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### Guest Blogger: Carbon Offsets Are Worth Considering



Niles Barnes

When looking for strategies to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and eventually achieve carbon neutrality, colleges cannot avoid considering the value of carbon offsets.

Skepticism abounds when carbon offsets are mentioned, and many have ridiculed the concept (in some cases comparing it to [infidelity offsets](#)). Critics of carbon offsets claim that offsets are simply a way to carry on as usual, escape some guilt, and perpetuate complacency. But this view misses the broader utility of offsets, especially if they're used in tandem with campus conservation measures and increases in efficiency.

Now that over 600 college and university presidents across the U.S. have committed to carbon neutrality by signing the American College and University [Presidents Climate Commitment](#), guidance concerning offsets is more important than ever. (See an earlier *Chronicle* post covering a [recently released guide to offsets](#).) Once you're able to get past all the debate, there are some neat examples of local and creative offset projects led by colleges and universities. Using offsets is certainly not an excuse to continue down a business-as-usual path, but offsets can be meaningful and have a tangible effect on managing emissions.

**Brown University** has begun an innovative effort, [Community Carbon Use Reduction at Brown](#), that provides support for reducing carbon emissions in the greater Providence area. Brown and the Sidney E. Frank Foundation have committed \$350,000 in support for student-, faculty-, and staff-led projects. One of the first tangible projects to emerge is [Project 20/20](#), a campus-community partnership in which students are replacing incandescent bulbs with more-efficient compact-flourescent models in the community surrounding the university. The project hopes to replace bulbs in 15,000 homes.

**Ohio University** is spending \$50,000 from a grant on [projects that reduce energy waste in off-campus student housing](#). Through energy-efficiency audits of residential properties, the university will provide recommendations and financial support to students and landlords interested in making efficiency improvements.

**University of Colorado at Boulder** students are [purchasing locally-generated offsets to mitigate a portion of campus emissions](#). The students are using \$50,000 of their student fees to purchase these offsets through Gov. Bill Ritter's "Colorado Carbon Fund." In addition, students trained in energy auditing are helping to make energy- and cost-efficient upgrades in the surrounding community through the [Community Energy Connections program](#). Student auditors have installed high-efficiency light bulbs and showerheads in low-income homes and provided community members with education about energy efficiency.

**The University of Prince Edward Island**, in Canada, is offering faculty and staff members and students the opportunity to [calculate their emissions from commuting and air travel and then contribute to an offset project](#) in nearby [Macphail Woods](#). The donations help restore Prince Edward Island's Acadian forests.

I'm sure there are numerous other local carbon-offset projects occurring at colleges. If your campus has an innovative project underway or planned, please [let me know](#). —Niles Barnes

*Niles Barnes, November's Buildings & Grounds guest blogger, is projects coordinator for the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. While he was a student at the University of Kentucky, he worked with both the university's residence-life sustainability program and with its environmental club, UK Greenthumb. You can read his previous posts [here](#) and [here](#).*

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