Introduction to Project 1(A): Tools
Identify the most effective means and tools to engage and communicate with Virginia communities on the benefits of climate and sustainability plans.

Project 1(A) Research Questions
What communication tools should the George Mason Center for Energy Science and Policy (CESP) utilize to maximize trust and engagement in their future local government sustainability initiatives? Do demographic differences in socio-economic, religious, ethnic, occupational, regional, and political backgrounds influence which communication tools are suitable for attracting local Virginia community officials, constituents, and policy entrepreneurs?

Project 1(A) Research Methods & Conclusions
Research was difficult due to the lack of any previous academic framework studying the utilization of appropriate communication tools in local climate & sustainability outreach initiatives. Translating other synonymous academic pieces written on communication strategies into those that could be used by the CESP made up a majority of the research. For example, those written on studying risk communication, advocacy efforts, and virtual healthcare communicative efforts amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic, were some of the few that were helpful in determining how to tailor communication strategies to engage by demographic and by target audience. It was found that demographical differences do affect which communication tools are most effective in outreach and engagement initiatives. By analyzing their target audience and tailoring their methods to the communities’ multi-faceted demographic qualities, interviews with the public, and by exercising proper strategies intended to maximize trust and engagement within the public, the CESP is far more likely to be successful in assisting local governments in Virginia.

Introduction to Project 1(B): Message
The second portion of this project is to develop message content for CESP to utilize when bringing new climate action projects to rural Virginia localities. CESP’s goals for this project are to maximize community buy-in and clearly communicate what the projects hope to achieve over their three major stages.

Project 1(B) Research Methods
This project began with a literature review of existing research in communication pertaining to climate action messaging towards climate denying or rural populations. After identifying the areas of research which needed further exploration, a short survey was developed for stakeholders in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Those who received the survey were interested in contributing further were contacted for an interview. These stakeholders included local and state government officials, grassroots activists, and private citizens of various occupations. The results were then reviewed, sorted by priority, and woven together into a communication guide for CESP’s future use.

Summary of Findings
The final communication strategy contained the following.
- Values Based Messaging:
  - CESP presents fiscally responsible projects.
  - CESP projects respect local economic interests.
  - CESP projects do not expand power of local government.
  - CESP projects help maintain a clean environment for future generations to enjoy.
- Projects will be introduced by a trusted community leader.
- CESP should prioritize communities with a college or university in proximity.
- CESP should engage the community with a clear sense of direction, including clearly stating what projects are viable options for that particular community.

REFERENCES:

Figure 1: To the right, sourced from local news station Wavy 10, is the result of the 2021 Virginia Beach bond referendum on flood mitigation measures. This is an example of successful climate action messaging in an area with demonstrated conservative leanings.

Figure 2: Sourced from the NACRP’s Community-Driven Climate Resilience Planning Framework, this infographic demonstrates the different ways in which communities, stakeholders, and government can participate in climate action planning and support environmental justice.

Project 2: Climate & Sustainability Action Plan Implementation
While Project 1A and 1B are focused on communication and outreach, Project 2 is centered around how to best implement climate action planning in local jurisdictions. This is relevant to CESP’s initiatives because the next stage of the project is collaborating with ICLEI and Manassas City in developing a CAP for Manassas. Project 2’s scope is wide, and research questions include specific best practices, lessons learned, and how to best structure a climate action planning process with smaller, rural jurisdictions. The methodology for this portion included researching past and current CAPs and literature on the topic, as well as reaching out for interviews with past leaders and participants. The literature reviewed also included academic papers on challenges and barriers to success for different jurisdictions, strategies for engaging communities in the planning, how to ensure environmental justice is considered at every step, and funding planning and implementation. One of the unexpected results from the research was how little accountability there is in the field. Participants that worked on CAPs were difficult to contact because they were no longer with the university, county, or community. One of the more important lessons learned was making community engagement a priority in the planning process, while having experts engaged to aid in the planning. For smaller, more local Virginian jurisdictions community outreach, climate action campaigns, and regional collaboration is key to a successful climate action plan that can be implemented and held accountable for the jurisdiction’s own goals.