Champions of change

UC Irvine’s Climate Action Fellows spearhead campus sustainability.
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The 2024 Climate Action Fellows are, from left, Jazmín Romero, Angelu Lesaca and Kendall Lankford.

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The Bonnie Reiss Climate Action Fellowship Program (formerly known as the Carbon Neutrality Initiative Fellowship Program) funds student-generated projects that support the University of California system’s climate action goals. All 10 UC campuses, five academic health centers, the UC Office of the President, UC

Agriculture and Natural Resources, and Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory participate in the program, which began in spring 2015.

UC Irvine has three Climate Action Fellows per academic school year – the 2023-24 cohort being Angelu Lesaca, Kendall Lankford and Jazmín Romero, dedicated, respectively, to resilience, student engagement and decarbonization. Central to their role is the integration of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice principles into the climate action framework, aiming to make adaptation strategies more relatable to UC Irvine stakeholders.

Their collaborative efforts are highlighted in such events as Climate Change Conversations and the Sustainival that target a diverse audience, emphasizing the interconnectedness between UC Irvine's energy choices and their wider impacts. The culmination is a poster presentation at UCOP, where Climate Action Fellows from all UC campuses will showcase their projects.

Angelu Lesaca: Focus on resilience

Among these changemakers at UC Irvine is Angelu Lesaca, a senior majoring in environmental science and policy. She first learned about the Climate Action Fellowship through an article in the Sustainability Resource Center's weekly email newsletter. The prospect of contributing to meaningful change motivated her to apply.

"I wanted to move the needle forward and see what's happening on the inside," Lesaca says.

Now, as the resilience fellow, she is using data collected by the previous resilience fellow from 800 survey respondents for vulnerability assessments, identifying areas and communities at risk from climate-induced hazards like wildfires, smoke, heat and flooding. Plotting these vulnerabilities onto climate maps from NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration highlights disparities and fosters a deeper connection with the climate change narrative.

"Currently, I'm actively collaborating with faculty and staff from various departments, in addition to engaging with undergraduate and graduate students through Climate Change Conversations and classroom visits," Lesaca says.

Kendall Lankford: Engaging on climate

A junior double-majoring in environmental science and policy and social ecology, Kendall Lankford is the Climate Action Fellow focused on student engagement. Learning about the opportunity through a sorority sister, she fosters community outreach, trying to educate and involve the UC Irvine community on sustainability and decarbonization efforts. In this capacity, Lankford orchestrates Climate Change Conversations, spearheads club and center outreach, and collaborates on various initiatives. Through regular events, she is ensuring that the voices of students and community members are heard.

“The Climate Change Conversations are a great educational platform where diverse opinions about a more sustainable future are openly expressed and discussed,” Lankford says. “They’re designed to engage a wider range of departments and individuals, particularly those who may not traditionally attend sustainability-themed gatherings.”

She and her counterparts at other campuses and UCOP are frequently in touch, exploring innovative approaches to sustainability and climate action.

Jazmín Romero: Carbon crusader

In the summer after sophomore year, Jazmín Romero, who uses the pronouns they/them/their, sought to make their mark. Fascinated by CO2 and its impact on climate, the environmental science and policy major gained experience in separating gases within plant samples. Stumbling upon the fellowship opportunity in the Sustainability Resource Center’s weekly newsletter, Romero knew they could contribute significantly to UC Irvine’s decarbonization goals. The self-identified “CO2 junkie” wanted to delve deeper into how these emissions affect the broader scope of climate change.

“I wanted to apply my technical expertise to practical, policy-driven solutions,” says Romero, now a junior.

As the Climate Action Fellow devoted to decarbonization, they were tasked with challenging responsibilities such as researching housing and dining for fossil fuel uses and exploring electrification replacement options in Mesa Court. But Romero was determined to refine UC Irvine’s fossil fuel decarbonization strategies further and took on the ambitious project of conducting annual research on the university’s gas inventory, a valuable contribution to The Climate Registry.

Living labs and beyond

The Climate Action Fellows also participate in UCOP’s Global Climate Leadership Council meetings, which convene faculty and associates from across the UC system to share ideas and strategies on integrating the university’s sustainability goals into its teaching, research and public service missions.

UC Irvine serves as a living lab, a campus where theoretical sustainability practices are brought to life. Through these efforts, UC Irvine is not only preparing its students to become environmental stewards but also solidifying its place at the forefront of social innovation in sustainability.

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