

Tapping young energy to drive corporate climate action

The EDF program dedicated to driving business action on climate and cultivating the environmental leaders of tomorrow.

By: Tasha Kosviner



Class of 2019. More than 1,000 top-tier graduate students have passed through the Climate Corps fellowship program, helping propel more than 500 leading businesses, cities and public institutions to greater sustainability.

What if you took some of the brightest young minds about to enter the business world, gave them the tools to create the solutions we need to stabilize our climate and then placed them in companies and institutions that wanted to change?

From BlackRock to Best Buy, Microsoft to Mars, businesses are seeking new ways to respond to the climate crisis. Faced with supply chain instability, energy insecurity and the threat of resource scarcity, as well as escalating pressure from customers, investors and employees, they urgently need roadmaps to a more sustainable future.

At the same time, young people are hungry for change. 2019 saw 1.4 million young people take to the streets to protest climate change. And 70% of millennials say they would choose to work at a company with a strong environmental agenda.

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to step up on climate.”

Scott Wood,
director of Climate Corps



EDF’s innovative Climate Corps program sits at this powerful intersection, where business demand for a cleaner future meets an emerging workforce eager to do something about it.

This unique 10-week summer fellowship program trains the brightest, most engaged young graduate students and pairs them with Fortune 500 companies, public institutions and cities determined to tackle their carbon footprints and map out a more sustainable future. Climate Corps fellows spend a summer designing and implementing new tools and practices to reduce energy consumption, procure renewable energy, set carbon reduction targets and engage customers, employees and suppliers in achieving sustainability goals.

Since the program’s inception in 2008, over 1,000 graduate students have been placed in more than 500 leading organizations spanning the U.S. and China. Together, they have helped identify energy savings worth more than \$1.6 billion, the equivalent of 2.2 million metric tons of carbon emissions. What’s more, many fellowships lead to full-time roles, either with their host company or in sustainability positions elsewhere. Today, Climate Corps’ active and growing alumni network comprises 2,200 former fellows and host organizations.

To hear more about how this program is transforming companies and supercharging the careers of tomorrow's environmental leaders, we sat down with the director of EDF's Climate Corps program, Scott Wood.

Scott, in today's political environment, how important is business action on climate?

Now more than ever, we need every sector of our society — nonprofit, civil and for profit — to step up. When it comes to businesses this means two things: advocating for federal policies that can bring about real and lasting change, and taking a clear-eyed look at the environmental impact of their own organization. Climate Corps fellows are focused on the second of those goals — helping businesses, cities and public institutions tackle their environmental impact. This could mean reducing energy consumption, improving access to renewables, setting carbon reduction targets and figuring out how to meet them, working with suppliers to drive down emissions and find cleaner shipping methods, or addressing the impact of their products after they've left their stores.



Climate Corps fellows Wei Shao, *left*, and Yinghuang Ji, *right*, seeking energy efficiencies in factories supplying Walmart China. They are two of 14 fellows who have helped propel the world's biggest retailer to greater sustainability since 2014.

What are some of your most memorable projects so far?

There are so many! In 2014, our first year of running the program in China, we placed two really impressive, smart, hardworking young women, Yinghuang Ji

and Wei Shao, with Walmart. Watching them crisscross the country in search of energy savings among Walmart’s suppliers’ factories was inspiring. Their work found tens of millions of dollars’ worth of energy savings and offered concrete steps to achieving it. Then, in 2018, the year Lyft committed to full carbon neutrality, a Climate Corps fellow joined the company to help them get a handle on their data and develop a methodology to accurately measure the company’s carbon footprint. That work led to Lyft’s very first greenhouse gas emissions inventory and allowed the company to accurately offset the impact of its rides.



In 2017, Climate Corps alum Jenny McColloch, *center*, now director of global sustainability strategy and scale for good at McDonald’s, hired fellow Amanda Bangs, *left*, to help develop the company’s sustainability and energy management strategy. “Climate Corps provides fantastic training and support for fellows to ensure they advance their host organization’s business and sustainability goals,” she says.

Then there are all the inspiring stories of what our fellows do after Climate Corps. Just one example: Jenny McColloch, who was a fellow in 2011, is now senior director of global sustainability strategy and scale for good at McDonald’s, pushing one of the world’s biggest fast food companies to deepen its environmental activities. In 2019, for example, McDonald’s announced plans for two new renewable energy projects that will generate enough power to run 2,500 restaurants, and the chain has recently committed to 100% sustainable packaging by 2025. And Jenny has hired Climate Corps fellows to help her. That’s not uncommon. Former fellows understand the value of the program, so when they’re looking for support on a particular project, they come back to us.

Climate Corps was founded in 2008. What was the catalyst for the program?

Back in 2008, a study came out that found that \$1.2 trillion a year was being left on the table through energy waste in the corporate sector. It wasn't that companies didn't want to benefit from the cost savings associated with energy efficiency. It was just that back then, most businesses weren't organized in a way that allowed them to fully understand the missed opportunity. In many cases, it simply wasn't anyone's job to tackle it. So lights were left on, machines were left running overnight, heating and cooling systems were not managed efficiently. But very few people were saying, "Hey, we could be doing things differently." So Climate Corps started as an energy efficiency program — an opportunity to make a significant impact on U.S. carbon emissions in the corporate sector. We knew it would appeal to companies because it made sense for their bottom line. So we said, "Let's throw some really bright MBA students at this problem and see what happens."

Climate Corps helps organizations tackle innovative sustainability projects, including:



- Energy efficiency**
- Greenhouse gas commitments**
- Supply chain sustainability**
- Renewable energy**

That first year, you placed seven fellows in seven different companies in California. How has the program evolved since then?

We've grown! In 2019, we placed 120 fellows in 99 companies, cities and public institutions.

And we've expanded what we offer. While there is still plenty for companies to do on energy efficiency, the level of understanding and resources has matured to such an extent that many companies can do that work in-house or through a growing supply of paid consultants. So we took a step back and asked ourselves, "What's important today when it comes to driving the corporate sector forward around climate?" That's how we landed on the four project categories we currently operate: energy efficiency projects that are scalable across multiple sites; renewable energy generation and procurement; setting long-term science-based climate targets; and supply chain engagement. And year on year, we've seen a steady uptick of interest in all those areas.

We've also partnered with EDF's China program to expand Climate Corps into China. In 2019, 25 of our fellows worked on projects in China, with multinationals such as IKEA, Unilever and Walmart alongside domestic companies like BYD, Lenovo and China Industrial Bank.

Finally, we recognize that to solve climate change we need to harness



Where climate and equity meet

Having moved to Texas from Mexico at age eight, Phoebe Romero, *above*, knows what it is to be an outsider. "As an immigrant, you don't feel 100% tied in to a place. You live between two cultures," she says.

Twenty-three years later, Romero is a Brown

University graduate with a master's in environmental management and sustainable development from St. Edward's University in Austin. She is also on a mission to bring social justice and equity to the heart of environmental planning.

As part of the City of Austin's Office of Sustainability, she and her team are developing a citywide climate action strategy that incorporates the needs and perspectives of Austin's most underrepresented communities.

"Race is still a primary indicator of life outcomes in Austin," says Romero, who is also a Climate Corps alum. "And climate change impacts low-income communities of

different perspectives, ideas and solutions. We are actively expanding our efforts to reach more diverse student applicants through outreach to minority-serving institutions and student groups, and conferences and events.

But wait, shouldn't companies pay for their own sustainability work?

With the exception of public sector placements, where we work with cities or public institutions, U.S. Climate Corps fellows are fully funded by the companies they're placed in. What EDF provides is the training, the expertise and matchmaking fellows with companies. It's a very involved process. We conduct rigorous interviews to discover fellows' aptitude and expertise, and we work with the companies to help them define the project. Before the fellowship begins, we get all the fellows together for three days of in-depth training, adding to the tools, resources and expertise they bring with them. And during the course of their placement, they have access to mentors and experts both within EDF and among former fellows too.

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Austin's Climate Action Plan is designed to mitigate the city's contribution to global warming while helping improve residents' quality of life. It looks at transportation, buildings, education and more. For example, Romero's work examines how bus electrification plans, intended to cut the city's greenhouse gas emissions, can be coupled with expanding routes to communities where residents may not own cars.

Romero also runs the podcast Greenhouse Lasses, which highlights voices of color, women and members of the LGBTQIA+

community who work in sustainability.

She credits her Climate Corps fellowship, helping the historically black Huston-Tillotson University slash energy use, with helping open her eyes to the intersection of race and climate. She has also worked with Amnesty International helping indigenous communities in Argentina tackle water contamination, and she is a graduate of Climate Corps' advocacy program.

“It is vital that all perspectives are included in policy making,” she says. “We have to build bridges between community and government.”

You engage with the brightest graduate students early on in their sustainability careers. What's that like?

It's the best part of the job! The topic of climate change can be tough to contend with every day. It's easy to feel discouraged, especially in this political environment, where we're so often on the defensive. I am fortunate in that I get a fresh injection of hope and inspiration from the young people we work with, literally every day. One example: A 2018 fellow, Dan Katzenberger, was placed with Best Buy, where he worked on analyzing and reducing the amount of energy the company's products consume after purchase. Best Buy ended up hiring Dan full-time (as a renewable energy program manager), not an uncommon outcome for our fellows. Now Dan tells us he is also a commissioner on his city's Conservation Commission and a member of the Environmental Initiative's Minnesota Sustainable Growth Coalition.

So the ripples of a fellowship continue far beyond that 10-week placement.

Yes, and that's something we're actively developing. One of the great things about this program is that it's extremely competitive. In 2019, we had over 1,000 applicants for 120 fellowships (which, my boss likes to say, rivals the

Since 2008, EDF Climate Corps fellows have identified energy savings of \$1.6 billion in organizations across the U.S. and China.



acceptance rate of some Ivy League schools!). This means Climate Corps attracts some of the most talented, motivated people around. So our network of alumni contains this amazing wealth of expertise. We recognize that our best opportunity for sustained impact as a program is in keeping those alum engaged, empowered, and close to EDF. So we've invested a lot of resources in that. We now have a full-time network manager whose job it is to keep tabs on alumni and find opportunities to connect one person with another. We have an annual conference and a steady schedule of regional meet-ups. We organize a webinar series that provides knowledge and training on sustainability leadership And we've launched a virtual platform that allows alum to stay connected, regardless of where they are in the world.

Like a Facebook for Climate Corps.

Exactly. But with a single focus on careers and knowledge exchange around environment and corporate sustainability. Fellows consistently tell us the network is one of the best resources they have.

“The Climate Corps advocacy workshop taught me I could make a change.”

Katherine Walsh,
*Climate Corps alum and
NY State Assembly candidate 2020*



What about alum who don't choose the traditional corporate sustainability career path?

In the last couple of years, we've launched two new programs for our alum. The first is a climate advocacy initiative. This consists of webinars in partnership with EDF's Political Affairs team, workshops and ongoing support

for young people interested in getting involved in climate advocacy. One graduate of that program, a 2013 fellow named Katherine Walsh, was inspired to make greater change and decided to run for office. She later went on to win a seat in the Democratic County Committee in Brooklyn, New York, and was elected chair of the Democratic Party for her Assembly district. In 2020, she is running for New York State Assembly with climate as her leading issue.



The Climate Corps network contains more than 2,200 alum and host organizations, spanning 37 U.S. states and 40 countries. An annual roster of events and meet-ups keeps them connected with EDF and engaged in the corporate sustainability mission.

The second is a climate entrepreneurship and innovation initiative, which similarly consists of workshops on EDF support. We ran a pilot in 2019 where fellows learned how to launch a sustainable start-up, secure funding and market their enterprise. The feedback from the participants was fantastic, but even more encouraging were the actions participants took afterward. For example, two fellows who came to the workshop with similar ideas for creating an organization that would promote energy efficiency and renewables ended up joining forces. We just heard that they have received a start-up grant from the National Science Foundation and are now working on piloting their idea statewide.

It makes me want to be starting out again!

I know! So much has changed in recent years in terms of access to training and opportunities for young people in this sphere. When I was starting out, I thought environmentalism was something you did alongside your career. Like

an additional interest. Roles like “sustainability manager” didn’t really exist. And there weren’t college courses in this sort of thing. Now, Climate Corps includes graduates with degrees in corporate sustainability management and coursework in topics like renewable energy, carbon accounting and more alongside traditional MBA students, and the people who are hiring them have titles like Director of Sustainability. That’s a great sign.

You’re a psychology graduate. How has this informed your work?

When I first joined Climate Corps, I spent a lot of time on the road, visiting conferences, talking to people about what we do and how their companies could benefit. And often these weren’t sustainability officers who already had that environmental mindset. They were facilities managers, directors of corporate real estate and other operations folks. It wasn’t unusual for me to find myself talking with people who didn’t believe in climate change. And it’s not intuitive, how to navigate those conversations. There are some real tried and tested approaches to talking with folks who don’t agree with you.

In these oppositional times, many of us encounter those challenges in our own lives. What advice can you offer?

I have three tips. Get to know the person you’re talking to before you try to convince them of something. This can take time, but it’s one of the most effective ways to have a productive conversation. I’m a firm believer that listening is more important than talking. Two: Be truthful but avoid a focus on scare tactics, which can make people feel helpless. Help them see how they can be part of the solution — for example, by voting or taking steps to reduce their own environmental footprint. Finally, don’t underestimate the power of storytelling. Facts and figures are important but stories, especially those that allow the listener to empathize with another human being, connect on a far more emotional level.

You recently became a dad. How has that changed your outlook?

It’s every bit as eye-opening, amazing and challenging as everyone said it would be! And of course it’s evolved my motivation for my work. As a young person, I was focused on how climate change would impact me personally.

I loved to ski; I grew up in New England, and I love the seasons. To see how climate change would impact those things was frightening. Later, I began to travel, and I saw the impacts on people's lives in much more profound ways. For example, prior to EDF, I spent some time working for a nonprofit in Peru, helping increase recycling in communities in the High Andes. I met people whose lives depended on glacial melt for drinking water and agriculture. That really brought it home that this was way bigger than me or any one person. And then my daughter Romy was born, and everything just became even more real. I thought about her and children like her in less fortunate parts of the world — and about the generations that would come after them. And suddenly I was like, “Wow, who cares about me?”



I hope that when Romy grows up, it will be a world with more progress than problems.

Scott Wood,
director of Climate Corps

Are you hopeful for their future?

It's never going to be a perfect world. But I hope that the efforts we are involved in today will be felt by her generation. I also believe that, as with every new generation, there will be new solutions, new advances and new approaches to problem-solving that we haven't even considered yet. I hope that when Romy grows up, it will be a world with more progress than new problems, a healing world.

For more information, please contact EDF Member Services at 800-684-3322 or email members@edf.org.

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