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# Building Powerful Partnerships: Lessons from Portland's Climate Action Collaborative

Jennifer H. Allen

*Portland State University, [jhallen@pdx.edu](mailto:jhallen@pdx.edu)*

Fletcher Beaudoin

*Portland State University, [beaudoin@pdx.edu](mailto:beaudoin@pdx.edu)*

Beth Gilden

*Portland State University*

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**[CT]** Building Powerful Partnerships: Lessons from Portland's Climate Action

Collaborative

**[CA]** Jennifer H. Allen,<sup>1</sup> Fletcher Beaudoin,<sup>2</sup> and Beth Gilden<sup>3</sup>

**[AA]**

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Mark O. Hatfield School of Government, Portland State University.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Director, Institute for Sustainable Solutions, Portland State University.

<sup>3</sup>Project Manager, Institute for Sustainable Solutions, Portland State University.

**[ABS] Abstract**

**[T]** There is growing interest in partnerships between universities and communities and how such collaborations can help address the wicked challenges facing the world today. This article traces the development of the institutional commitments at Portland State University (PSU) in its efforts to build sustainability-focused community–university partnerships. The Institute for Sustainable Solutions at PSU has served as a mechanism to catalyze and nurture such partnerships on and off campus. This article examines two cases under the Portland Climate Action Collaborative that illustrate how community–university partnerships have emerged, what impacts they have had on the community, and what factors contributed to their success. Interviews with university and community representatives throughout the Pacific Northwest on important considerations in the

process of building effective, high-impact partnerships provide insights and some key takeaways that include: the value of having an institutional unit that can defray transaction costs and serve as a matchmaker and support structure for programs and projects; the importance of relationship building over time to help develop trust and organizational understanding; the impact that sustained funding, even in small amounts, can have in terms of providing student support and allowing faculty time to invest in project and programs; and the need to balance clarity of project scope with flexibility to allow projects and relationships to grow and evolve.

[K] Keywords: university, partnerships, collaboration, climate

## **[H1] Introduction**

The growing interest in partnerships between universities and communities represents a shift from universities as ivory towers—where knowledge is pursued without reference to how it relates to real-world problems—toward a focus on “use-inspired” research and engaged scholarship.<sup>1</sup> As institutions of higher education seek greater relevance in the 21st century, many are exploring how to build mutually beneficial relationships with community partners.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, urban communities face increasingly complex challenges, such as climate change adaptation and housing affordability. Addressing such issues requires both better information and more effective integration across agencies than currently exists.<sup>3</sup> Developing mutually beneficial collaborations between institutions of higher education and community partners—relationships that go beyond a project-by-project focus and bridge organizational boundaries and cultures—represents an emerging area for innovation and experimentation.<sup>4</sup>

## [H1] Institutional Foundations

[T] Portland State University's motto Let Knowledge Serve the City reflects the university's long history of community-focused engagement.<sup>4</sup> PSU's commitment to leadership in sustainability is also longstanding; starting in 2000, the university invested in faculty and staff positions to advance sustainability efforts, and in 2005, adopted a Declaration of Support for Sustainability, recognizing the university's public responsibility to develop solutions to sustainability challenges.<sup>5</sup> The Center for Sustainable Processes and Practices (CSP2, later renamed the Institute for Sustainable Solutions, ISS) was established in 2006 to foster sustainability-related research and education across campus and connect it with the community.<sup>6</sup>

PSU has embraced sustainability as a campus-wide initiative, reflecting broad interest in the topic among faculty.<sup>6</sup> PSU's sustainability strategies also consistently focus on problem-based research to better understand and work toward solving real-world problems.<sup>6</sup> The university's visible commitment to community led to the decision by the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation in 2008 to award PSU a \$25 million gift to support its sustainability programs. Miller Foundation trustees wanted to make an investment in an institution that would benefit the community more broadly, and PSU's track record of sustainability-focused community engagement positioned the university as a candidate for this grant.<sup>6</sup> Since 2008, the Institute for Sustainable Solutions (ISS) has focused investments from the Miller Foundation on promoting experiential learning for students, advancing research addressing complex challenges, and fostering community engagement.

One ISS initiative has been the formation of the Portland Climate Action Collaborative, a project in which the university works with the City of Portland to advance the Portland

Climate Action Plan. The collaborative represents one example of how ISS integrates learning opportunities for students with collaborative research, working in close partnership with the community.

### **[H1] Portland Climate Action Collaborative**

[T] The Portland Climate Action Collaborative (Climate Collaborative) was launched in 2013 after six months of planning involving ISS and the City of Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS). The Climate Collaborative was intended to serve as a framework for ongoing collaboration between PSU and BPS related to Portland and Multnomah County's joint Climate Action Plan (CAP).<sup>7</sup> Working closely together during the planning process, they explored how to build a comprehensive program as a foundation for long-term engagement between the university and the City, and how to identify projects focused on climate action that students and faculty could work on jointly. The involvement of high-level leadership from PSU and BPS strengthened the institutional foundations of the effort.

Funding from the Miller Foundation and from the Bullitt Foundation supported the planning process, allowing staff in both organizations to think through structure and strategy before diving into project identification and implementation. Since 2013, the Climate Collaborative has supported approximately 12 projects, involving 17 faculty from 10 disciplines, and has supported 18 students in research projects and 25 student internships. Projects have addressed carbon reduction and climate change adaptation strategies related to urban heat islands, green infrastructure, active transportation networks, energy use in commercial buildings, flooding, and landslide risks due to climate change, among other issues.

ISS and BPS have both been actively engaged in designing and implementing the Climate Collaborative; BPS has focused on identifying project priorities for the city while ISS has focused on engaging students and faculty to support these projects. The processes for developing, supporting, and assessing projects have been codeveloped by BPS and ISS, evolving over time to reflect best practices and lessons learned. Both BPS and ISS have a point person serving as the primary contact for each institution. The BPS point person is well connected across BPS and with other bureaus, has strong collaborative capacities, and is deeply interested in university engagement; this person helps maintain communication with the university, resolve problems with ongoing projects, and identify new project opportunities.

The ISS point person is similarly well networked, with the over 400 students and faculty engaged in sustainability efforts at PSU. Once the City has identified a project of interest, the ISS point person seeks a good match in terms of expertise and interest among faculty and students. The ISS point person then works with the BPS point person to schedule exploratory meetings and develop a scoping proposal and joint budget. Once projects move into implementation, with project-specific leads at the city and the university, the two point people provide ongoing support, help solve problems, and identify how projects can evolve as new information and opportunities emerge.

PSU faculty and students engage in these projects in a number of ways, including conducting research on issues city staff don't have time to explore in depth, offering valuable technical expertise, and/or providing an outside perspective that may strengthen or validate a strategy under consideration. However, the collaboration goes well beyond a one-off client-researcher or client-consultant relationship and also beyond simply achieving what is stated in the scope of specific projects. The broader impact of this work

is reflected in the ways that PSU and the City are working together to advance sustainability in effective, responsive, and evidence-based ways, working across city-university silos and agency silos, building the next generation of sustainability leaders through student engagement, and pursuing ongoing strategic thinking and goal setting beneficial to both organizations and the community more broadly. The following Climate Collaborative projects help illustrate both the process of developing and implementing collaborative projects as well as these broader impacts.

## **[H2] *Urban Heat Island and Vulnerable Communities***

[T] An urban heat island is an urban or metropolitan area that is significantly warmer than surrounding areas due to human activity.<sup>8</sup> In 2013, BPS approached PSU to help identify the location of heat islands in Portland and explore how they intersected with vulnerable communities. ISS helped identify faculty with relevant expertise, and faculty and students then worked with city staff to map heat island locations. A PSU faculty member also facilitated meetings with agencies and stakeholders to better understand what makes people vulnerable to heat. These efforts resulted in an analytical framework combining practitioner feedback with findings from the academic literature and a mapping tool that allowed the city to characterize heat island profiles and specific exposure levels for vulnerable populations across the city.

The project's initial goal was to increase understanding of the issue with an eye toward including heat island maps in the 2015 Climate Action Plan. This first phase also enhanced the expertise of city staff who then served as more effective project advocates with other bureaus as the project evolved. While understanding how impacts could be mitigated was always part of the city's intentions, only when the initial phase of mapping was complete did consideration of mitigation options become an explicit focus.

As mitigation options were being identified, including increasing urban forestry, removing impervious surfaces, locating cooling centers near high-risk areas, among other options, the BPS point person connected this effort to development of a new code for multifamily residences, offering an opportunity to integrate project findings into City policy. PSU faculty and students have continued to explore ways that the building code could address this issue through modeling different design prototypes to measure their impact on heat islands. Project impacts to date include both direct influence on the multifamily building code and a shift in the City's thinking to include broader questions related to climate adaptation, for example water retention, air quality, and other aspects of climate responsive design.

## **[H2] *Deconstruction vs. Demolition***

[T] In 2015, the City of Portland was exploring whether to substitute building deconstruction for residential demolition as a carbon reduction strategy. Research had already indicated such a policy would have positive environmental impacts, but the City wanted to understand the social and economic impacts of instituting a deconstruction requirement. BPS engaged the Climate Collaborative to identify a faculty team to assess the economic impacts of such a policy on the construction industry.

PSU's Northwest Economic Research Center (NERC) performed the assessment and concluded that a policy requiring that homes 100 years old or older be deconstructed rather than demolished would reduce home demolitions by about 30 percent without disrupting jobs or home prices. They also identified opportunities for workforce development related to deconstruction and possible new markets for salvaged materials and deconstruction techniques. Following NERC's report, Portland City Council passed



an ordinance requiring deconstruction for all homes built in 1916 or earlier that are slated for demolition. BPS designed a workforce development program aimed at minorities and women to certify companies trained in deconstruction. As of 2017, the second phase of research by NERC is assessing the actual impacts of the policy on industry—whether new markets for salvaged materials have developed—as well as equity aspects of workforce development.

While providing research informing new policy would be a success on its own, this project has also fostered new innovative partnerships in the carbon-friendly deconstruction sector. For example, PSU’s Community Environmental Services is taking on a project with others in the deconstruction industry to consider how construction waste and deconstructed materials can be reused at a larger scale, PSU’s Center for Public Interest Design is working with salvage and reuse organizations to create a prototype for a salvaged materials kit that would be used to build an Accessory Dwelling Unit., and in September of 2017 the national Decon+Reuse conference<sup>9</sup> was hosted by the City of Portland at Portland State university..

### **[H1] Collaborative Program Development: Lessons Learned**

[T] These Climate Collaborative projects illustrate how university–community partnerships can inform city policy. Attracted by the success of the Climate Collaborative, the Bullitt Foundation recently funded ISS to identify and disseminate best practices around community–university sustainability partnerships in the corridor from Portland to Vancouver, BC. Interviews conducted for the Bullitt-funded effort and from the experience of ISS highlight lessons that will be helpful for others exploring such partnerships.

[H3] Relationships are the Foundation. [T] Relationship-building activities and a commitment to engagement over time to build trust and grow interorganizational understanding are essential building blocks for successful long-term partnerships. In the case of the Climate Collaborative, strategies to develop relationships have included holding regular meetings with city and university leadership. These meetings have been focused on:

- communications and awareness building, problem solving, and identifying future project opportunities
- exploring opportunities for projects to evolve over time, allowing collaborators to continue to work together and deepen their mutual understanding and relationships
- identifying ways to build city–university connections outside of specific projects (e.g., inviting faculty to informal lunch-time presentations, having university representatives testify on code policy, hosting mixers for faculty, students, and practitioners)

[H3] Reduce Administrative Burdens. [T] Reducing administrative demands on faculty, students, and city staff enhances their ability to engage in projects. For the Climate Collaborative, it has been extremely helpful to have an institutional unit and dedicated staff at both the city and the university to catalyze and coordinate partnership opportunities, foster communication, and develop guiding principles for project design and assessment.<sup>19</sup> Faculty and community partners often lack time and resources to invest in these important elements of partnership development and implementation; having units that can invest staff time in these activities and maintain a through-line of engagement across projects over time has contributed to the success of the described projects. For example, the collaborative framework enabled the deconstruction project to launch

quickly in response to real-time policy needs by facilitating rapid access to funding and support with scheduling and hiring.

Having an established Climate Action Plan that requires multiple city agencies to work together, and having city staff who assume responsibility for the CAP and are committed to the partnership's success, have facilitated communication and coordination.

Recognizing this value, a dedicated point of contact has been incorporated into a new partnership between ISS and Portland's Bureau of Environmental Services (BES), which is being developed with support from the Bullitt Foundation.

**[H3]** Codevelopment Pays Off. **[T]** Codevelopment creates buy-in and ensures that the goals of both parties to a partnership are being met. Although working together to clarify goals and project outcomes can take more time than a unilateral approach to project development, codevelopment builds deeper ownership of projects and often results in more usable outcomes and more effective problem solving. Codevelopment ensures that faculty know their goal of advancing a research agenda will be met and that city staff understand how projects help meet their goals as well. When projects are too focused on one party's needs, as happened with several early ISS-BPS projects, it can be difficult to maintain engagement from the less interested party; ultimately the project may end up meeting the needs of one organization rather than laying a foundation for further work that can be championed by both sides.

**[H3]** Seek Sustained Funding. **[T]** The availability of sustained funding, even in small amounts, has allowed PSU to provide faculty and students with the resources needed to invest time in projects and programs and has allowed the partners to be nimble in responding to opportunities. The Miller Foundation grant provided PSU with generous

resources to make such investments; however, even before receiving the Miller grant, PSU's top administrators directed smaller amounts of funding to catalyze and incent faculty engagement in community-focused sustainability projects.<sup>11</sup>

**[H3]** Existing Data May Be Enough. **[T]** The precision provided by new research is not always needed to inform policy decisions. Using existing models, data, or methods may allow researchers to generate useful information and refine results more quickly and efficiently. For example, when the heat island project began exploring mitigation options, there was interest in understanding how the biophysical layout of a census block might affect its response to heat pulses. Rather than building a new model, researchers adapted an existing model developed in Germany,<sup>11</sup> accelerating their ability to apply the model and develop results.

**[H3]** Establish Clear Institutional Agreements. **[T]** Agreements stating the scope, expectations, and roles and responsibilities in a partnership help clarify how the partners work together and toward what end. These agreements also help participants from the university and the community understand the context in which they are working and can serve as a communications tool with organizational leadership. A Climate Collaborative Partnership Agreement between ISS and BPS signed in January 2017 describes the context for the partnership, organizational and staff roles and responsibilities, and channels for ongoing communication, providing a point of reference for new and continuing participants.

**[H3]** Balance Clarity and Flexibility. **[T]** Partnerships can have unexpected outcomes. While it is helpful to define the scope of a project as clearly as possible up front, it is also important to allow for flexibility to adjust as new understanding of an issue emerges.

Clear communication channels are essential to allow for project evolution as new opportunities emerge. Both the heat island and the deconstruction project were able to evolve over time, building on the original purpose and expanding to address new issues as they emerged.

## **[H1] Conclusion**

[T] The sustainability partnerships between Portland State and the City of Portland continue to evolve as new opportunities arise and as reciprocal understanding of the different institutional cultures deepens. The development of institutions like ISS and frameworks like the CAP have helped facilitate coordination and communication, while investments in staff dedicated to ongoing communication in both organizations has been critical to the success of these efforts. One of the most important elements of success has been the commitment of both organizations to the relationship and their willingness to make it adaptable over time. Investing effort in building an adaptive system helps lay the foundation for longer-term institutional cooperation that is not dependent on the specific individuals who have shaped the program to date.

Each institution and community has its own characteristics and culture; any approach to partnership building must take this specific context into account. Nevertheless, the experiences shared here may be helpful to others interested in exploring collaborative sustainability partnerships.

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Address correspondence to:

*Prof. Jennifer H. Allen*

*Portland State University*

*Mark O. Hatfield School of Government*

*P.O. Box 751 Mail Code PA*

*Portland, OR 97207-0751*

*E-mail: [jhallen@pdx.edu](mailto:jhallen@pdx.edu)*

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