- **The entire community shares responsibility** for achieving and maintaining sustainability, carbon neutrality, and climate resilience.

Oberlin seeks to pursue these principles in the realms of education, energy use and production, facilities management, grounds maintenance, investing, purchasing and disposal, and transportation.

Education

Climate change and other environmental challenges now affect every aspect of human existence. Preparing students to meet these challenges is an essential component of fulfilling Oberlin's educational [mission](#) and ensuring

its students meet the institution's [learning goals](#). The principles and strategies below articulate how Oberlin's commitments to sustainability, climate neutrality, and climate resilience support this mission.

Guiding Principles

1. As an institution of higher learning with a proud history of being a "college of firsts," Oberlin has a responsibility to educate campus community members effectively for current and future environmental challenges. Addressing sustainability and resilience is integral to Oberlin's purpose and strengths as an institution.
2. All members of the Oberlin College and Conservatory community are involved in education and the creation of shared knowledge, both as teachers and learners. While students are obviously a main focus of Oberlin's educational efforts, trustees, faculty, staff, administrators, and the institution's wider network of alumni and supporters all have the potential to learn from and contribute to education associated with Oberlin's sustainability efforts.
3. As a leader in sustainability, Oberlin seeks to educate broader communities, institutions, and the general public by serving as a testing ground and a model for successful sustainability strategies.

Main Strategies

To fulfill these goals, Oberlin will pursue four main educational strategies, outlined below. More specific exploration of how these principles are to be implemented in particular domains (e.g., energy, purchasing) appears in each individual section of the accompanying Implementation Plan.

1. Infuse sustainability-related topics throughout the formal curriculum and co-curricular activities.
2. Develop programming and communication tools throughout campus that engage, educate, motivate, and empower the community around environmental stewardship and environmental problem-solving.
3. Communicate successes, initiatives, and lessons learned to effectively promote responsible environmental stewardship on campus and beyond.
4. Educate all campus community members about the Environmental Policy and how to implement it in their campus roles.

Energy Use and Production

Oberlin's energy use represents its largest source of greenhouse gases and a significant operational expense. Energy use and production are defined as the electricity, natural gas, and diesel fuel used for all campus building heating/cooling, lighting, and operations. Transportation also requires energy, but because of its unique challenges and needs, it is covered in a different section of this document.

Guiding Principles

1. Oberlin is committed to the long-term goal of "climate positivity," a condition whereby the release of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases through all activities associated with institutional operations is less than other activities that remove carbon from the atmosphere.
2. Oberlin seeks to meet its energy needs in ways that minimize environmental, social, and economic harm and maximize environmental, social, and economic value.
3. Because technology, energy costs, and related knowledge are dynamic, Oberlin continuously assesses its energy sources and infrastructure and engages in long-range planning.

Main Strategies

To meet energy use and production goals, Oberlin will pursue the following main strategies:

1. Conserve energy as much as possible (i.e., changing human behavior and facility design/controls to reduce consumption).
2. Ensure that energy is used efficiently (i.e., using technology that accomplishes more work with less energy input).
3. Aggressively pursue a 100 percent carbon-free energy portfolio.
4. Invest in on-campus infrastructure projects that support carbon neutrality and climate resilience.
5. Limit purchase of Renewable Energy Credits (RECs)² to 10 percent or less of the overall energy portfolio.

Facilities Construction, Modernization, and Maintenance

The way Oberlin's facilities are constructed, modernized, and maintained has long-term implications for the institution's environmental impact, carbon footprint, and readiness for a changing climate. Approximately 96 percent of Scope 1 and Scope 2 emissions are associated with campus buildings.

Facilities are defined as campus buildings and infrastructure (such as heating and water pipes, electrical grid). The guiding principles below apply to new construction and to the renovation and maintenance of existing facilities.

Guiding Principles

1. Oberlin seeks to maximize the positive impacts and minimize the negative impacts of its facilities operations on economic, human, and natural systems while maintaining facilities that support its educational mission.
2. In both new construction and renovation of existing infrastructure, Oberlin plans for resilience in the face of a changing climate.
3. To further its core mission of education, Oberlin will maximize the curricular and co-curricular educational opportunities associated with the construction, modernization, maintenance, and weatherization of buildings.

Main Strategies

To meet these goals, Oberlin will pursue five main strategies:

1. Maintain high-quality, third-party-verified standards for building construction and modernization. This includes considering embodied carbon and investing in the upfront costs of high-performance buildings.
2. Engage in a rigorous initial and continuous commissioning process.
3. Systematically monitor and share building performance for facilities management and educational purposes (i.e., through use of the Environmental Dashboard).
4. Program, construct, maintain, retrofit, and operate buildings in ways that maximize energy, water, and material use efficiency.
5. Promote educational opportunities for students to engage in green building (re)design and innovation.

Grounds

Oberlin's outdoor spaces—no less than its classrooms, laboratories, and other teaching facilities—are part of the

² Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) are energy certificates that represent "when one megawatt-hour (MWh) of electricity has been generated and delivered to the electricity grid from a renewable energy resource" (EPA.gov).

educational apparatus of the institution. They are also the first (and sometimes only) part of Oberlin's campus that visitors see. The grounds include flower and perennial beds, trees, lawns, parking lots, and walkways around buildings, as well as athletic fields, the arboretum, wooded lots, and open land owned by the institution.

Guiding Principles

1. Oberlin maintains the functionality of its landscapes with as much ecological integrity as possible. This includes maximizing: habitat; air, soil, and water quality; biodiversity; the adaptive capacity (the ability to adjust to stress) of the landscape; and carbon sequestration.
2. Oberlin supports land-management practices that minimize inputs, particularly those that reduce the use of carbon-intensive materials and environmentally harmful chemicals.
3. Oberlin uses its grounds to support its commitment to climate neutrality and to buffer against extreme weather brought about through climate change.

Main Strategies

To meet the goal stated above, Oberlin will pursue five primary strategies:

1. Mimic and enable natural systems wherever possible.
2. Consider projected changes in the climate when planting and making long-range plans.
3. Sequester carbon on campus properties wherever possible.
4. Foster a connection to and care for the natural landscape.
5. Educate the campus, visitors, and the broader community about the importance and value of intentionally ecological landscaping.

Investment & Finance

The Investment Office, under the direction of the Board of Trustees' Investment Committee, oversees growth of the endowment by investing funds into a wide range of financial instruments. While the primary purpose of investments is to generate returns that ensure the continued funding of the institution, investments are an important way to promote Oberlin's environmental and social values.

Guiding Principle

1. Oberlin strives to align its investment strategies with the institutional commitments and values outlined in this policy, while ensuring that it generates more than enough revenue to ensure future operations.

Main Strategies

1. Use impact investments to generate financial, environmental, and social value from the endowment, real estate holdings, and retirement plan.
2. Establish transparency to the greatest degree possible with Oberlin's stakeholders regarding the ESG/sustainability performance of investments in the Impact Investment Platform.
3. Refrain from investing in companies that fail to acknowledge and address the impact of greenhouse gas emissions, including fossil fuel investments.
4. Encourage employees to consider social and environmental value when choosing how to invest their retirement funds.

Purchasing, Reuse, and Disposal

Oberlin purchases and discards products that have significant social, economic, and environmental impacts. This section covers purchasing, reuse, and disposal across the entire campus, including dining services—but excludes construction, as those items are covered in the Facilities Construction and Modernization and Maintenance section.

Guiding Principles

1. Oberlin works internally, as well as externally, with producers and suppliers to push toward a zero-waste institution. (“Zero waste” means systematically eliminating the volume and toxicity of waste and materials, conserving and recovering all resources, without burning or burying them.)
2. Oberlin selects products and goods that minimize social, economic, and environmental costs and maximize environmental benefits on campus and beyond.

Main Strategies

1. Reduce consumption on all dimensions (e.g., number of products purchased, resources consumed to produce products, and the amount of mileage/carbon required to get products to Oberlin).
2. Favor materials and products, including food, that minimize social, economic, and environmental costs and maximize social, economic, and environmental benefits.
3. Reuse or donate as much as possible.
4. Recycle or compost items that cannot be reused such that materials are separated and returned into useful production.

Transportation

Oberlin’s residential, in-person education inevitably requires that students, faculty, staff, and visitors travel to and from campus. Transportation covered by this policy pertains to all travel included in Oberlin’s carbon inventory: travel for business, commuting to work by faculty and staff, and vehicle use on campus.

Guiding Principles

1. While some business can be conducted via electronic communication, face-to-face interactions are highly valued and an essential part of the Oberlin educational experience.
2. For travel that is essential to fulfilling the educational mission, the institution seeks to minimize the adverse impacts of travel on economic, human, and natural systems.
3. Oberlin considers particular accessibility needs when making decisions, policies, and purchases.
4. Because Oberlin’s efforts to decarbonize its travel are inextricably linked with local and regional efforts, the institution collaborates with city, county, and regional entities to support active and mass transit.

Main Strategies

1. Avoid unnecessary travel when possible
2. Minimize the environmental impact of necessary travel via low-carbon local strategies such as walking, bicycling, and the use of public transportation; regional strategies such as shuttle services (for example, to Cleveland-area destinations), and inter-regional strategies such as driving instead of flying.
3. Offset the carbon that results from unavoidable travel.
4. Maintain a fleet that is electric and highly efficient.

5. Support local and regional efforts to make roads bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly and to maintain and expand public transportation

Implementation

This policy is supplemented by an Implementation Plan that articulates goals and strategies for a set period of time. Below are the high-level principles and strategies that inform the specific policies and implementation plans developed for any given issue or time period.

Guiding Principles

1. Oberlin uses iterative, integrative design, seeking to involve all relevant stakeholders in decision making, policy writing, and implementation.
2. Oberlin cultivates a culture of sustainability through institutionalized leadership, education, and systems of accountability.

Main Strategies

1. Regularly develop, review, institutionalize, and disseminate relevant policies and practices to support the achievement of the guiding principles outlined in this document.
2. Ensure every person on campus knows how their role supports the Environmental Policy, the Implementation Plan, and associated policies.
3. Communicate Oberlin's commitments and successes to the campus and broader communities.
4. Participate in sustainability networks such as the [Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education](#) (AASHE) and Second Nature.

This document replaces the [Environmental Policy adopted in 2004](#).