COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

STRATEGIC PLAN

2024-2029

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

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University of Washington College of the Environment
Strategic Plan 2024 - 2029

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MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the College of the Environment’s work at this moment in human history. Whether we seek to understand the fundamental processes of our planet and environment, manage natural resources sustainably and ethically, devise mitigation and adaptation strategies in response to climate change, or build policy and other solutions in partnership with communities and public-sector leaders, our impact has never been more vital or urgent.

The College is unlike any other in the world, with unparalleled scope and depth in diverse subject areas including atmospheric sciences, oceanography, Earth sciences, fishery sciences and marine biology, forest sciences, and social sciences connected to the environment, including policy. Our students, faculty, staff and postdoctoral scholars are some of the foremost on the planet, enabling us to serve as a global hub for innovative research and excellence in teaching.

The College was established just over a decade ago, inspired by the vision that by collocating these fields of research and education, the University of Washington could further cement itself as a leader in addressing our planet’s most pressing environmental challenges. Since then, as these challenges have grown in their existential importance to humanity, the need for this approach has become even more apparent.

Throughout the years, our primary strength has been cutting-edge, transformative research across the environmental sciences. Adding to this the collaborative, creative, interdisciplinary spirit of our community has allowed the College to develop solutions to big problems in partnership with colleagues across the UW and other institutions. This is our key differentiator, and the reason that the UW is already widely acknowledged as a world leader in these fields.

The College has come a long way since its founding, but to amplify our impact we will take greater advantage of our extraordinary breadth and depth of scholarship, teaching and service, further integrating work across our many programs and creating a seamless pipeline from fundamental science to community impact. After thoughtful discussions with the Strategic Planning Steering Committee, the College of the Environment community and external partners, we recognize that to realize this vision we must further our systems-based approach and continue to move beyond traditional academic silos.

This strategic plan will serve as a North Star guiding us toward that vision. It articulates who we are, what we do and the value we bring to individuals, communities and society globally. It will be used to elevate our profile in Washington State, nationally and worldwide, and to help us secure the resources we need to do our best work and demonstrate the greatest possible positive impact.

Maya Tolstoy
Maggie Walker Dean of the College of the Environment
**PURPOSE OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN**

Our work is more urgently needed than ever. The College of the Environment generates transformative, cutting-edge climate and environmental research and trains exemplary early career scholars. Facing a rapidly changing climate and accelerating environmental degradation, we seek to elevate and transform our work to better serve the people and stakeholders of Washington and the global community beyond. Robust disciplinary work must always underpin our efforts. However, to fully understand the big questions we seek to answer and problems we seek to solve, we also require systems-based thinking enabled by interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches.

Through this strategic planning process, we have identified opportunities for our College community to truly become more than the sum of our parts, and through that collective, interactive effort increase our impact in the face of unprecedented need for our expertise. This plan aims to guide our efforts broadly for the next five years (2024-2029), acting boldly to take intellectual risks and decisive steps that have high impact, all while remaining grounded in our Vision, Mission and Values. We view this plan as a living document, and will regularly check in as a community to hold ourselves accountable, and be nimble in response to our rapidly changing world.

**VISION — what we want to achieve**

We will help build a just and sustainable future where discovery-driven and applied research inform and support a thriving, resilient society.

**MISSION — what we do and who we serve**

We observe and analyze the natural world and humans’ place within it to increase understanding and build equitable solutions to complex climate and environmental problems, and to educate and train future generations to meet new challenges we face on our ever-changing planet.

**VALUES — principles we want to uphold in all our work and interactions**

**Collaboration** – Generating and improving ideas, actions and outcomes by engaging individuals, partners and communities around us in novel ways to achieve goals together that none of us could alone.

**Collegiality** – Ensuring a culture of mutual respect, appreciation and trust that supports meaningful interaction and collaboration among students, faculty, staff, postdoctoral scholars and those in communities beyond the University.

**Inclusion** – Building a community of richly varied personal backgrounds, experiences and viewpoints essential for effective inquiry, learning and growth informed by ways of knowing not typically represented in the academy.
**Integrity** – Demonstrating ethical behavior and accountability in all of our pursuits and interactions.

**Stewardship** – Taking individual and collective responsibility for the natural world and the societies of which we are a part and pursuing actions to ensure their resilience and continued health.

In this document we use the terms disciplinary, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and systems-based research as things we do and seek to do. These terms are defined below.  

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1. **Disciplinary**: Disciplinary refers to work within a particular subdivision of scholarship or specialized subfield of study.

2. **Interdisciplinary**: Interdisciplinary refers to the integration of two or more academic disciplines to address a research question or problem. In interdisciplinary research, scholars from different disciplines work together to create new insights, theories, or methods that would not be possible using a single disciplinary approach. For example, a project that combines biology, psychology, and sociology to study the health effects of social isolation is an interdisciplinary project.

3. **Transdisciplinary**: Transdisciplinary refers to the integration of multiple disciplines and other types of knowledge (such as local knowledge or practical knowledge) in a collaborative and participatory manner to address complex problems. Transdisciplinary research aims to create new forms of knowledge that are relevant to real-world problems and that involve stakeholders in the research process. For example, a project that combines biology, economics, anthropology, and local knowledge to develop a sustainable agriculture system is a transdisciplinary project.

4. **Systems-based**: Systems research recognizes that a system (be it climate, environmental, natural hazards, or other complex system) is a function of its components, and that each component interacts, interconnects, interrelates, and/or influences each other.

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**Goals Supporting the Strategic Plan**

Faculty, students, staff and postdoctoral scholars of the College of the Environment strive to conduct environmentally relevant research at local-to-global scales, and in service of our shared planet. At our core, we continually develop and fortify the foundations of knowledge required for sustainability in a rapidly changing world.

Earth or climate systems do not function in isolation, so we will broaden our scholarship and provide support structures to more fully embrace inter- and transdisciplinary research. Similarly, no community functions in isolation, so we will build bridges and strengthen our cohesiveness as a community, internally and externally.

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1. For definitions, see the glossary at the end of the Strategic Plan document.
Goal 1: We will strengthen community across the College to enhance knowledge of each other's work, bolster relationships and seed collaborations across the College, the University and with the wider world.

Goal 2: We will build on our exceptional disciplinary breadth to catalyze more systems-based approaches in our work to understand the full complexity of environmental processes and to create effective solutions to our collective challenges.

Developing a systems-based approach, we will focus on emphasizing and encouraging the interdependence of research, education, engagement and culture in everything that we do. These core pillars of our work inform our strategic goals and the actions we will take to realize them.

To ensure our success, we must have strategies to reach these two overarching goals over the next five years. Some are described below, but because this plan is a living document, these will be adapted and strengthened as we learn from our progress.

**STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS**

**Goal 1: Build a Stronger, More Connected Community**

*We will strengthen community across the College to enhance knowledge of each other's work, bolster relationships and seed collaborations across the College, the University and with the wider world.*

**Strategy 1: We will develop an inclusive, diverse and collaborative culture that values the continua from discovery science to research that is actionable, from deep disciplinary work to transdisciplinary and systems-focused research.**

Even as the reputation and accomplishments of our core units have grown, we will be even stronger by increasing knowledge and trust across the College, and establishing clearly defined diversity, equity, inclusion, justice and accessibility (DEIJA) goals. All of these conditions are necessary for the College to amplify and advance its world-class science, education and community impact through systems-level research.

To pursue this strategy, we will:

- Enhance knowledge of each other's work, build trust, and seed cross-College collaborations through events and programming that build connections among our core units, encourage partnerships and collaboration across units, and create a shared understanding of the topics our College community considers to be of the highest priority.
● Expand recognition, support and professional development for personnel involved in systems-based research, external community engagement and environmental literacy work.

● Ensure tenure and promotion criteria recognize and reward impact in addressing environmental challenges through partnerships and community-engaged scholarship.

● Identify and address hurdles faced by early career scholars wishing to include systems approaches into their research and education.

● Increase the College’s commitment to DEIJA principles that build a more diverse community of faculty, staff, students and postdoctoral scholars, including implementation of the recommendations of the College’s DEI Task Force Report.

Strategy 2: We will strengthen and expand environmental literacy at UW and in society at large through innovative research and education.

The College of the Environment’s research has expanded what we know about our natural environment, our place within it, and how to sustain its resilience and health in the face of increasing challenges. Yet innovative solutions that we develop to address environmental problems can only be implemented, and produce genuine impact, if people comprehend the magnitude and urgency of these challenges. We will deliver top-tier education, learning and outreach that enhances systems-based thinking and leadership. This will cultivate widespread understanding of the natural world and inspire environmental service and action.

To pursue this strategy, we will:

● Include sustainability, climate change, planetary boundaries and environmental justice within our curricula, both as central course topics and as lenses through which to view disciplinary content and skill-set learning.

● Increase access to hands-on, experiential education for undergraduate majors and minors regardless of income or ableness, including research opportunities, career mentoring, internships and field trips.

● Increase our connections with K-12 educators, community college and peer institutions.

● Support College instructors in pedagogical research.

● Create tracks of existing and new courses, and appropriate credentials, for professionals in the private, public and nonprofit sectors who wish to further their environmental literacy.
Strategy 3: We will develop a shared College identity and tell our story locally, nationally and globally to grow our visibility, recognition, reputation and public trust in the College and the University.

Our core units already have strongly established identities, yet a College-wide identity is only now emerging. Students, researchers and our partners will benefit from a strong connection to the units across the College to amplify our collective strengths and demonstrate that we are more than the sum of our parts.

To pursue this strategy, we will:

- Develop and share messaging and visual materials differentiating the College of the Environment from other similar institutions and emphasizing our value for prospective and current students, the University, external partners and the state and people of Washington and beyond.

- Seek opportunities and capitalize on new pathways to disseminate our research and build new partnerships, including where our work is in service to society.

- Enhance our reputation as a widely known and trusted source of accurate, understandable and timely information about the environment for the public, policymakers and other key stakeholders.

Goal 2: Enabling a Systems-Based Approach

*We will build on our exceptional disciplinary breadth to catalyze more systems-based approaches in our work to understand the full complexity of environmental processes and to create effective solutions to our collective challenges.*

Strategy 4: We will engage the exceptional breadth and depth of expertise in the College community to continuously identify emerging systems-level themes as focal points for our research.

This focus on systems-level research will be nimble and responsive to new knowledge and rapidly changing local and global environmental challenges. We will empower students and support researchers to understand systems-based approaches to be effective change makers in the world. To pursue this strategy, we will:

- Establish an equitable process that engages the entire College community to identify and define systems-level themes to pursue through research and education.

- Identify projects that can focus on systems-level research and will be responsive to the needs of the public.

- Invest in and provide infrastructure to nurture ideas that lead to bold, ambitious grant-writing and new philanthropic opportunities.
Strategy 5: We will nurture and sustain mutually enriching partnerships and interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaborations beyond the College, to develop new knowledge and tools that lead to environmental solutions and other benefits to society.

The College of the Environment will lead by building on its extensive network of longstanding, trusted partners and world-class academic programs, both internal and external to the University of Washington. We will enhance and encourage existing partnerships, and increase the capacity of the College community to successfully create innovative new ones.

To pursue this strategy, we will:

- Enhance existing partnerships by strengthening the College’s support for co-developing research with external partners, and identify gaps to fill with new structures to serve our partners.
- Increase incentives for collaboration, and identify and lower administrative, funding and cultural barriers to cross-departmental and cross-college collaborations.
- Collaborate with partners inside and outside of UW to develop our capacities in “implementation science” — collaborative research that develops and tests different approaches that may increase successful implementation of environmental solutions.

Closing Vision

As the College of the Environment works to transform into something that is truly greater than the sum of its parts, we must strive to strengthen our internal community and build bridges with the many external communities and stakeholders that we work with and serve. This work will not only enable us to amplify our contributions to a world facing the existential threat of climate change and numerous environmental challenges, but will also contribute to the College being a truly joyful and productive place in which to learn, innovate and collaborate.

The Dean’s office is committed to investing resources immediately to build structures to support these goals at multiple levels, as well as actively seeking additional resources to grow this work. This also must be a living document, one we will need to further develop and implement, and regularly evaluate our progress against to hold ourselves accountable. If we do so, together, in community, we will have an enormous impact on research, education, community and culture within and beyond our walls, and work to make our world a better, safer place for all.
## Members of the Strategic Planning Steering Committee

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Assistance to the Steering Committee provided by John Braunstein and Belinda Li of AKA Strategy