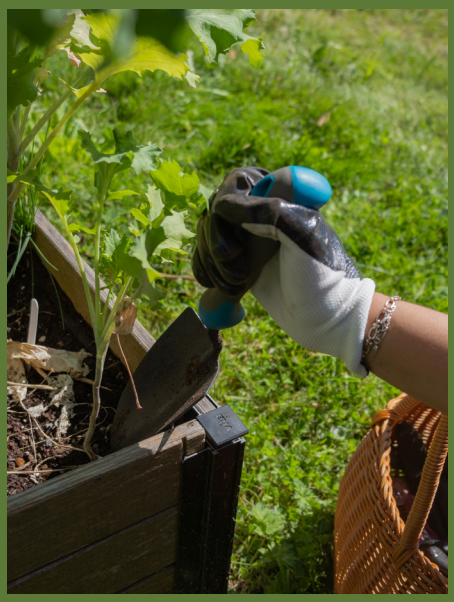
CAMPUS AS A LIVING LAB: UNIVERSITY PEER REVIEW









THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Sustainability Hub

November 2025

Introduction

Campus as a Living Lab Concept

The "Living Lab" concept encapsulates an innovative approach to real-world problem-solving and innovation. They are places and spaces where people can design, pilot, study, and learn from social and technical innovations in real-time, real-world contexts. Living Labs serve as a bridge between theoretical research and practical application by fostering an environment of diverse participation through co-creation and co-development, and enabling participants to engage with complex problems and learn valuable lessons from the practices.

Building on these principles, the Campus as a Living Lab (CLL) model leverages the unique resources of a university as a dynamic platform for experimentation and application—turning campuses into vibrant, real-world laboratories and learning hub for innovation and impact.

A Dynamic and Evolving CLL Landscape

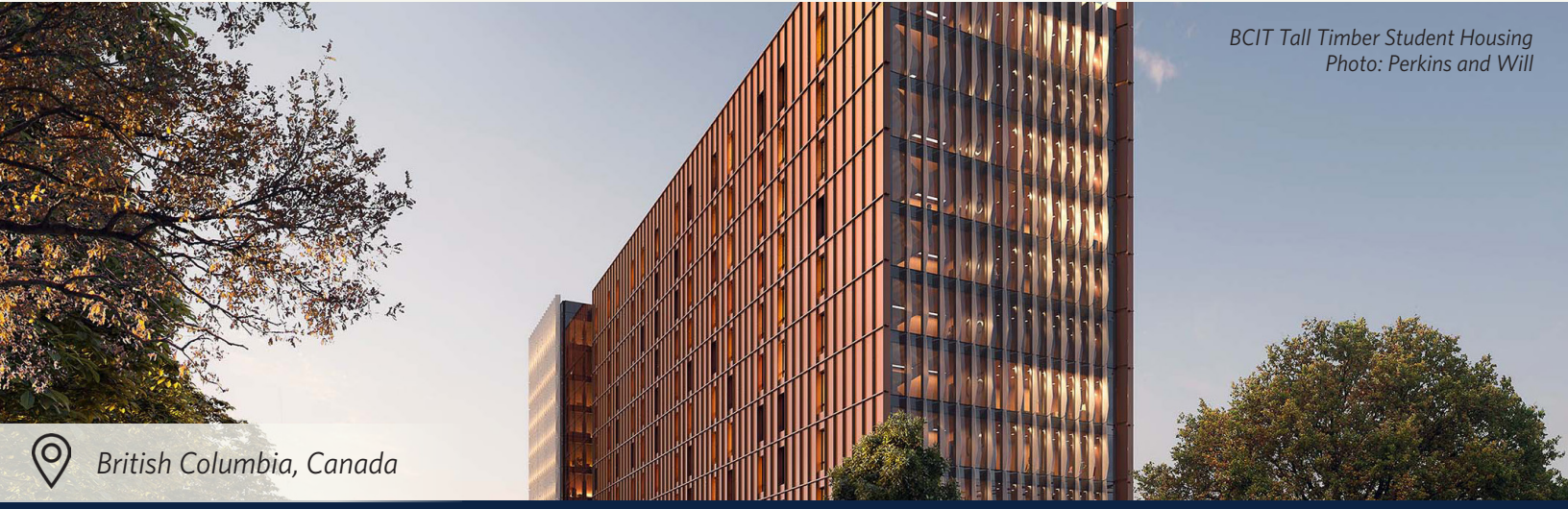
Across North America and beyond, universities are establishing systems and structures to support interdisciplinary collaboration, applied research, enhanced teaching and learning through Campus as a Living Lab initiatives. Each institution's approach varies in approach, organization, funding, and governance, reflecting its unique priorities and context.

As part of this learning effort, we had the opportunity to speak with peers from several universities and organizations who generously shared their insights into CLL practice, programming, and culture. We extend our sincere appreciation to colleagues from Arizona State University, British Columbia Institute of Technology, Concordia University, Creative Destruction Lab, Harvard University, Innovate BC, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Simon Fraser University, University of Alberta, University of Victoria, and Urban Living Lab Center for their time and collaboration.

Peer Interviews and Shared Learning

This summary combines publicly available resources and insights from peer interviews across diverse CLL program types, presenting one-page profiles for each program that granted permission to share their information. While not exhaustive, this collection offers a snapshot of diverse CLL approaches, highlighting their key programming, models, and unique propositions. Our intent is to contribute to the growing community of practice around Campus as a Living Lab initiatives, fostering collaboration, knowledge exchange, and mutual inspiration.

UBC Sustainability Hub looks forward to continuing the conversation with existing and emerging peers to deepen collective understanding and advance the Living Lab work and success together.



BCIT Tall Timber Student Housing
Photo: Perkins and Will

British Columbia, Canada

British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) – Living Labs

QUICK FACTS

ENGAGEMENT TYPE
Experiential learning, industry collaboration

INSTITUTION MODEL
Single institution

MANAGING DEPARTMENT
Institute Sustainability with Campus Planning and Facilities

KEY STAKEHOLDERS
Faculty, staff, students and industry partners

FUNDING SOURCES
Internal budget for staff; external partner/in-kind contributions for programs

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https://www.bcit.ca/sustainability/living-labs/

BCIT Factor Four
Photo: BCIT

LIVING LAB APPROACH

BCIT's Living Labs initiative is a pan-institutional program that deeply embeds sustainability through hands-on, real-world learning opportunities across the campus environment. It uses the physical campus as an experimental platform where students, faculty, staff, and industry partners collaborate on practical sustainability challenges. BCIT emphasizes experiential learning tailored to its trades and technology students by offering direct, visual access to campus infrastructure, operational data, and leading-edge technologies. Participants are encouraged to design, test, and implement solutions that advance both sustainability objectives and educational outcomes.

KEY PROGRAMMING

BCIT's Living Labs integrates experiential learning into campus development by embedding specific educational components into the Request for Proposals (RFP) processes for consultants and contractors for its major construction projects. These components typically encompass periodic guest speaker events led by designers, builders and/or suppliers, time-lapse video and documentation capturing the construction process, student and community engagement through facilitated tours and site visits, and sharing of technical drawings, sustainability models, and Building Information Modeling (BIM) spatial models for educational purposes. Consultants and contractors are required to include proposals for Living Lab activities, ensuring that each project contributes to both sustainability and educational outcomes.

UNIQUE PROPOSITIONS

BCIT effectively embeds Living Lab components into its institutional framework through a structured and collaborative approach. The initiative is underpinned by a 2007 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the administrative services and participating schools, where each school designates coordinators to facilitate Living Lab activities. This model ensures that sustainability and educational objectives are consistently integrated across departments. The integration process begins with pre-scoping to align project goals with teaching and learning outcomes. Subsequently, Living Lab expectations are articulated within RFP documents, requiring consultants and contractors to submit detailed proposals on how they will incorporate Living Lab elements into their services. Post-approval, the Campus Planning and Facilities department oversees the implementation of these components. This approach has been successfully applied to construction projects, including the 12-storey mass timber student housing building. By institutionalizing Living Lab practices, BCIT ensures that each project not only meets operational goals but also serves as a dynamic educational platform.

Concordia University – Volt-Age Living Lab Platform

QUICK FACTS

ENGAGEMENT TYPE
Campus & community living labs, applied research, experiential learning

INSTITUTION MODEL
Concordia-led with national academic partners

MANAGING DEPARTMENT
Volt Age Engagement, Living Labs, and EDI Team

KEY STAKEHOLDERS
Faculty, students, industry, municipal/Indigenous partners

FUNDING SOURCES
Canada First Research Excellence Fund ($123 M)

PRIMARY CONTACT
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WEBSITE
https://www.concordia.ca/research/volt-age/initiatives/impact-programs.html

Photo: Concordia University

LIVING LAB APPROACH

Based at Concordia University with academic partners at the University of Calgary, Toronto Metropolitan University, and Dalhousie University, Volt-Age is a research and innovation program funded by the Canada First Research Excellence Fund (CFREF). Living Labs are one of Volt Age' key platforms to engage communities through hands-on participatory research to transforms Concordia's campuses and off-campus locations into living laboratories where electrification and decarbonization innovations are developed, tested, and mobilized. Its approach is grounded in three core principles: co-creation of research, engagement of diverse stakeholders, and implementation in real-life context. This ensures that projects evolve through active collaboration among academic, industry, government, Indigenous, and community partners. This practical model embeds experiential learning into Concordia's broader electrification research strategy, guiding both institutional goals and community impact.

KEY PROGRAMMING

Volt-Age supports Living Lab development through two main funding streams:

- Seed Grants: Offers early-stage support to a wide range of pilot initiatives—such as campus decarbonization, solar and energy modeling, building retrofits, and community energy sovereignty—leveraging both the Volt-Age grant and partner contributions.
- Living Lab Funding Calls: Dedicated research competitions funding three major Living Lab projects in 2025, each receiving $1.3M over 3–4 years, with additional projects anticipated to start in 2026. Projects are selected through a structured review process and governed by formal research partnership agreements.

The Volt Age Living Labs team delivers additional programming through stakeholder workshops, co-creation labs, and governance sessions, and leads the platform with support from the Volt Age Executive Committee.

UNIQUE PROPOSITIONS

Volt Age is the first Living Lab platform in Canada grounded in a major research grant funding ($123M from CFREF), making it one of the country's most well-funded ecosystems for applied sustainability innovation. A notable innovation is the Curation Process, a participatory planning model involving events such as webinars, workshops, and informal meetups, which is used to inform funding call design and ensure alignment with institutional and community priorities. With its clear governance model, well-organized funding calls, deep commitment to experiential student learning, and strong collaboration, Volt Age's Living Lab platform exemplifies how universities can convene complex partnerships to drive systemic and equitable climate action.

Harvard Living Labs
Photo: Photo: Harvard Office of Sustainability

Massachusetts, USA

Harvard University – Office for Sustainability Living Labs

QUICK FACTS

ENGAGEMENT TYPE
Applied research, experiential learning, operational integration

INSTITUTION MODEL
Single institution

MANAGING DEPARTMENT
Harvard Office for Sustainability

KEY STAKEHOLDERS
Students, faculty, staff, external partners

FUNDING SOURCES
Internal university funds, grants

PRIMARY CONTACT
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WEBSITE
https://sustainable.harvard.edu/our-plan/how-we-lead/harvard-living-lab/

Harvard Quad Bikes Initiative
Photo: Harvard Office of Sustainability

LIVING LAB APPROACH

Harvard University employs its campus as a dynamic "living laboratory" to pilot and scale innovative sustainability solutions. The Office for Sustainability (OFS) unites students, faculty, and staff to co-create and test strategies that advance the University's sustainability goals and priorities. This collaborative approach transforms Harvard's operations into a platform for experiential learning and applied research, aligning with the University's Sustainability Action Plan.

KEY PROGRAMMING

Harvard's Living Lab initiatives encompass a range of programs designed to integrate sustainability into campus operations and academics. For example, the OFS Student Sustainability Grant Program provides seed funding for student-led projects addressing global sustainability challenges with on-campus applications. The Campus Sustainability Innovation Fund supports interdisciplinary teams comprising faculty, researchers, and students to pilot innovative solutions to sustainability challenges on campus or in the surrounding community. The Council of Student Sustainability Leaders works together with staff and faculty to test solutions and develop resources that help Harvard make progress toward its sustainability goals. Additionally, the Salata Institute for Climate and Sustainability provides various opportunities for students to contribute to solutions today, while learning valuable skills and developing professional connections for tomorrow.

UNIQUE PROPOSITIONS

Harvard's Living Lab integrates sustainability into the University's core functions, combining academic research, teaching, learning, operational practices, and community engagement. The University's commitment to fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and providing practical, hands-on learning experiences enables the development of scalable solutions that address complex environmental challenges. By embedding sustainability into its educational and operational frameworks, Harvard not only advances its own sustainability goals but also serves as a model for other institutions seeking to implement similar initiatives.

MIT E38 Building
Photo: MITOS

Massachusetts, USA

Massachusetts Institute of Technology – Campus as a Living Lab

QUICK FACTS

ENGAGEMENT TYPE
Applied research, experiential learning, operational integration

INSTITUTION MODEL
Single institution

MANAGING DEPARTMENT
MIT Office of Sustainability (MITOS)

KEY STAKEHOLDERS
Faculty, students, staff, city partners

FUNDING SOURCES
Internally funded

PRIMARY CONTACT
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WEBSITE
https://sustainability.mit.edu/

MIT Summer Heat Risk Monitoring
Photo: Noah Phoenix

LIVING LAB APPROACH

MIT's Living Labs program, led by the Office of Sustainability (MITOS), treats the campus as a dynamic research platform to generate actionable sustainability and climate solutions. MIT's mission is to transform its campus into a replicable model—producing equitable, scalable solutions for a changing planet while addressing operational goals, student learning, and global sustainability needs. The Living Lab framework is embedded in campus adaptation planning, climate resilience work, and cross-sector partnerships, particularly with the cities of Cambridge and Boston.

KEY PROGRAMMING

MIT's Living Labs follow two primary modalities: Engagement-Focused and Transformative. Engagement-focused projects include one-off or short-term initiatives—hackathons, class partnerships, or data-sharing collaborations—with up to 20 such engagements annually. In contrast, Transformative Living Labs involve deep, multi-year collaborations (typically 2–3 per year) that are co-led by faculty and operational staff, often linked to MIT's core sustainability priorities such as campus flood risk modeling, heat monitoring, and stormwater mitigation. MITOS coordinates a Student Cohort Program with the MIT PKG Center for Social Impact, funding and mentoring students across disciplines to contribute to projects like Scope 3 emissions inventories, biodiversity mapping, and heat resilience dashboards. Many of these efforts inform real-time operational data via web-based tools like the Sustainability Data Pool and result in changes to infrastructure design, planning guidelines, and climate models.

UNIQUE PROPOSITIONS

MIT's Living Lab model is notable for its integration of research and operation and its capacity to scale impact across both campus and city scales. Rather than simply enabling research access, MITOS co-leads multi-year projects with faculty and operational staff, ensuring that outcomes are implemented and refined in real-world settings. The Living Lab work conducted through its dual modalities has directly shaped infrastructure planning and policy, including MIT's climate adaptation roadmap and design standards for new buildings using flood and heat modeling. A dedicated student cohort model further incorporates sustainability work into education while supporting research across emissions tracking, waste, food systems, and resilience.

British Columbia, Canada

Simon Fraser University - RADIUS Social Innovation Hub

QUICK FACTS

ENGAGEMENT TYPE
Equity-centered innovation, community-led systems change, capacity building, institutional change

INSTITUTION MODEL
University-affiliated social innovation hub

MANAGING DEPARTMENT
SFU Beedie School of Business

KEY STAKEHOLDERS
Equity-seeking communities, institutional decision makers, students, public & non-profit partners

FUNDING SOURCES
External grants, Fee for Service

PRIMARY CONTACT
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WEBSITE
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Participatory Grantmaking Initiative working group (Refugee Livelihood Lab) Photo: SFU Radius

LIVING LAB APPROACH

RADIUS is a social innovation hub at Simon Fraser University's Beedie School of Business, working at the intersection of equity, systems change, and entrepreneurship. Its work is grounded in three interwoven principles: Community Weaving, Knowledge Sharing, and Infrastructure for Change. These principles support individuals in examining their roles in unjust systems, facilitate shared learning rooted in lived experience, and create the conditions for community-led experimentation and innovation. As a founding node in the Social Innovation Canada network, RADIUS connects BC's social innovation ecosystem to national efforts aimed at systemic transformation.

KEY PROGRAMMING

RADIUS delivers a range of equity-focused programs and services designed to cultivate leadership, advance community resilience, and support systems change. Flagship initiatives include the Refugee Livelihood Lab, which centers migrant justice through community empowerment and policy experimentation; and the Health Equity Lab, which supports public sector and grassroots responses to health inequities. RADIUS also offers internal consulting, equity-centered training, and student engagement opportunities aligned with social impact and justice goals. The hub actively secures and manages external grants to fund its labs, fellowships, and applied research projects.

UNIQUE PROPOSITIONS

RADIUS is uniquely positioned within a business school while operating with the ethos of a community-rooted change lab. It is co-directed by a shared leadership team that collectively governs program development, partnerships, and strategic direction. Their work spans personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels of change: fostering critical self-reflection, nurturing community-led collaboration, and building infrastructure to test and scale new interventions. RADIUS centers those most impacted by injustice in its processes and invests in the leadership and knowledge of communities to champion a more just, equitable economy. Its cross-sector model—engaging academia, government, and collaborative networks—sets it apart as a systems-focused innovation hub ingrained in institutional and civic contexts.

Alberta, Canada

University of Alberta – 5G Living Lab

QUICK FACTS

ENGAGEMENT TYPE
University-industry research and development

INSTITUTION MODEL
Single institution

MANAGING DEPARTMENT
Research & Innovation and Innovation and Partnerships team

KEY STAKEHOLDERS
Faculty, staff, students, TELUS, PrairiesCan, Alberta Innovates, private sector businesses

FUNDING SOURCES
PrairiesCan and Alberta Innovates grants

PRIMARY CONTACT
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WEBSITE
https://www.ualberta.ca/en/research/innovation/u-of-a-5g-living-lab.html

5G Research innovation Showcase
Photo: University of Alberta

LIVING LAB APPROACH

The 5G Living Lab is a collaborative partnership undertaking between University of Alberta (UA) and TELUS, supported by Alberta Innovates and Prairies Economic Development Canada (PrairiesCan). It integrates a dedicated private 5G network and mobile edge computing infrastructure across North and South campuses, creating a technological testbed for researchers, industry, and community innovators. Managed by the Innovation and Partnerships team and supported by a UA–TELUS working group, the Lab enables real-world experimentation in precision agriculture, autonomous systems, smart infrastructure, healthcare, and digital education.

KEY PROGRAMMING

The 5G Living Lab operates an annual open call for proposals, inviting cross-sector teams to submit research project ideas aligned with 5G and edge computing capabilities. Selected projects are typically funded for up to $100,000 over two years and gain access to a dedicated 5G environment configured specifically for university-based experimentation. So far, nine projects have been supported, with themes including smart building systems, indoor-outdoor navigation, AI-enhanced education tools, drone collision avoidance, and intelligent municipal infrastructure. Project proposals are reviewed and selected by a living lab selection committee composed of VPs, AVPs, Deans, and subject-matter experts in 5G technologies.

UNIQUE PROPOSITIONS

The UA 5G Living Lab stands out for its collaborative deployment of private 5G on a full university campus. With strong multi-agency backing, governance by senior leadership, and industry–academic integration, the Lab provides a strategic pathway from technical proof-of-concept to real-world deployment. By offering cutting-edge connectivity and edge computing capacity to research teams, it accelerates innovation while maintaining alignment with sectoral priorities. With a strong emphasis on real-world application and cross-sector collaboration, the 5G Living Lab functions as a scalable engine for technology validation, deployment, and commercialization across UA's innovation ecosystem.

UA Campus
Photo: University of Alberta

University of Alberta – Campus as a Living Lab

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

QUICK FACTS

ENGAGEMENT TYPE
Research-operations integration

INSTITUTION MODEL
Single institution

MANAGING DEPARTMENT
Energy and Climate Action and Sustainability Council

KEY STAKEHOLDERS
Faculty, staff, students, Sustainability Council

FUNDING SOURCES
Internal budget for staff and programs

PRIMARY CONTACT
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WEBSITE
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Campus Saint-Jean chemistry lab water recycling initiative by student Alex Schoeddert
Photo: University of Alberta - Sustainability

LIVING LAB APPROACH

The Campus as a Living Lab, a joint program between University of Alberta (UA) 's Energy and Climate Action and Sustainability Council, provides a platform for integrating academic research, institutional sustainability priorities, and campus operations. The program supports a range of projects that use the university's physical infrastructure as a testbed for innovation. It also creates meaningful learning opportunities, particularly for students engaged in micro-grants, major projects, undergraduate research initiative, sustainability certificate and graduate-level internships.

KEY PROGRAMMING

The Campus as a Living Lab serves as an umbrella for diverse programs, funding resources, and experiential learning opportunities:

- Campus Sustainability Grants (up to $2,000): Support short-term, student- or staff-initiated ideas focused on system-level improvements or proof-of-concept trials.
- Major Projects (up to $50,000): Fund larger-scale, collaborative projects involving students, faculty, and operations units to pilot and evaluate sustainability solutions on campus.
- Sustainability Scholars Program: Matches graduate students with public-sector partners to conduct applied sustainability research during the summer term.
- Undergraduate Research Initiative: Offers up to $6,000 in student stipends, contingent on identifying a faculty supervisor and an aligned operational challenge.

Projects funded through the Campus Sustainability Grants are selected via an annual proposal process and receive administrative support from the Energy & Climate Action team, which helps link research outcomes to UA's planning, infrastructure, and policy decisions. Other Campus as a Living Lab opportunities follow their own timelines and are managed by the organizations that coordinate them.

UNIQUE PROPOSITIONS

The University of Alberta's Campus as a Living Lab allows academic ideas to directly shape energy, sustainability, and facility practices. Its multi-level structure—supporting everything from small, student-led initiatives, projects to faculty-supervised research—enables broad engagement while maintaining tangible impact. The model encourages researchers and students to work alongside operational teams and community partners, transforming theoretical learning into practical outcomes. By directly aligning research with the university's strategic goals, the Campus as a Living Lab serves as both a learning engine and an implementation tool.

Martha Piper Plaza at sunset
Photo: University of British Columbia

British Columbia, Canada

University of British Columbia – Campus as a Living Lab

QUICK FACTS

ENGAGEMENT TYPE
Applied research, operational partnership and demonstration, knowledge-sharing

INSTITUTION MODEL
Single Institution

MANAGING DEPARTMENT
UBC Sustainability Hub

KEY STAKEHOLDERS
Staff, faculty, students, industry/ community partners

FUNDING SOURCES
Internal funding, sponsored research and government grants

PRIMARY CONTACT
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WEBSITE
https://livinglabs.ubc.ca/

Brock Commons
Photo: University of British Columbia (Brudder)

LIVING LAB APPROACH

UBC's Campus as a Living Lab (CLL) provides a collaborative framework that connects researchers, staffs, students and external partners to use campus as a platform for exploring, developing, and testing new ideas. Through this approach, CLL advances UBC's sustainability goals by addressing challenges rooted in local contexts and sharing insights from real-world applications. Initiated in the 2000s, CLL spans a wide range of activities across both campuses, including innovative capital projects with strong research components, academic–industry partnerships, applied research across diverse disciplines, and infrastructure that delivers both academic and operational benefits.

KEY PROGRAMMING

UBC CLL drives impact through programs that integrate research, operations, and experiential learning. Capital projects such as Brock Commons and the Bioenergy Research Facility, along with faculty-led initiatives like the Smart Hydrogen Energy District, showcase sustainable design, advance clean energy systems and city-scale infrastructure, and influence policy beyond campus. Industry collaborations, exemplified by UBC–Rogers 5G, unlock multidisciplinary applied research opportunities. Place-based living labs such as the UBC Farm foster innovation in food system, biodiversity and land-based learning. The SEEDS Sustainability Program mobilizes students in applied research aligned with UBC's campus action plans and goals. Complementing these efforts, the bi-annual CLL Fund Competition provides seed funding to spark new academic-operation partnerships and pilot transformative solutions in our campus and communities.

UNIQUE PROPOSITIONS

UBC's CLL is distinguished by its co-leadership model, where faculty and staff collaborate as equal partners from concept to implementation—combining academic expertise with operational insight to turn research into action. Acting as a facilitator and connector, CLL brings together interdisciplinary teams to co-create solutions for urgent sustainability challenges. Each project reflects five defining characteristics: innovation, research excellence, relevance to UBC's campuses and communities, student engagement, and scalable impact. Guided by four core values—sustainability, equity and inclusion, transparency, and collaborative learning—CLL provides the structure and relationships that enable transformative ideas to thrive. Rooted in its vision and purpose, CLL positions UBC as a living demonstration of what a sustainable university can achieve—accelerating change that is collaborative, scalable, and globally relevant.

WSÁNEĆ community at TEṮÁĆES Restoration Initiative project launch. Photo: Living Lab Project

British Columbia, Canada

University of Victoria – Living Lab Project

QUICK FACTS

ENGAGEMENT TYPE
Eco-cultural restoration, land-based learning, youth & community engagement

INSTITUTION MODEL
University-supported, self-funded network

MANAGING DEPARTMENT
Living Lab Project Team

KEY STAKEHOLDERS
Faculty, staff, students, industry partners

FUNDING SOURCES
UVic seed programs, REFBC grants, NSERC grants, partner funds and in-kind contribution

PRIMARY CONTACT
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WEBSITE
https://livinglabproject.ca/

Local Indigenous Youth Restoring their Sea Garden at WE'NAN'EC (Saltspring Island) Photo: Uvic Living Lab Project

LIVING LAB APPROACH

The Living Lab Project at the University of Victoria (UVic) is a unique, community-engaged initiative that fosters eco-cultural restoration, land-based learning, and reciprocal partnerships with Indigenous communities. Originally supported through university seed funding, the project has evolved into a self-sustaining, relationship-driven network, co-governed by community and campus groups with administrative support from UVic. The Lab's model is grounded in the principles of decolonization, cultural resurgence, and long-term relationship building. It supports place-based learning opportunities that integrate reciprocal knowledge sharing.

KEY PROGRAMMING

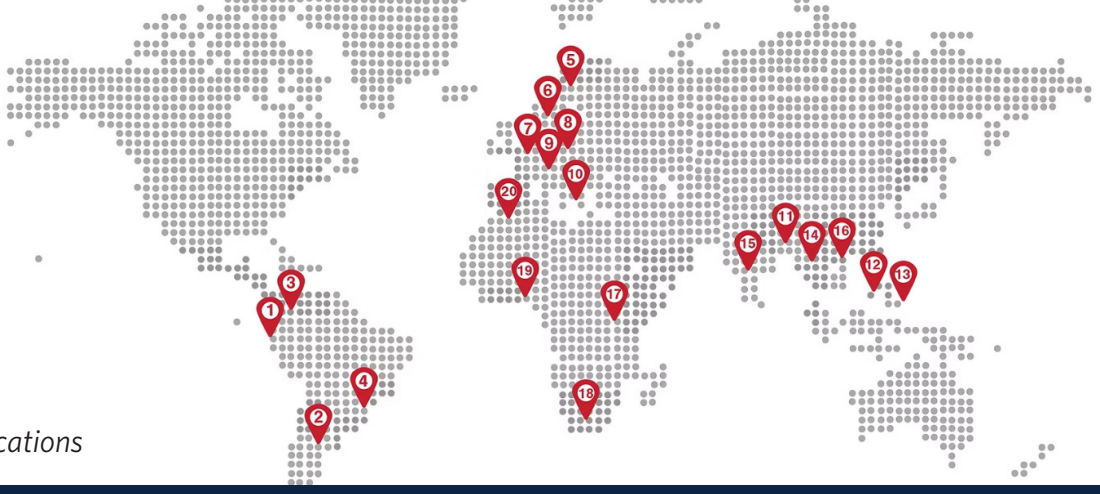
The Lab participates in and supports a range of community-based initiatives, including:

- TEṮÁĆES Restoration Initiative: Restoration of culturally significant sites, including signage and educational installations developed in collaboration with WSÁNEĆ educators
- ÁLEṈENEĆ Field School: Land-based learning with the WSÁNEĆ School Board that integrates Indigenous pedagogy and outdoor ecological education.
- Summer Youth Eco-Stewards & Community Water Labs: Programs engaging youth in environmental monitoring and local ecological practices.
- ReconciliAction Oak Bay: Collaboration with Oak Bay municipality and Indigenous partners to embed reconciliation into local governance initiatives.

The Lab's projects are supported by a combination of UVic seed funding, grant sources such as the Real Estate Foundation of BC (REFBC) and Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), partner in-kind contributions, and support for linked initiatives in UVic's Climate & Sustainability Action Plan.

UNIQUE PROPOSITIONS

The strength of the Living Lab Project lies in its versatile, interdisciplinary team and its ability to integrate academic knowledge with community and Indigenous expertise. This approach reflects the values and rhythms of land-based learning and community engagement. Rather than leading every initiative, the Lab acts as a facilitator and connector—offering relationship-building, coordination, and strategic guidance to a range of grassroots, educational, and Indigenous-led efforts. Its deep alignment with Indigenous knowledge systems and community-defined priorities sets it apart from conventional institutional driven living labs models. The Lab exemplifies how post-secondary institutions can engage in meaningful, reciprocal collaboration that supports long-term, place-based impact.



Map of Regional Hubs
Image: Urban Living Lab Center

Multiple locations

Urban Living Lab Center

QUICK FACTS

ENGAGEMENT TYPE
Urban experimentation, transdisciplinary collaboration

INSTITUTION MODEL
Consortium of 4 institutions:
- MIT
- TU Berlin
- Wuppertal Institute
- UN-Habitat

MANAGING DEPARTMENT
Four institution combined management team

KEY STAKEHOLDERS
Cities, faculty, startups, industry, students

FUNDING SOURCES
EU Horizon 2020, City Innovation Funds

PRIMARY CONTACT
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WEBSITE
https://www.living-lab.center/

Urban Pathways Project
Photo: UN-HABITAT

LIVING LAB APPROACH

The Urban Living Lab Center is a partnership co-hosted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Technical University Berlin, the Wuppertal Institute and UN-Habitat that champions city-based experimentation as a pathway to urban sustainability. The Center redefines the living lab model by emphasizing pilot experimentation in real city environments rather than conventional academic research. It mobilizes academic capacity to support urban transformation, focusing on cross-sector partnerships with municipal governments, industry, and startups.

KEY PROGRAMMING

The Center organizes its activities through a regional and thematic hub structure, where project ideas are typically initiated at the regional level and shaped collaboratively with external partners. Projects include urban demonstrators, mobility pilots, electrification strategies, and governance innovation, often delivered through co-funded mechanisms. Programming also spans academic course and exchange program development, particularly through collaboration with over 20 partner universities and applied research centers. Rather than leading from academia, faculty and researchers play supporting roles in city-driven efforts, helping design, implement, and evaluate interventions. Major initiatives are supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, with additional funding streams and in-kind support from sources such as City Innovation Funds and European industry partners.

UNIQUE PROPOSITIONS

The Urban Living Lab Center stands apart from traditional campus-based models by placing cities as the primary testbed for innovation. Academic researchers and institutions act as facilitators and evaluators, supporting initiatives led by municipal governments, startups, and civil society actors. Its multi-institutional governance structure enables coordinated strategy while remaining agile and responsive to diverse urban contexts. Its affiliation with UN-Habitat connects it to global policy efforts, while participation in platforms such as Smart Energy Solutions for Africa (SESA) and SOLUTIONSplus expands its reach through peer exchange and replication. By combining municipal leadership, transdisciplinary academic support, and international collaboration, the Center models how institution-enabled, city-led innovation can scale across borders to accelerate sustainable urban transformation.

The UBC Sustainability Hub team in collaboration with our partners at both the Vancouver and Okanagan campuses, respectfully acknowledge that UBC's campuses are situated within the traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) and in the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the Syilx (Okanagan) Nation and their peoples.

CAMPUS AS A LIVING LAB (CLL) IS MANAGED BY UBC SUSTAINABILITY HUB

For more informaiton about CLL, please visit: livinglabs.ubc.ca.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Sustainability Hub