

# College-Community Environmental Sustainability Initiatives: Local and State Partnerships in Pennsylvania

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The Center for Economic and Environmental Development at Allegheny College has initiated successful partnerships with the surrounding community of Meadville, Pennsylvania. In a similar spirit, the government of the state has worked to initiate environmental partnerships with and among colleges and universities throughout Pennsylvania. This discussion highlighted these programs, both in Meadville and statewide.

## COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Located in northwest Pennsylvania halfway between Chicago and New York, Allegheny College is a small private liberal arts school with approximately 2,000 undergraduate students. Its host community of Meadville is known as the birthplace of the modern American zipper industry, Channellock Pliers, and a wide variety of natural resource based industries including forestry, dairy farming, and agriculture. During the 1970s and early 1980s Meadville suffered from inflation and resulting unemployment. Today the economic situation is not much better, with a median personal income of approximately \$10,000. From 1979 to 1997, Meadville experienced de-population and a 15 percent decline in household income. Currently 50 percent of the housing stock is rental property and energy expenditure is estimated to be 20 percent of personal income. Overall, 25 percent of the population has not graduated from high school and 89 percent has no college education. Many previously vibrant

industries have now gone, with some leaving unpleasant reminders of their time in Meadville, such as brownfields.

Despite this bleak picture, there are signs of recovery and progressive thinking. The primary brownfield left in Meadville has been redeveloped and currently houses small start-up companies that employ all together 600-800 people. The downtown theater that had fallen into disrepair has been refurbished and is sparking more downtown attention. In addition, the projects that Allegheny College students and faculty are undertaking in partnership with the community are beginning to make noticeable impacts.

### **THE CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEVELOPMENT**

The road to meaningful partnerships between Allegheny College and Meadville began when professors at the College started looking for ways to teach sustainability. To unite around this common goal, professors formed an umbrella institution known as the Center for Economic and Environmental Development or CEED. Now over ten years old, CEED is designed to engage college students, faculty and the greater community in innovative approaches to sustainability. Despite (or perhaps because of) the socioeconomic stresses on the town, Meadville was the perfect location for CEED to take root, given its resemblance to so many small towns around the country. The Heinz Family Endowments funded CEED for the first five years. Currently, funding is being sought by each project through individual grants.

CEED focuses on providing environmental education for people of all ages and abilities. It also strives to encourage environmental stewardship within the town of Meadville by promoting the notion that sustainability is a good way to do business. In addition, it supports economic revitalization that takes into account economically sustainable business practices. In all of its efforts, CEED has focused on what it calls the “K through CEO” approach. The idea is that if work were focused on educating only the young, it would take a long time to see results. Instead, attacking problems at all levels of experience creates both a top down and a bottom up approach, more effectively including all members of the community.

CEED currently operates about a dozen projects. The Arts and Environment Initiative is a highly successful project that began as a partnership between the Pennsylvania Department of Public Works and CEED. Through this project, road signs transformed into sculpture have beautified a fence in town. This and other recycled art projects have become a source of pride for both the college and the greater community.

**Figure 1** “Read Between the Signs,” a roadside mural made out of recycled highway signs – an Art & the Environment Initiative, Center for Economic and Environmental Development, Allegheny College and Meadville, Pennsylvania.



Another CEED project focuses on improving environmental education in local schools. CEED was able to identify two major challenges facing local teachers in conducting environmental education: a lack of knowledge about teaching techniques specific to environmental education, and financial difficulties in getting supplies. To address these needs, college students combined supplies and lesson plans (on riparian zones, aquatic insects, and groundwater) in large plastic totes that were distributed to teachers. In return, the students were able to use data collected by the teachers for their own analyses.

CEED has also been working to promote and enhance Meadville’s growing ecotourism sector. They started by working with a number of visitors bureaus around the region to get a better understanding of what ecotourism resources are currently available. The next step has been helping to develop travel packages for bicycle tours, farm tours, and other excursions that highlight the value of the natural landscape while attracting visitors through the convenience of the options. Given the area’s natural resource-based community, there are many opportunities for community involvement.

Another CEED project was the Commonwealth Community Energy Project. It began about ten years ago with the discovery that 54 percent of housing in Meadville was rental property with very poor insulation. CEED began working to convince local building owners that they could charge more rent and invest the money in building improvements that would reduce the energy costs that occupants had to pay. At the same time, occupants were educated about the potential savings that come with improved insulation. By working with builders, renters, and homeowners and utilizing a revolving loan program, this project has been successful in improving the energy efficiency of many Meadville homes. MCEP was so successful that the program is now administered through the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, a statewide environmental organization.

Yet another project was undertaken by an economics professor at Allegheny who initiated a roundtable discussion on pollution prevention strategies with many of the area's small business owners. Many tool and die groups are also involved, including Pittsburgh Paint and Glass, which has facilities in the area. The roundtable discusses solvent waste disposal, energy expenditure challenges, and ways to address other environmental impacts. It serves as a forum for sharing ideas and voicing concerns.

Additional work at CEED has focused on environmental writing, environmental justice issues, and local farm products. Much good progress has been made through current projects; however, CEED aspires to do even more. Ironically, CEED's sustainability efforts within the community have begun to have an even greater impact than those undertaken on the campus itself.

Perhaps CEED's greatest contribution to sustainability on campus has been in its ability to engage students. When students see that there is a purpose to the assignments they receive, they tend to get excited. They can go downtown and see the results of their work, and they receive support and valuable lessons from local professionals. The region has become a living laboratory that shows that sustainability can work.

CEED's efforts have provided very valuable lessons for future efforts. First, it is important to get all possible partners involved in a project from the start, including the leadership of the educational institution involved. When designing a program it is also important to note that the tremendous value of first-hand experience held by local professionals cannot be overlooked. In addition, to avoid conflict, all participants should be kept informed to prevent people from feeling threatened by proposed changes. It is important to be aware that there are many hidden flaws and challenges in even the most carefully thought-out plans. This can be particularly difficult for students to accept, since it is not consistent with traditional academic structures. Students have to learn to expect delays in their projects and to be aware of the boundaries in terms of scope that must be faced.

## **STATEWIDE COLLABORATION**

The Pennsylvania Consortium for Interdisciplinary Environmental Policy (PCIEP) came into existence under the guidance of Don Brown of the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The central problem he faced was that the state DEP was limited in its ability to conduct the research needed to effectively develop and evaluate environmental policies. In the state of Pennsylvania there are over 200 institutions of higher learning with tremendous research capacity – thus a natural pairing was conceived. Over the past decade both students and faculty have become increasingly involved in environmental policy-relevant research for the DEP. PCIEP links the research needs of decision makers with the expertise of institutions of higher learning to enrich the policymaking process.

One of the PCIEP initiatives worth highlighting is an analysis of wind energy in the state. This research evolved into a school-based cooperative wind power purchasing agreement that now includes 37 schools in the state. Another project has

focused on solar power and recently culminated in a solar workshop. State-inspired projects have also included research on the impacts of development, greenhouse gas inventories, greening operations and training sessions for campus communities, and an environmental health road map.

Educational institutions participating in these state-guided efforts have developed a healthy level of competition. This has helped to drive innovation and inspired collaboration. Events have been held to share ideas and to encourage student involvement.

Working in this partnership has not been without challenges, however. One problem has been the ever-changing political arena, which slows the progress of projects. Another challenge has been the compartmentalization of state organizations, which can make interdisciplinary work difficult. However, this also highlights the importance of partnerships like the PCIEP that can cross bureaucratic boundaries and challenge conventional wisdom in environmental policymaking.

