

Are universities connected to local sustainability? A new study suggests yes and no

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A new study finds that universities scoring strongly on measures of sustainability are associated with innovation and economic growth in

their surrounding communities. However, the study did not find similar connections between university sustainability performance and environmental sustainability in their home communities.

"Society is facing a slew of global challenges, and we wanted to assess the extent to which higher education is contributing to the sort of transformative change needed to address these challenges," says Christopher Galik, co-author of the study and a professor of public administration at North Carolina State University.

"For this study, we started at the local level, exploring whether there was any association between university sustainability performance and sustainability in their surrounding communities."

To explore the issue, researchers looked at data from 105 [metropolitan areas](#) in the United States, which are collectively home to 427 higher education institutions. Specifically, the researchers drew on data from two sources, the U.S. Cities Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Index and the QS Sustainability Universities Ranking.

The paper, "Individual and interlinked SDGs: higher education institutions and metro area sustainability performance," is [published](#) in the *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*.

The SDG Index aggregates dozens of metrics related to a municipality's sustainability efforts, covering issues such as [climate action](#), energy efficiency and water use. The QS Sustainability Universities Ranking evaluates university efforts related to [environmental sustainability](#) as well as efforts aimed at addressing social concerns, such as global partnerships, community engagement and the health and well-being of students, faculty and staff.

The researchers wanted to see whether there was any relationship

between universities that scored well on the QS Sustainability Universities Ranking and the municipalities that scored well on the SDGs.

"Sustainability is complicated—it has lots of different components," says Ha Vien, first author of the paper and a Ph.D. student at North Carolina State University. "And we found that universities are associated with progress on some of those measures, but not others."

The good news is that there was a very strong correlation between universities that score well on sustainability and communities that score well on innovation, reducing poverty, creating economic opportunities and reducing inequality.

"The bad news is that universities that perform strongly on sustainability measures are also associated with a decline in responsible consumption and production—measured here as increased air pollution and release of toxic chemicals—in their surrounding areas," Vien says. "There was also little or no correlation between universities that scored well on environmental sustainability and the environmental sustainability scores of their communities."

"This is an [observational study](#), so it's impossible to determine causation," Galik says. "However, the evidence suggests two things. First, universities continue to be strongly associated with innovation and economic development. But second, the idea that universities can contribute to broader sustainable transformations doesn't seem to be realized yet, at least on a large scale."

"It took significant time and effort for universities to become the economic drivers that we see today," Vien says. "Looking into the future, climate change will continue to be a defining challenge for the foreseeable future. Our findings highlight that there are still a lot of

opportunities for [higher education](#) to make more of a difference in surrounding communities."

More information: Ha Vien et al, Individual and interlinked SDGs: higher education institutions and metro area sustainability performance, *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* (2024). [DOI: 10.1108/IJSHE-06-2023-0231](#)

Provided by North Carolina State University

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