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CAMPUS GREENING EFFORTS: What Difference Do They Make?

NEW STUDY REVEALS A DIVIDE AMONG AMERICAN COLLEGES ON CLIMATE CHANGE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS

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A new study of over 1,700 American college students shows a sharp divide on their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors about climate change. The study, conducted by researchers at the College of William and Mary, compared universities that received either a high (A) or a low grade (D and F) on the levels of institutional commitment to environmental sustainability measures as determined by the Sustainable Endowments Institute (SEI).

The survey illustrated that institutional support—what colleges are doing to help students save energy— is strongly correlated with students' own actions regarding climate change. Schools graded highly have students who are more likely than low-graded schools to:

- Turn off their computers at night,
- Use fewer appliances in their rooms,
- Regularly adjust their thermostats to save energy, and
- Have reduced their energy use since beginning college.

The combined impact of nationwide “greening” efforts could be substantial.

“I was impressed by the fact that when students perceive climate change to be a priority for their school, it really affects their individual actions,” commented Samantha Weston, Co-Director of the study and a graduating senior at the College of William and Mary.

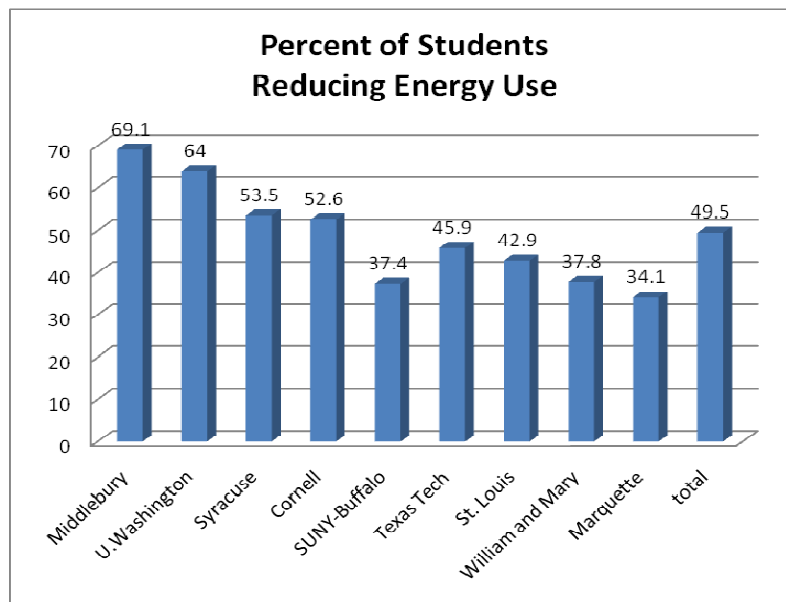
Action	“A” Schools	“D/F” Schools
Turn off computer	40.4%	32.2%
Have fewer appliances	56.8%	42.4%
Reduced their energy use	57.9%	39.2%
Report “huge” reductions in energy use	8.0%	2.6%
Adjust thermostat	36.9%	28.2%
Turn off lights	61.5%	63.0% ns

All these differences were statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (except the last).

Fifty-four percent of students at schools receiving an “A” from the SEI reported that their institutions placed a high emphasis on sustainability. This percentage signifies an almost twelve-fold difference when compared to schools receiving poorer grades from SEI (4.4%).

In regards to institutional support, 81.9% of students from highly graded schools responded that their college had encouraged them to reduce their impact, as opposed to the 48.1% of the students at schools with low grades.

"The findings highlight the importance of strong institutional support for energy reductions by students, but they also point out that there is room to expand on institutional sustainability programs across all schools and to place greater emphasis on the energy reductions," noted William and Mary junior and researcher Aubrey Miler.



A New Admissions Criterion? Overall, current freshmen are two times more likely to choose their school based on sustainability concerns than the entering freshman class just 3 years ago (13.5% vs. 6.5%, respectively). This suggests that we may be at the front of a new wave of students basing more of their decisions on “campus greening” efforts.

“It was unexpected to see that freshmen now value a school’s ‘greenness’ so much more than students even in my own junior class did. When I was applying to colleges it was simply not a factor, and it’s very exciting to see that a campus’ environmental actions has become important to applicants,” said Nicole Scheer-Irvine, a Co-Director of the study and third year William and Mary student.

An Emerging Consensus? Three times as many respondents agreed that “the Earth’s temperature changes are driven by humans” (70.1%) than those who believed that “the Earth’s temperature cycles are natural and current conditions are part of those cycles”

(19.9%). This is a far stronger consensus than among the American people as a whole: national surveys typically find about half of Americans attributing climate change to human causes.

Taxing Themselves? An overwhelming majority of respondents (85.5%) said that they would be willing to pay \$20 a month more to live in an environmentally sustainable dormitory, apartment or house. Only fifteen percent said that they would oppose the extra cost or were unsure.

About the study: The survey, completed between February 17th and March 14th, was conducted by College of William and Mary Director of Environmental Science and Policy J. Timmons Roberts and 67 students, was administered to 1,742 randomly selected undergraduates at nine colleges and universities across the nation. Each school was chosen by its grade on The 2008 College Sustainability Report Card, released in October 2007 by the Sustainable Endowments Institute, which evaluates the colleges and universities with the 200 largest endowments in the United States. For this survey, five schools with high report card grades and four with low report card grades were chosen. For results based on the total sample, it can be said with 95% confidence that the sampling error is plus or minus 2 percentage points. For the two subsamples of universities with high and low SEI grades, the sampling error is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. Of course question wording and the practical difficulties in collecting responses and conducting the survey could introduce error or bias into the findings.

High SEI grades:	Low SEI grades:
<i>Public Schools</i>	<i>Public Schools</i>
University of Washington	Texas Tech University
SUNY Buffalo	College of William and Mary
<i>Private Schools</i>	<i>Private Schools</i>
Middlebury College	St. Louis University
Cornell University	Marquette University
Syracuse University	
Total Respondents: 963	Total Respondents: 779

About the respondents: Random e-mail invitations were sent to 1,000 students from each of twelve schools; each was sent 3 reminders. The web-based Opinion surveys were completed by 2,114 respondents; 1,742 deemed valid from 9 schools selected after technical problems were considered. Of these respondents, 41.5% were male, 58.5% were female. 28.7% were freshmen, 22.09% were sophomores, 22.3% were juniors, and 24.5% were seniors. Most of them were full-time students (98.1%) and only a few were part-time students (1.9%).

Table: Comparing “Campus Greening” Efforts at the Nine Major Universities Surveyed

	High Institutional Support					Low Institutional Support			
	Cornell	Middlebury	Syracuse	SUNY Buffalo	University of Washington	Marquette	St. Louis	Texas Tech	William and Mary
Public/private	Private	Private	Private	Public	Public	Private	Private	Public	Public
Total Number Students	20,638	2,500	17,011	26,025	38,415	10,472	10,633	27,567	7,164
Endowment in Dollars	\$5.1 B	\$936 M	\$908 M	\$500 M	\$2.1 B	\$360 M	\$908 M	\$641.6 M	\$586 M
Endowment per student	\$247,117	\$374,400	\$53,377	\$19,212	\$54,666	\$33,857	\$85,395	\$23,274	\$81,798
Environmental program developed or small?	Developed	Developed	Very Developed	Developed	Very Developed	No Program	Developed	Very Developed	Developed
Office of sustainability?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Written policy on sustainability or climate change/energy?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Did they do Focus the Nation?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
LEED certified buildings?	2+	1	0	2	4+	0	1	0	3
Student clubs on sustainability	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Transportation support?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Awareness programs on saving energy?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Overall Grade from SEI	B	A-	B-	B-	A-	C-	D-	D	D-
Grade from SEI on Climate Change/Energy	A	A	A	A	A	D	F	F	F
Grade from SEI on Administration	A	A	A	A	A	D	F	F	F
Full Time Sustainability Staff	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Environmental Advisory Committee	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No