



Case Study: University Air-Travel Offset Policy

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CAL STATE EAST BAY

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Synopsis California State University East Bay (CSUEB) established a University Air-Travel Offset Policy (the policy) to mitigate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from university-funded air travel. The policy went into effect on July 1, 2020. CSUEB now charges a \$9 carbon fee for every air-travel round trip funded by the university or affiliate. The monies are deposited into the university's Climate Action Plan Fund. The Campus Sustainability Committee will invest the funds in on-campus projects that reduce GHGs.

The University Air-Travel Offset Policy aims to help CSUEB meet goals laid out in its Climate Action Plan (CAP). The CAP requires that all state-funded travel be carbon neutral or 100% offset by 2022, and that CSUEB achieve campus carbon neutrality by 2040.

Primary stakeholders involved The CSUEB Climate Action Plan Implementation Task Force developed the policy and vetted it through the CSUEB Division of Administration & Finance. The Office of Sustainability manages the policy.

Timeline CSUEB conceived of the Air Travel Offset Policy in 2018 while developing its Climate Action Plan. The Campus Sustainability Committee discussed the policy and agreed on details at their Spring 2019 meeting. The university president signed the policy in June 2020, and it went into effect July 1, 2020.

Scope The University Air-Travel Offset Policy is mandatory and applies to university-related travel, including travel funded by university affiliates. This covers all travel by university auxiliaries such as the campus bookstore and campus dining services, self-supported programs such as courses not funded by the state, and donor-supported programs. The policy excludes travel paid for by grants, as many grants currently prohibit the use of grant funds for carbon fees.

Determining a carbon price CSUEB reviewed many approaches to determining the cost of carbon emissions. The U.S. EPA has estimated the full social cost of carbon (SCC), a price meant to monetize societal costs associated with carbon emissions, to be about \$50 per metric ton of CO₂ equivalent (MTCDE) emitted per year.¹ A survey of over 300 economists who have published

1. According to the EPA, "The SCC is meant to be a comprehensive estimate of climate change damages and includes changes in net agricultural productivity, human health, property damages from increased flood risk, and changes in energy system costs, such as reduced costs for heating and increased costs for air conditioning. However, given current modeling and data limitations, it does not include all important damages." <https://19january2017snapshot.epa.gov/climatechange/social-cost-carbon.html>



research on climate change in peer-reviewed journals revealed that about 75% believed that the SCC was equal to or higher than the \$37/MTCDE estimated by the U.S. government in 2014, with nearly 70% believing it was higher.²

CSUEB recognizes that carbon dioxide is not the only greenhouse gas generated by air travel, nor are those emissions the only impacts of air travel on climate. According to the IPCC Special Report on Aviation and the Global Atmosphere, from 1992 to 2050 the overall radiative forcing by aircraft (excluding that from changes in cirrus clouds) is a factor of 2 to 4 times greater than the forcing by aircraft carbon dioxide alone.³ Commercial offsets may not account for these impacts. For example, IPCC estimates that the full aviation warming impact is 2.7 times the carbon dioxide impact alone.⁴

CSUEB also looked to current programs adopted by other universities and to the prices charged by state-approved offset vendors. Based on the available information, CSUEB found that universities are charging between \$8 per round trip to \$25 per round trip, depending on the destination.⁵ Other universities are purchasing offsets per air-mile travelled.⁶

The CSUEB Campus Sustainability Committee ultimately preferred a simple flat-fee approach to reduce policy implementation costs. And the committee preferred not to distinguish local and international travel. Given that CSUEB's directly-financed air travel is predominantly domestic, the university opted for a single flat-fee, regardless of destination, at the low end of the range: \$9 per round trip flight.

Development process CSUEB made a commitment to pursue carbon neutrality when President Morishita signed the Carbon Commitment in January 2015. To fulfill the Carbon Commitment, CSUEB formed the Campus Sustainability Committee in May 2015, adopted a CAP in May 2018, and approved the creation of the Climate Action Plan Implementation Task Force (CAP-IT) in September 2018. The CAP commits the University to achieve carbon neutrality by 2040 and specifically states that “all state-funded travel will be carbon neutral or 100% offset by 2022.”

The CAP-IT originally developed the draft Air-Travel Offset Policy. A Fellow from Climate Corps, a program of local environmental nonprofit Strategic Energy Innovations, provided research and draft language that helped inform the policy. The CAP-IT includes representatives from campus Facilitates Development & Operations, Financial Services, the Procurement Office, Student Housing & Residence Life, the Office of Sustainability, the Academic Senate, and Associated Students, Inc. Once the CAP-IT finalized and approved the policy language, they vetted it through CSUEB's Division of Administration & Finance to ensure the policy structure

2. Barron, A. & Parker, B. (2018). *Selecting an Internal Carbon Price for Academic Institutions* (Working Paper). Smith College. Retrieved from <https://secondnature.org/wp-content/uploads/SMITH-Selecting-an-Internal-Carbon-Price-for-Academic-Institutions.pdf>
3. IPCC. Special Report on Aviation and the Global Atmosphere. Retrieved from <https://archive.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/sres/aviation/index.php?idp=3>
4. IPCC. Special Report on Aviation and the Global Atmosphere. Retrieved from <https://archive.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/sres/aviation/index.php?idp=3>
5. See for example: [UCLA - Air Travel Mitigation Fund, Arizona State University - ASU Carbon Project](#)
6. See for example: [University of Maryland - Carbon Neutral Air Travel Initiative](#)



aligned with current campus finance operations. Then, at its Spring 2020 meeting, the Campus Sustainability Committee recommended the policy be sent to the Office of the President for signature. President Morishita signed the policy in June 2020.

Collection & use of funds The CSUEB Finance Office uses university travel software reports to determine the number of air-travel claims incurring the \$9 fee. This happens three times per year, after the Fall, Spring, and Summer semesters. The office then charges an Air Travel Offset expense to the corresponding departments, not to the individual travelers. CSUEB Accounting deposits the resulting monies into the university Climate Action Plan Fund. The Office of Sustainability accesses this data through the university financial systems, and reports results annually in the CAP Progress Report. The Office of Sustainability also shares results publicly with the campus community.

The Campus Sustainability Committee will use funds collected from the policy to invest in on-campus projects that provide measurable GHG reductions. This may include projects located on any site owned and managed by CSUEB. One potential project is a carbon farming initiative at the university's Concord Campus. The university president will also review and approve funding decisions. The Director of Sustainability provides final authorization for all spending from the Climate Action Plan Fund.

Lessons Learned

- Having a university-approved CAP with an air-travel offset goal set a clear expectation for the policy development process and removed the need to advocate for the policy. Instead, it allowed conversations to focus on policy design, since the concept was already approved in the CAP.
- Developing friendly relationships early on with Procurement and Finance staff was critical. They championed the policy and should be recognized.
- Learning from other campuses was valuable. UCLA and University of Maryland supported the process by sharing resources and experiences, which was a great help during CSUEB's process.