



Statement of Purpose

PHENND, a consortium of Delaware Valley colleges and universities, has been working for 35 years to advance a vision of campuses and communities developing and growing together through democratic, mutually beneficial, service-learning partnerships. Our mission is to improve our universities and their impact on surrounding neighborhoods through increasing the capacity of our members for community engagement and sustained relationship building.

It's clear that human activities are overtaxing the planet's natural resources, driving mass extinction, and dangerously altering the climate. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has stated we have until 2030 to avoid 'climate catastrophe'. And while the effects of climate change span the whole planet, the disparities between the greatest contributors and those at greatest risk reflect and exacerbate long standing environmental and social injustices.

Climate impacts in our region, from urban heat islands to sewer overflows; deforestation and displacement are legacies of disinvestment and the environmental racism perpetrated against Indigenous, Black and Brown communities. But it is these same communities, often ignored or disregarded, who have the wisdom and expertise to increase our capacity to create change - on campus, in schools, and in neighborhoods. When universities move beyond paternalistic attitudes and approaches and look for partners, we can tap into a rich ecosystem of individuals and organizations committed to a more sustainable and just Philadelphia region.

Young people stand to bear a disproportionate share of the burden. So it is the obligation of schools and universities to prepare students for the work of an unprecedented social-ecological transformation by providing opportunities for active learning. To do this, higher education institutions need to collaborate with each other and their communities to educate for sustainability and environmental justice.

An emerging subnetwork, PHENND Sustainability, has convened to address the need for a coordinated approach to Education for Sustainability across the K-16 spectrum in the Delaware Valley. PHENND Sustainability aims to identify and build upon the great work happening in our schools and communities, and advocate for place-based, real world problem solving as a core pedagogical approach to sustainability education.

The complex ecosystemic challenges ahead require communication and collaboration beyond our institutional and disciplinary silos, and the formation of multi-stakeholder partnerships in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The School District of Philadelphia has defined

Education for Sustainability as “a holistic framework to equip students, schools, administrators, families, and the community ... to create and contribute to a world where economic prosperity, social justice and responsible citizenship are strengthened while restoring our health and that of the living systems upon which our lives depend.”¹

Nonprofit and community organizations have led the way. The Delco Alliance for Environmental Justice has educated the public and activated local resistance against environmental racism, efforts matched by PhillyThrive in their work to shut down the PES refinery and ensure that any new plan for the site prioritizes the health of people and environment. Soil Generation has organized around issues of land and food sovereignty, to empower Black and Brown growers in Philadelphia, and move us toward a more sustainable and equitable food system.

At the university level, we know that reducing on-campus emissions and waste is not just a facilities issue, but part of preparing students to consider their individual and collective impact.

PHENND Sustainability hopes to bring the UN Sustainable Development Goals into focus locally, working together with community groups, nonprofits and the private sector to craft a regional vision. Our work is informed by the RCE Education for Sustainable Development framework developed by the United Nations and used by cities around the world, including Portland and Atlanta.

We will catalyze and support regional partnerships among higher education institutions, community organizations, and K-12 schools that integrate learning, teaching, and research with advancing local sustainability, climate resiliency, and environmental justice. We will create and support opportunities for students across the Greater Philadelphia area to engage in place-based, community-engaged scholarship, share research and best practices, build community and social capital, and integrate sustainability into education across all disciplines and grade levels.

We believe that higher education is uniquely positioned to support environmental justice and sustainability efforts throughout the region. Whether a liberal arts college or a research university, we share two fundamental missions: preparing students to be capable, engaged citizens, and bringing our knowledge to bear on the social problems of today and tomorrow. In a time of global environmental crisis, these core goals are more important than ever, and they come with the added responsibility of redressing the unequal relationships within and between our communities.

We need to bring our teaching, learning, and research into our communities in a shared commitment to environmental justice. There’s no such thing as sustainability in isolation. We have enormous challenges in the region — mitigating emissions, addressing inequity and injustice, and adapting to changes like rising seas and warmer, wetter weather. But we also have tremendous resources to draw on, potential partners from schools to community activists, citizen science projects and social enterprises. We look forward to working together and learning from you all, and encourage you to get involved and help make this vision a reality.

¹ <https://www.philasd.org/greenfutures/focus-areas/education-for-sustainability/>