

COVID-19, the Climate Crisis, and WLUF: Pandemic Lessons for our Work-Related Carbon Emissions

A brief summary of a WLUF Climate Action Committee panel discussion

WLUF's new Climate Action Committee held its first public event through Zoom on Tuesday March 16. About 15 WLUF members attended a discussion of the ways in which WLUF might facilitate a more carbon-neutral return to normal operations after the pandemic. The event began with presentations from the Climate Action Committee's Derek Hall (full-time faculty, Political Science/SIPG, Waterloo) and Brenda Murphy (full-time faculty, Social and Environmental Justice, Brantford) and many valuable questions and suggestions were raised by the membership during the open conversation. In this blog post, we provide a brief summary of some of the ideas put forward at the meeting. Please contact the Climate Action Committee if you would like to suggest other ideas!

As Laurier is a multicampus university, students, faculty, and staff often need to travel between Toronto, Kitchener/Waterloo and Brantford. A regular shuttle bus between the Waterloo and Brantford campuses would help us cut carbon emissions and facilitate engagement between the campuses. Classrooms could also be equipped with telecommunication tools to facilitate cross-campus instruction and meetings to cut down on the need for commuting. In order to cut down on driving around our individual campuses, faculty and staff could be issued local bus passes.

The COVID pandemic has encouraged us to cut down on paper use and conduct more of our business online. We can continue to encourage less paper use by educating the membership on software and hardware technologies that enable digital research and grading. Disabled students, faculty, and staff often have increased knowledge working with tools that could help decrease our carbon emissions. We must, however, keep in mind the carbon footprint of our digital technologies. More research needs to be done to better understand the environmental impacts of paper versus virtual business as well as the differences between different online technologies such as Zoom versus Teams and Skype.

Flying for research and networking purposes is a concern. We need to decouple the perceived link between frequent flying and academic success. We also need to encourage more conferences to stay online after COVID restrictions end. Additionally, we could push the university to allow us to purchase carbon offsets with our PER funds. Significant limitations with carbon offsets were noted, however, as they tend to download the carbon footprint of North American Countries onto the Global South. Perhaps a first step would be to get more information on our current flying levels so that we can set a benchmark that we can work towards lowering.

Just transitions are a priority for our membership. In our discussions of moving more activities online, we also need to consider questions of digital equity and advocate for students, faculty, staff, and research partners who may not have adequate technology or internet access. Without proper access, we run the risk of inadvertently silencing community members. We also need to collect data on how equity considerations might limit our personal transportation or technology choices. Additionally, we should advocate for stable employment as a form of climate justice. Contract faculty often need to put together teaching positions in multiple cities in order to make a living and thus to do large amounts of inter-city commuting, and fighting for more stable jobs with living wages at single institutions is thus both an equity and a climate issue. The university's subcontracting out of staffing positions also allows for more worker exploitation and may reduce control over the environmental practices of that labour, such as custodial staff and the use of toxic cleaning materials.

The university campuses are embedded in, and have tight reciprocal relationships with, their surrounding communities; boosting collaborative efforts could improve the impact of climate change initiatives. For instance, the bus pass is a valued service for full-time students while helping to support municipal public transportation systems and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Where faculty, staff and students are working with community-based environmental non-government organizations on climate change issues, these efforts could be further supported to contribute towards low carbon sustainability. Finally, when undertaking community service learning opportunities, efforts could be made to support climate change-related initiatives.

It was noted that we need more data on the current environmental working practices of our students, faculty, and staff. This information could be gathered by conducting a large survey or by securing a SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant with WLUF and the university. It was also noted that we should strike a balance between critiquing the university administration and pushing them to do more while working with the university on environmental programs that have already been developed. For example, we could encourage participation in the university's Green Office Program which offers hundreds of suggestions on how office operations can be more sustainable at the departmental and program level.