



Executive Director
Cornell Atkinson Center for Sustainability
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY

THE SEARCH

Cornell University seeks a visionary and collaborative leader to serve as the next Francis J. DiSalvo Director of the [Cornell Atkinson Center for Sustainability](#) (Cornell Atkinson). Leveraging the intellectual strength of Cornell's dual Ivy League Land-Grant mission, Cornell Atkinson is the hub for collaborative sustainability research at Cornell University, forging vital connections among experts in climate, environment, energy, food, and health to connect Cornell's world-class research with real-world action. The Center has awarded over \$45 million to sustainability research and has engaged more than 700 faculty members across the university in interdisciplinary research, scholarship, and collaboration. The Center advances bold ideas and powerful new models that ensure people and the planet not only survive but also thrive. Success in Cornell Atkinson's core knowledge-to-impact mission depends on building collaborations across colleges inside the university and outside the university with NGOs, civil society organizations, corporations, and government agencies.

In 2010, David and Patricia Atkinson endowed the Center with an [\\$80 million gift](#), making it the single largest gift to the Ithaca campus from an individual at the time. Today, the Center remains financially strong (see [2023 Year in Review](#)), allowing the Director and other center leaders to be nimble, entrepreneurial, and risk-taking; this is commensurate with the urgent need for conceptual and technical innovation in response to climate change, biodiversity conservation, and other global sustainability challenges. The next Director will lead an organization with rapidly growing programs supported by philanthropy. The Director will also accelerate the success of the Center in moving knowledge and faculty-led innovations to impacts on technology, corporate practices, government policy, and public opinion.

As described in Cornell Atkinson's [strategic plan](#), the Center is a boundary-spanning, mission-driven organization within the university. Cornell Atkinson channels university intellectual and infrastructure assets into creative collisions that provoke large-scale, long-term, real-world change. It brings together passionate experts and innovators, theorists and practitioners, business leaders, and community

members to deliver effective solutions to reduce climate risks, conserve biodiversity, accelerate energy transitions, increase food security, and advance One Health.

Reporting to the Vice Provost for Research, the successful candidate will be an enthusiastic, collaborative, and strategic leader who will continue to develop an interdisciplinary culture (for both Cornell Atkinson and Cornell as a whole) and bring a strong commitment to advancing innovative research, technology innovations, and policy solutions. A true relationship builder, the Director will bring a track record of academic and intellectual achievement, superb administrative leadership, a demonstrated commitment to inclusion, and success in attracting resources from a variety of sources.

Cornell University has retained Isaacson, Miller, a national executive search firm, to assist in this recruitment. All inquiries, nominations, and applications should be directed to Isaacson, Miller, as indicated at the end of this document.

CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Founded in 1865, [Cornell University](#) is a remarkable community of scholars, educators, students, staff, and alumni who are deeply influenced by proud traditions and a set of cherished founding principles, including Ezra Cornell's ambition to "found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study." It is a world-class research institution known for the breadth and rigor of its curricula and its dedication to preparing young people to be well-educated and well-rounded citizens of the world. Its faculty and students believe in the critical importance of knowledge—both theoretical and applied—as a means of improving the human condition and solving the world's problems. Faculty, staff, and students thrive at Cornell because of its unparalleled combination of quality and breadth; its open, collaborative, and innovative culture; its vibrant rural and urban campuses; its land-grant legacy of public engagement; and its commitment to its founding principles.

Cornell is unique among its Ivy League peers as a private university with a land-grant mission, and several of its colleges are supported by New York State. Today, Cornell consists of [15 schools and colleges](#). Across the Ithaca campus, the Weill Cornell Medicine campuses in New York City and Qatar, and the Cornell Tech campus in New York City, the university enrolls over 16,000 undergraduates and over 10,000 graduate and professional school students. Cornell's nearly 12,000 faculty and staff forge novel partnerships where unexpected integrations of deep expertise point the way toward the solutions of tomorrow. The university fuels this through initiatives that elevate collaboration across disciplines and academic units.

Cornell is located in [Ithaca](#), a city of about 30,000 people in the heart of the Finger Lakes region of Central New York. Both Cornell and Ithaca offer a wide range of cultural activities, sporting events, and outdoor activities, with the pleasures of both city and country close at hand. Ithaca boasts unsurpassed natural beauty in its gorges, state parks, and waterfront.

THE CORNELL ATKINSON CENTER FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Cornell Atkinson grew out of the Cornell Center for a Sustainable Future, which was established in 2007 as a pilot program with major support from alumnus David R. Atkinson '60 and his wife Patricia following a multiyear, cross-campus discussion about energy and sustainability. Mr. Atkinson envisioned the Center as “a source of unbiased information; a catalyst bringing knowledge from different disciplines together to address sustainability; and a partner with entrepreneurs, businesses, NGOs, and governments to magnify the impact of knowledge and ingenuity at Cornell in moving society toward a more sustainable future.”

Today, Cornell Atkinson is the hub of collaborative sustainability research at Cornell University, forging vital connections among researchers, students, staff, and external partners. The intellectual power of Cornell, combined with its vision of being the “land-grant to the world,” makes it uniquely suited to be a global leader in sustainability scholarship and practices. No other U.S. university with a land-grant mission has taken such a broad and deep systems approach to sustainability. Cornell Atkinson creates a defined pathway for taking knowledge to impact—to convert the advanced research at Cornell into large-scale, long-term sustainability solutions worldwide.

Cornell Atkinson facilitates interdisciplinary sustainability research across Cornell and links to co-created sustainability solutions with non-academic partners among [four core priority areas](#): Reducing Climate Risks, Accelerating Energy Transitions, Increasing Food Security, and Advancing One Health. Cornell Atkinson has awarded over \$45 million to sustainability research and has engaged more than 700 faculty members through interdisciplinary research, scholarship, and collaboration across the university. It has facilitated and funded an impressive body of discovery research, which in turn has garnered substantial external resources to conduct further research.

The Center’s flagship funding program to date is its **Academic Venture Fund**, a \$1.5 million annual program that supports seed grants in the \$50,000-\$150,000 range that are multidisciplinary and have the potential to propel good ideas forward so that they can make a measurable impact. Projects often include engagement with external partners from industry, government, nongovernmental organizations, and foundations.

The Innovation for Impact Fund connects nonprofit, government, and industry partners with Cornell's research capacity to jointly develop and test evidence-based solutions. Current collaborators include the Environmental Defense Fund, The Nature Conservancy, CARE, Avangrid, Oxfam, and the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute. Moving forward, this partnership work will deepen and accelerate.

The **Rapid Response Fund** (RRF) facilitates urgent or time-sensitive sustainability research, workshops, and other activities. The RRF is a source of funding for smaller projects that cover a broad range of sustainability initiatives. RRF proposals are evaluated by Cornell Atkinson’s leadership team on a rolling basis.

The 2030 Project and Cornell Atkinson offer "**Fast Grant**" research-to-impact seed funding to enable faculty to seize urgent and unique opportunities to provide support for impact-oriented climate research, expected to be in the \$10,000-\$25,000 range. The 2030 Project and Cornell Atkinson also offer "**Big Ideas**" support to catalyze large-scale, interdisciplinary, impact-oriented climate research at Cornell. In addition, the Center is piloting an initiative to support faculty-led undergraduate summer opportunities in sustainability research, to prepare undergraduates to conduct independent research in a collaborative environment. The Center has student and post-doctoral funding from grants to internship opportunities that encourage innovative and multi-disciplinary research.

ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR

As chief administrative officer, the Director of Cornell Atkinson will be responsible for executing the mission of the Center as a campus leader, supporting the full range of interdisciplinary research related to energy, environment, and sustainability, and advancing the identity of Cornell as a university committed to far-reaching engagement with the climate challenge. In overseeing these initiatives, the Director will guarantee that both the Center and experts in the broader Cornell community actively engage in activities that have a material impact.

The annual budget for Cornell Atkinson is \$9.3 million, more than half of which is designated to Research & Programs. The Director will report to the Vice Provost for Research and is advised by the Cornell Atkinson Advisory Council and Visiting Senior Fellows; they are expected to lead a dynamic, experienced team of [faculty directors, advisors, fellows](#), and [15 staff](#) to implement the Center's mission and strategic plan while modeling accountability to overarching Cornell priorities. The Director's direct reports include the Director of Development, Director of Marketing & Communications, Director of Strategic Partnerships, Associate Director and Director of Student & Postdoctoral Programs, Project & Administrative Manager, Faculty Directors, and other Faculty Advisors, including the Cornell Atkinson Scholars and Senior Faculty Fellows.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The Director should demonstrate leadership skills based on the values of collaboration, transparency, and consensus-building. To ensure the continued growth, impact, and distinction in an area of increasing competition, the Director will be expected to address several key opportunities and challenges:

Articulate and execute a shared vision for Cornell Atkinson leadership in addressing climate issues

With the strategic plan, the next Director will be charged with shaping a distinct and unified vision for the Center, collaborating closely with faculty, researchers, and students across Cornell to foster an interdisciplinary environment that promotes innovative research and engagement. Central to this role is the commitment to elevate the Center's visibility within the Cornell community and beyond, ensuring that its contributions to energy, environment, and sustainability are widely recognized and serve as a magnet

for further impact. Establishing clear structures and policies around program development and implementation will be a priority, providing a solid framework for the Center's undertakings.

The Director will strategically leverage the existing strengths and areas of expertise in research, policy, and external engagement, amplifying the Center's influence in these critical domains. This will include efforts to support mechanisms to encourage faculty innovation and the cultivation of partnerships, nurturing a culture of innovation and excellence. In doing so, the Director will help Cornell not only further its climate goals but also chart a path for the Center that is visionary yet firmly grounded in practicality, striving for impact that resonates within and beyond Cornell.

Continue to foster deep interdisciplinary collaborations across the Cornell ecosystem

Collaboration with senior administration and school leadership is crucial to contributing to the university's identity as a proactive participant in addressing climate and sustainability challenges. This will be accomplished by aligning the Center with university priorities, fostering cohesion, and driving innovation in research and programming through new partnerships and initiatives. This alignment involves forging relationships across all schools. The Director will assume a pivotal role in fostering connections among faculty across schools and providing essential support for their research endeavors in a decentralized environment.

Providing direction to the Center's faculty directors is also essential to maintain staff-led research and engagement programs that connect faculty interests with emerging policy issues and engage stakeholders across all academic levels. Working with the Cornell Atkinson team, the Director will build on these efforts by managing a portfolio of programs that complement and amplify school-based initiatives.

Support the Center's shared culture and nurture organizational growth

The Cornell Atkinson Center serves as both a professional and academic unit comprised of a wide array of faculty and staff and, as such, requires a leader with strong administrative and management acumen and exceptional organizational foresight. The Director will be responsible for imbuing a sense of shared culture and priorities within the broader research complex of the Center, in addition to being a consummate manager of its resources. The Director will continue to foster Cornell Atkinson's identity as a unified center of excellence, strategically fortifying its infrastructure and resources through partnerships across campus to support the varied needs of its diverse set of personnel.

Fundraise and deftly manage resources for a complex enterprise

This next leader must astutely steward and deploy the Center's existing resources while thinking strategically and proactively about additional revenue sources. A new Director must compellingly advocate for the Center's mission and be a public ambassador and promoter for its impact, making the

case to philanthropic donors for the value of the work and its complementarity with key activities within Cornell's schools.

Ensure a welcoming culture

Cornell Atkinson is a welcoming and supportive hub, fostering engagement in research and community involvement for stakeholders across Cornell. The Director will champion inclusive, interdisciplinary initiatives, actively supporting the Center's commitments to its strategic planning efforts. They will also identify opportunities for recognition and acknowledgment of the dedicated efforts of faculty and staff to propel the Center's ongoing progress in these areas.

QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Acknowledging that no one person will embody them all, the successful candidate will bring many of the following professional qualifications, skills, experience, and personal qualities:

- PhD or terminal degree in a qualifying field related to energy, environment, and/or sustainability is preferred,
- A portfolio of excellent scholarship and/or professional leadership consistent with a tenured faculty appointment,
- At least five years' experience as a director in a similar senior role or equivalent experience with an orientation to understanding how to lead and administer in complex organizational environments. This may include previous executive or managerial positions in similar organizations, research institutions, government agencies, or corporate entities involved in the energy and sustainability sectors,
- Demonstrated ability to develop and articulate a strategic vision for a complex organization and effectively lead its implementation, including goal setting, formulation of guiding strategies, and oversight of overall operations and programs,
- Demonstrated success in hiring, managing, and mentoring professional and administrative staff,
- Experience in fundraising and securing financial resources from a variety of sources,
- Demonstrated strong financial management skills to ensure responsible budgeting and resource allocation,
- Demonstrated appreciation for the power of experiential learning and collaborative inquiry in fostering climate fluency among students,
- Outstanding verbal and written communication skills, with the capacity to convey the Center's research findings, policy recommendations, and initiatives to various audiences,
- The ability to be an effective spokesperson and advocate for the Center, representing its interests within Cornell as well as in public forums, conferences, and media engagements,

- Demonstrated experience as a collaborative leader who maintains constructive working relationships with various stakeholders, including government agencies, industry leaders, nonprofit organizations, research institutions, and the community,
- Track record that demonstrates a dedication to fostering a collaborative and inclusive work environment, building cohesive teams, managing a diverse staff, fostering innovation, and promoting interdisciplinary research,
- Ability to work with and attract a diverse group of highly experienced Advisory Council members.

COMPENSATION

This role is located in Ithaca, New York, and the salary range is \$325,000-375,000.

APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Screening of complete applications will begin immediately and continue until the completion of the search process. Inquiries, nominations, referrals, and CVs with cover letters should be sent via the Isaacson, Miller website: <https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/cornell-university-atkinson-center-sustainability/director>. Electronic submission of materials is strongly encouraged.

Kate Barry, Partner
 Karen McPhedran, Managing Associate
 Alexandra Lolavar, Senior Associate
 Kaitlin Cruz, Senior Search Coordinator
 Isaacson, Miller

Cornell welcomes students, faculty, and staff with diverse backgrounds from across the globe to pursue world-class education and career opportunities, to further the founding principle of “... any person ... any study.” No person shall be denied employment on the basis of any legally protected status or subjected to prohibited discrimination involving, but not limited to, such factors as race, ethnic or national origin, citizenship and immigration status, color, sex, pregnancy or pregnancy-related conditions, age, creed, religion, actual or perceived disability (including persons associated with such a person), arrest and/or conviction record, military or veteran status, sexual orientation, gender expression and/or identity, an individual’s genetic information, domestic violence victim status, familial status, marital status, or any other characteristic protected by applicable federal, state, or local law.

Cornell University embraces diversity in its workforce and seeks job candidates who will contribute to a climate that supports students, faculty, and staff of all identities and backgrounds. We hire based on merit and encourage people from historically underrepresented and/or marginalized identities to apply. Consistent with federal law, Cornell engages in affirmative action in employment for qualified protected

veterans as defined in the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act (VEVRA) and qualified individuals with disabilities under Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act. We also recognize a lawful preference in employment practices for Native Americans living on or near Indian reservations in accordance with applicable law.