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2025 FALL UPDATE

RESILIENT FUTURES: GETTING TO WORK

Career Fair

More than 350 community members and students attended the “Resilient Futures Career Fair”

The early August fair was held in partnership with the Office of Assemblymember Isaac Bryan and featured more than 30 employers from the blue and green sectors, including Avenue 33 Farm, LA Conservation Corps, SunRun Solar, iFoster and the Metropolitan Water District. Several organizations offered immediate job and internship opportunities.

California State Assemblymember Isaac Bryan attended to show his support for the college’s unique Climate Center and the need to invest in a green future. From the podium he remarked, “this Center happened because the administration fought for it and you deserve it. So, let’s make the most of it and let’s get the education we need to build the future we deserve...No one person makes a future. It takes every single one of us.”

“We were honored to have such a large turnout and continued support from Assemblymember Bryan for this initiative that is so important to us here at West,” said Dr. James M. Limbaugh, College President.

An Eventful Season: Winter and Spring 2025 were eventful in the truest sense for the CA Center for Climate Change Education at West Los Angeles College. Multiple events, on and off campus, were testament to the Center’s vital work and capacity for outreach.



California State Assemblymember Isaac Bryan at career fair

Empowering Every Career for a Climate-Resilient Future

By Khari Jones Jr

The California Center for Climate Change Education (The Climate Center) is leading a movement that is transforming how students, educators, and communities think about climate action — and how they prepare for the future of work.

When Andrea Rodriguez-Blanco, now Director of the Career Center, was a student at West Los Angeles College in 2013, she noticed a missing piece in her education: students didn’t just need classes, they needed guidance and pathways into meaningful careers. In 2019, as a team of one, she began building what would eventually become the college’s Career Center. That effort has grown into the “Workforce Pillar” of the Climate Center — and is now the backbone of its mission.

“Our philosophy is simple: every career is a climate career,” Rodriguez-Blanco explains. “Whether you’re an engineer, an artist, a teacher, or a technician — every job plays a role in addressing climate change, whether we realize it or not.”

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Roots & Resilience

An Earth Day Event Celebrating the 2nd Anniversary of the Climate Center

April closed with a great celebration. The Roots and Resilience event celebrated both Earth Day and the second anniversary of the Climate Center. A great turnout was greeted by workshops, organization and employer booths, free food and student and staff testimonials. This event was produced in conjunction with Rising Scholars and Dean of Adult Education, Dr. Imelda Perez.

Established by the California State Legislature, the Center supports climate change education across community colleges, emphasizing equity and social justice. It builds pathways to certificates, degrees, and careers while fostering partnerships with nonprofits to create internships and work-based learning opportunities for students.



Invitations & Presentations

College President Speaks at NASEM

WLAC President Dr. James M. Limbaugh recently participated in Climate Conversations: Pathways to Action, a monthly webinar series hosted by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM). The discussion, moderated by Neil Leary of Dickinson College, explored how higher education can expand pathways into resiliency-focused careers. Limbaugh joined Leah Dundon of the Vanderbilt Climate Change Initiative in highlighting how colleges and universities are preparing learners with the skills needed for a climate-resilient future.

LACCD Board of Trustees Meeting

In April, the Climate Center WLAC President James M. Limbaugh and Climate Center Director Dr. Jo Tavares shared testimonials and updates on the work of the Center at the Los Angeles Community College (LACCD) Board of Trustees meeting. Student Climate Ambassador Herbert Jimenez also provided a moving testimonial.

BECAP Conference

In March, Tavares was a featured speaker at the Blue Economy and Climate Action Pathways (BECAP) Summit which focuses on meeting the emerging employment demands in ocean-related labor markets in Los Angeles. Tavares discussed the work of the Climate Center in opening educational and professional pathways.

2025 California Masonry Summit

In May, Tavares and WLAC Adjunct Professor George Cortez discussed the Center's work and the importance of masonry in the emerging green economy. The full-day CA Masonry Conference & Expo was held at the UCLA Luskin Conference Center. Professionals learned about sustainability, decarbonization, energy efficiency, innovation, and technology in the masonry industry.



Empowering Every Career

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That vision has grown into a movement that connects students with hands-on opportunities in climate-related fields. In its first year, the Climate Center placed 30 students into paid summer internships focused on sustainability and climate justice. By its second year, the program expanded to serve 100 students.

One of the most exciting ways the Climate Center develops talent is through the California Youth Leadership Corps (CYLC) Fellowship —

a paid fellowship program that trains students in climate leadership, policy, and workforce skills. Fellows participate in workshops, community engagement events, and mentorship sessions, while working on real projects that address climate issues in their own communities. By the end of the program, participants leave with not only professional experience but also a deeper understanding of how to integrate climate solutions into any career path. CYCL is a year long program.

"Our goal is to prepare students to think critically about climate issues and see themselves as part of the solution," said Betsy Pajevski, CYCL Fellowship Coordinator.

Career coaches play a crucial role in this process, working closely with both students and employers to find the right match and ensure that each placement is meaningful. "Our coaches are the backbone," Rodriguez-Blanco says. "They work to figure out the best situation for each employer and each student, so everyone benefits."

The Climate Center has invested in education initiatives that integrate climate awareness into curriculum. This includes supporting faculty in developing and testing contextualized learning modules. Two key projects—Climate Across the Curriculum and the Districtwide Equity and Environment Education Demonstration Project—were launched in partnership with the Sustainable Environment Institute (SEI) to ensure students gain relevant, real-world knowledge.

Beyond workforce development and education, the Climate Center is also reshaping the campus environment itself through initiatives like the Microforest Project.

This collaborative effort includes the district facilities team, campus faculty, the Nature Nexus Institute, and the wider West Los Angeles community. "The first planting day brought over 300 volunteers together," says Emily Cobar, who helps lead the initiative. "Since May 2025, we've been there weekly, seeing the changes and documenting every plant and animal that shows up. It's amazing to watch a thriving ecosystem take root."

This spring, the microforest will see another wave of native flowers planted, continuing its transformation into a living classroom and community gathering place. By combining education, workforce development, leadership programs like the CYCL Fellowship, and environmental stewardship, the Climate Center is proving that climate action is not just a subject to study — it's a way of life. It is creating opportunities for students of all backgrounds to become part of the solution and to shape a future where every career truly is a climate career.

meet our CYLC Fellows



By Alci Rengifo

For Emely Antunes Otsuka, West Los Angeles College wasn't just a stepping stone — it was a launchpad.

What began as a pursuit of screenwriting soon evolved into a life-changing journey of purpose, leadership and discovery, thanks to the opportunities and support she found at WLAC and its California Center for Climate Change Education. "I started here wanting to make films," Otsuka said. "Now, I want to be a university professor studying and teaching climate communication. That's the power this place had on me."

Otsuka, originally from São Paulo, Brazil, enrolled at WLAC in 2019 with dreams of breaking into Hollywood. But it was her first experience in the U.S. education system and the deeply encouraging environment she encountered on campus shifted her ambitions. "It was my first time studying in another language," she said. "But I had an amazing professor for English 101, Jeremiah Allen, who made writing feel accessible. The support from faculty and counselors really stood out."

Through hands-on roles in student government, tutoring, and a marketing internship, Otsuka discovered new talents and confidence. That foundation eventually led her to UCLA, and ultimately back to West — this time, to help lead climate communication efforts at the very college that changed her life.

"One of the things I learned a lot at West LA College is that if you want to be successful, it needs to come from you, so you need to be the one who seeks those things out," Otsuka said. "In my time here, I was part of the student government, I was a tutor, then I became a marketing intern. The skills that I learned here of leadership, time management and public speaking...really prepared me. There wasn't a whole mystery to being in a college environment."

After graduating from UCLA with a degree in communications, Otsuka found herself questioning how she wanted to use her skills. Based on a recommendation made by former campus marketing internship supervisor, Michelle Long-Coffee, *Otsuka received a call from Dr. Jo Tavares, director of the California Center for Climate Change Education at West, that changed everything.* "She asked me if I wanted to work with them in literally what I studied for — graphic design, social media work — at the Climate Center," Otsuka said. "I had never done work regarding climate change. But I had that will in me, that motivation, that desire to use my degree for something that would be doing good for the world."

From Screenplays to Climate Solutions: How West LA College Transformed Emely's Path

Otsuka credits her earlier time at West, including her interactions with a diverse range of students, for inspiring her eco-socially conscious career path. Now working at the Climate Center, she calls the experience both grounding and inspiring. "I have learned a lot about climate change, emissions. Coming back to West has been amazing. I see it almost as a second home. Jo is an amazing mentor. We're having the summer internship program coming up. It doesn't matter what your major is, we have English majors and film students. We're going to find a place for you here because we believe climate change is an intersectional problem."

Tavares has played a pivotal role in her continued growth. "Jo Tavares is amazing, she's a superhero," Otsuka said. "Seeing all the passion that she has, all these projects she's creating for students and making the new ones that we have better, she's just great. She's also a great mentor, personally. She has been talking to me about how to use my degree and has been motivating me to attend grad school. Any student who comes here would really benefit from her mentoring."

Otsuka's academic journey is far from over. While working at the Climate Center, the idea of graduate school began to take hold.

Now, she is preparing to begin a master's program in computational social science at the University of Chicago in fall 2025.

Her ultimate goal? A PhD and a career in research or academia focused on climate communication. "It's insane to think about how far I've come," she said. "But also so exciting."



This poem is written from the perspective of an inmate firefighter on his way to his first fire. For anyone that may not know, some states have programs where they use people serving time for their crimes for cheap labor. Having a job as an inmate firefighter has its perks, but also comes with a heavy toll on peoples body and mind. Most people that work as inmate firefighters have to endure a lot of physical training as well as mentally navigating prison politics. At fire camps most of the people there hope to make their time easier and smoother at the same time risking their bodies in order to shortened their time in prison. With new policies and laws getting passed, more and more of these firefighters can find careers in these fields after incarceration.

Behind Bars of Fire

*The bus staggered on the small path towards the forest fire,
And for some that was their line.*

*Knowing the dangers of our task, we questioned if the
Extra freedoms were worth what we were about to face.*

*No amount of training will prepare you for the devastation
A wildfire can blow at you as you step foot out that
Damn glorified ambulance we called a bus.*

*Very quickly we felt the heat on our faces
As we placed our thin shrouds under our helmets.*

"Nope, not me," said one of the inmate firefighters.

*"Take me back behind the wall, I
Ain't signed up for this shit," he dropped his
Gear and walked back to the bus.*

Everyone else marched towards the bars of fire.

By Herbert Jimenez

Herbert Jimenez joined the Marines out of high school with the hope of later going to college. But he was involved in an accident that led to his incarceration. While serving his time, he also worked in the fire camps - his first exposure to the impacts of climate change. After being released, he came to West, but as a roofer working on buildings. His college dream was reignited and he enrolled. An advisor suggested he look in to the Climate Center. There he found community, paid internships with partner organizations, and leadership opportunities.

Recently he completed MIT's "En-ROADS" program, where he became a certified facilitator who will guide others in using the En-ROADS tool to understand climate policy and data. After West, he aspires to transfer to USC or UCLA to hone his skills as a writer.



Focusing on Climate Change Economics

Alexia Dowell was an economics student at Kalamazoo College when she learned about the Climate Center's paid summer internship program.

"It was the first internship I had looked at that actually excited me," said Dowell. "While a traditional internship in the economic field would have been very informative for my major, climate change mitigation was something I was already passionate about. At the end of the day, money relates to everything, and I knew I could make it work."



In addition to helping organize events and making presentations, "I also attended conferences for the center to expand my knowledge on the varying impacts and approaches to solving the climate crisis. Dr. Jo [Tavares] exposed me to economic concepts I had yet to learn, including circular economy, the degrowth movement and the loss and damage fund," she said.

When Dowell returned to Kalamazoo, she was able to use all that she had learned to successfully create her senior project.

After graduation, "I reached back out to come back," explained Dowell. "And I am so happy to be here. With the Climate Center's notion that every career is a climate career, I strive to find a career of which I can incorporate this idea and know I am part of the solution."



Raíces y Futuro

Capping the summer and welcoming the fall, the second annual Raíces y Futuro at West kicked off the 2025 Climate Palooza event series. In celebration of Latino Conservation Week and just ahead of Hispanic Heritage Month, Raíces showcased the community's diversity and interest in a green future. Workshops and employer booths combined with folkloric performances from Mexico and Guatemala for an absorbing event.

Certificates were also presented to the Center's 100 paid interns for completing Summer 2025 assignments at various host sites. Interns and employers shared inspiring and engaging stories about their experiences.

Coming Events

SEPT 25: Game Jam is an invite-only summer workshop event connecting video gaming to ecology. Participating students will be given the opportunity to showcase their own video game projects. Speakers have extensive game-related experience from companies including Xbox, DreamWorks Interactive, and MTV.

OCT 17: Educator's Symposium

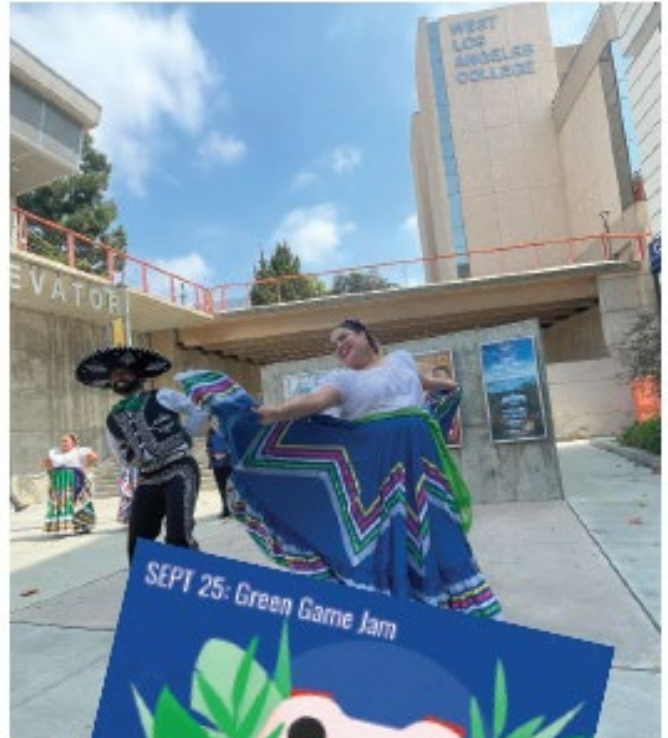
This will be a gathering of educators to discuss climate education and environmental justice. All faculty and teachers from the LA Region are welcome to join.

OCT 23: BECAP Career Day

Join our free, open to all, career event focused on jobs that align with the Blue Economy and Climate Action Pathways.

More information and RSVP links at WLAC.edu/Climate-Center

ClimateCtr_WLAC



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