

STUDENT ACTION RESEARCH

Sustainability Communications

Stakeholder

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Abstract

UCLA Sustainability spearheads various campaigns with the goal of improving the sustainable practices of the campus community. However, these campaigns have no quantitative data on how effectively they reach students. As a result, sustainability communicators face a knowledge gap when determining channels that best reach not only those who are seeking out this information but also those outside the realm of sustainability. There is currently no information regarding the effectiveness of sustainability communications and preferred channels at UCLA. Our project is a first step towards bridging this gap. Our research will serve as a benchmark for future SAR teams researching communications to continue to hone UCLA's Sustainability Communications Strategy and improve engagement with the campus community.

To work towards a definitive answer, our research employs three primary methods of data collection: a survey, informational interviews, and a focus group. During Winter quarter we focused on developing the methodology of our research as well as contacting outside resources. In Spring quarter we began our data collection – distributed our survey, conducted informational interviews, and a focus group. After collecting our data we analyzed our results, which showed some common trends. Our survey and focus group data revealed a gap between student knowledge of campaigns and behavior, which indicates that knowledge is not enough to engage students. Our survey responses also showed that most students received their information from word of mouth through peers and social media. Our informational interviews reinforced that student-to-student distribution is an effective tool to motivate student action and reiteration is key in a university setting because of a fast student turnover of four years on average. Compiling our results allowed us to provide recommendations for improvement.

Introduction

UCLA is engaging in several meaningful and impactful sustainability initiatives such as the UCLA Zero Waste Campaign, UC Plastic Policy, and the UCLA Sustainability Plan (UCLA Sustainability Plan | UCLA Sustainability, n.d.). The implementation of UCLA's comprehensive Sustainability Plan and its associated programs requires active involvement of the campus community to achieve goals like diverting waste from landfills, reduction of single-use plastic on campus, and sustainable food choices. In order to participate in these programs, students must be aware of their adoption, understand the need for their implementation, and recognize desired target behaviors. The Sustainability Communications Team's research project seeks to understand the magnitude of the knowledge gap regarding campus sustainability initiatives and identify which channels are most effective at reaching students.

We are operating under the hypothesis that currently, many students, particularly those not within the sphere of sustainability, are unaware of the breadth and depth of UCLA Sustainability initiatives and that a more coordinated and comprehensive Communication Strategy is necessary to effectively involve the student body in campus sustainability initiatives. There is no previous SAR Project related to the efficiency of sustainability communications at UCLA, meaning data is quite limited. This also means that our research will serve as a benchmark for future communications teams to continue to hone UCLA's Sustainability Communications Strategy and improve engagement with the campus community. This will in turn, assist in the achievement of UCLA's current and future sustainability goals.

Through a review of the literature regarding sustainability communications at other higher education institutions we have identified some key determinants of community engagement with sustainability initiatives. These include social media outreach, impact of sustainability messaging on student

behavior, knowledge of the benefits of sustainability initiatives, and more. We then formulated several hypotheses to guide our research. These are – there is a lack of knowledge about campus Sustainability initiatives among the student body, social media is the most effective channel to reach students, and students involved in environmental studies/clubs are more likely to exhibit knowledge of sustainability policies and exhibit target behaviors. Our team used a student survey, informational interviews, and focus groups to gauge the current efficacy of the UCLA Sustainability Communications Strategy and provide recommendations for the course forward based on an analysis of the data we collected. The primary variables of our study are: Demographic information (housing, year, major, ect.), knowledge of campus sustainability campaigns, performance of specific target behaviors, and effective channels of communication. We compiled the quantitative data, student opinions, and professional advice collected to create a final presentation for our deliverable. This presentation includes our analyzed and raw data, a summary of our main findings, and specific recommendations for sustainability communications campaigns going forward.

Methods

Our project relies on three primary methods of data collection: a survey, informational interviews, and focus groups. The reasoning behind our selection of these data collection methods are as follows. Our survey allowed us to reach the maximum number of students on campus to ensure a representative sample. The focus group served to fill in the gaps of our survey by allowing us to ask more specific questions and gain an in-depth understanding of student opinions. Finally the key informant interviews brought us perspectives from professionals communicating sustainability initiatives to a university community, giving us insights on what methods and channels are effective at other institutions.

Student Survey

The central source of data collection is our survey, which was opened for responses from week ten of Winter Quarter to week six of Spring Quarter. This timing allowed students to fill out the survey during a period when they have no classes, making it more accessible to those with heavy workloads who might be disinclined to respond while classes are in session. We kept it open far into Spring Quarter to account for those who do not check email or other forms of communication over break.

The first weeks of the quarter are when students generally have the least work to do, making this an ideal time to request a few minutes of their time. This timeline increased the breadth of our audience and allowed plenty of time for survey dissemination.

Channels of survey distribution:

- Email – Our team had access to an extensive list of UCLA club, organization, and departmental email addresses. We aimed to get a representative sample of the student population and were concerned that an inflated participation of sustainability organizations might introduce a bias in our data due to their predisposition to care about environmental projects. To manage this possible sampling error, we prefaced our survey with a specific request for non-sustainability-aligned organizations to participate as well. In addition, we emailed as many organizations as possible that are not affiliated with environmental concerns. This totaled 600 separate emails which were sent out using Mail Merge.
- Social Media and GroupMe – An additional method of dissemination is a graphic with a QR code to our survey. We sent out this graphic digitally on GroupMe class and organization chats, as well as posted the graphic on our personal social media pages. We asked our peers to repost the graphic as well. This methodology is designed to reach populations who might not check their email or participate in organizations on campus.

In order to maximize participation our team included an incentive to fill out the survey. We offered the chance to enter in a raffle for a \$100 gift card to Patagonia or win a Hydroflask. We advertised this in our flier graphic as well as in our emails to the organizations. In the interest of prompting honest responses, the questionnaire was also anonymous, with respondents having the option to provide us with their email to be entered into the raffle. Those who chose to enter the raffle were directed to a separate linked form so as to keep the participants' identity separate from their survey responses.

Informational Interviews

Our next method of data collection was our informational interviews. We emailed fifteen possible candidates and were successful in interviewing two key members of UC Berkeley and UC Santa Cruz who are excelling in sustainability, specifically in the communication of their initiatives and policies. These took place on April 28th and May 12th. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter so we could easily reference the conversations in detail during our data analysis. Through these interviews, we hoped to gain insight into the infrastructure of communicating with college campuses. We formulated questions with the aim to obtain advice on successful methods of sharing information on sustainability. This data aided us in crafting our final deliverable and giving recommendations for improved communication.

Focus Groups

The focus group allowed for more detailed insight into how students feel about UCLA Sustainability's current communication. Here, we asked more open-ended questions, guided by survey responses. We touched on communication preferences to understand what channels students are most receptive to. These opinions expand on the data collected by the survey and identify gaps in our data. To get participants we created a flier which we posted on Instagram, GroupMe, as well as on campus and the Hill. The flier included a QR code to a survey where students were asked to fill out general demographic information such as year, major, and housing. This allowed us to select our focus group participants to be representative of a variety of majors, years, and levels of interest in sustainability. We included an incentive for participating to increase interest amongst a broad section of students. The prize for participation was a \$50 Patagonia gift card. We selected six participants

which represented a variety of majors, years, and living locations. Of those selected, four showed up when we held the focus group in Week Six of Spring Quarter. During the focus group our team took up different roles to ensure the conversation was productive. We had one general overseer, two facilitators, three people taking notes, and an audio recording to reference for any information missed by the note takers. This allowed us to gain as much insight as possible from our conversation.

We worked to avoid bias and promote EDI by reaching and including the voices of students of diverse backgrounds, interests, abilities, and values in our research. The questions asked in our survey, interviews, and focus group were all formulated to incorporate equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and reduce bias. We chose the wording of our questions specifically to avoid exclusive language and leading questions. In addition, we have asked various affiliates of SAR to review our survey for wording bias, including Carl Maida, Cully Nordby, Jeff Van, and our stakeholder Jennifer Friedman.

Challenges

Lack of Previous Research

Since we are the first SAR team focused on Sustainability Communications, we struggled to find a basis for our research initially. There is additionally not much research, more generally, on the topic of sustainability communications. This is exciting, on the one hand, because we are doing groundbreaking research, but it left us with a little background to fall back on while constructing our project proposal.

Scope Reduction

When we first embarked on this project, we wanted to target not only students but campus faculty and staff as well. After having our first project proposal with Carl and Cully, we realized that our scope had to be narrowed down to just students – we were trying to accomplish too much. This initially felt like a bit of a letdown because we would have loved to include everyone on campus in our research – but we underestimated how much work it would have been. Following this meeting, we reworked the premise of our research to include only the UCLA student body. Since we reduced the scope of our project, we were able to spend more time collecting data. We originally planned on having a survey as our only method of data collection. With a reduced scope, we had more time to add to our data with a focus group and informational interviews.

Funding

Early in the winter quarter we applied for and received the TGIF mini-fund. The process took longer than expected because we did not anticipate the second step of receiving the check. We waited weeks to receive our check which we needed earlier to order our incentives for the survey and focus group. We hoped to have a table on BruinWalk distributing Yerba Mates and Black Forest Gummies to encourage people to fill out our survey towards the end of Winter quarter, but this was not possible due to delays with funding. Instead, we reallocated our funding to increase incentives for the survey respondents. We purchased 10 hydro flasks instead of just one and \$400 worth of Patagonia gift cards. We raffled the hydro flasks and \$200 of Patagonia gift cards to students who took our survey and each participant in our focus group received a \$50 Patagonia gift card.

Survey Distribution

One of our main ways to distribute our survey was through Bruinwalk. However, the challenge we faced with funding prevented us from handing out flyers on Bruinwalk. Bruinwalk is a main way clubs and organizations at UCLA spread their messages. As a Communications team at UCLA, we planned to collect a lot of student interaction and survey responses from flyering on Bruinwalk. We also planned to have our QR code and graphic on TV screens around campus. There were problems with the TV screens that our stakeholder worked to fix but ultimately this channel of survey distribution did not succeed. As a result, we decided to keep our survey open much longer than we had initially anticipated – throughout Spring Quarter, reshared the QR code on social media, and put up physical flyers around campus.

Key Informant Interviews

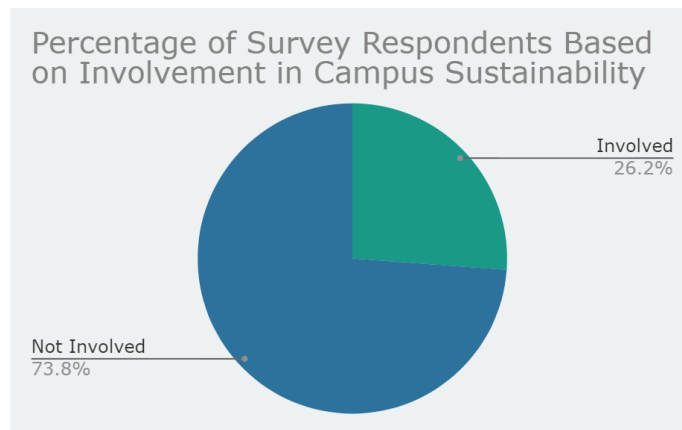
We added key information interviews in week 9 of Winter quarter. As this is normally an element of research that is conducted early on we were hoping to begin conducting interviews soon after making the decision to add them. This process had not been as smooth as we had hoped because it was difficult to find people to interview. This was mainly because we were looking for contacts at other universities and due to the late addition of this method in our project we were operating on a very limited time frame of just about two weeks to reach out to potential interviewees and conduct interviews. Even though multiple individuals were open to being interviewed, we ended up conducting two interviews with professionals because of scheduling conflicts and the limited time frame.

Though the aforementioned roadblocks were initially daunting, our team was able to effectively work together to determine strategies to adapt to these challenges and complete our research project successfully.

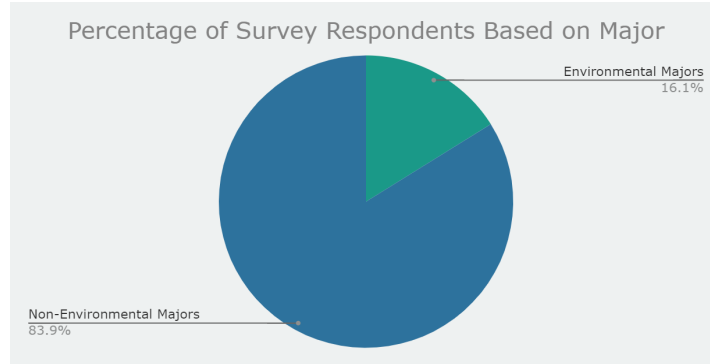
Results

Survey

- General Takeaways:
 - 149 Survey Responses
 - Demographic of respondents
 - 84% Non-environmental majors
 - 73.8% NOT involved in sustainability orgs
 - Avoided selection bias
 - Successful in reaching students not associated with sustainability



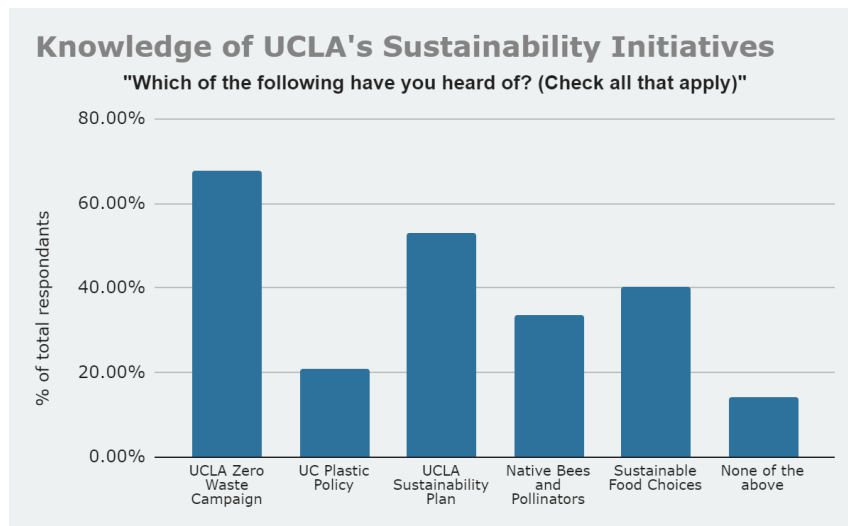
[Figure 1: Percent of Survey Respondents Involved in Campus Sustainability]



[Figure 2: Percent of Survey Respondents with Environmental Majors]

- Knowledge

- Overall 86% of student had heard of at least one campaigns
 - Most commonly known initiatives were Zero Waste, Sustainability Plan, Sustainable Food Practices

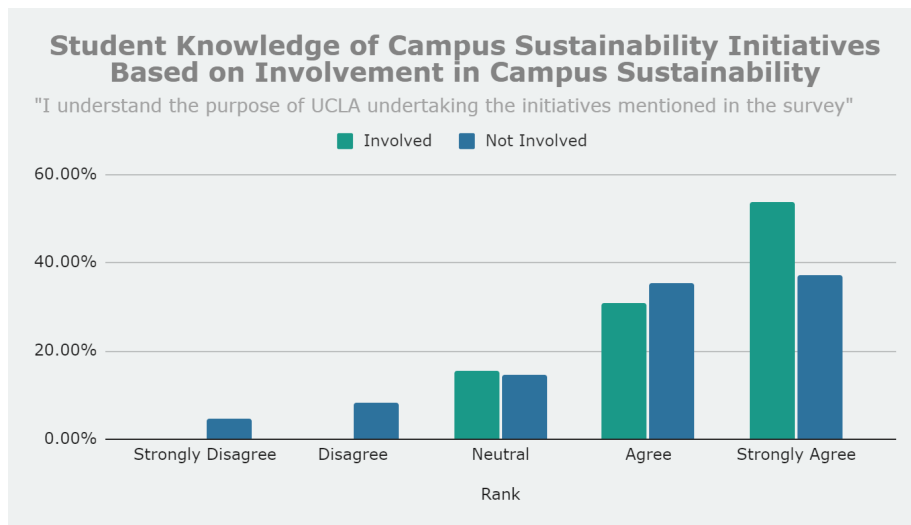


[Figure 3: Percentage of Respondents per Response to Question "Which of the Following Have You Heard of?"]

- Our survey responses reveal that there is a gap in knowledge between those who are involved and interested in sustainability and the environment and those who are not.

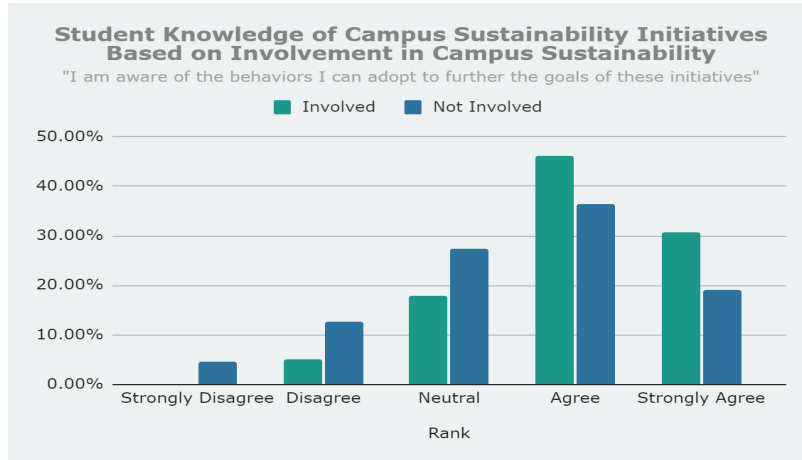
- To illustrate this we divided the responses to the “knowledge” section of the survey into
 - i) those from students involved in sustainability on campus vs students not involved in sustainability on campus
 - ii) those from students pursuing an environmental related major vs students pursuing a non-environmental major

- Discrepancy between involved in sustainability vs. not involved in sustainability
 - 84.62% of those involved in sustainability agreed or strongly agreed that they understand the purpose of undertaking the campaigns, as compared to 72% of those not involved in sustainability



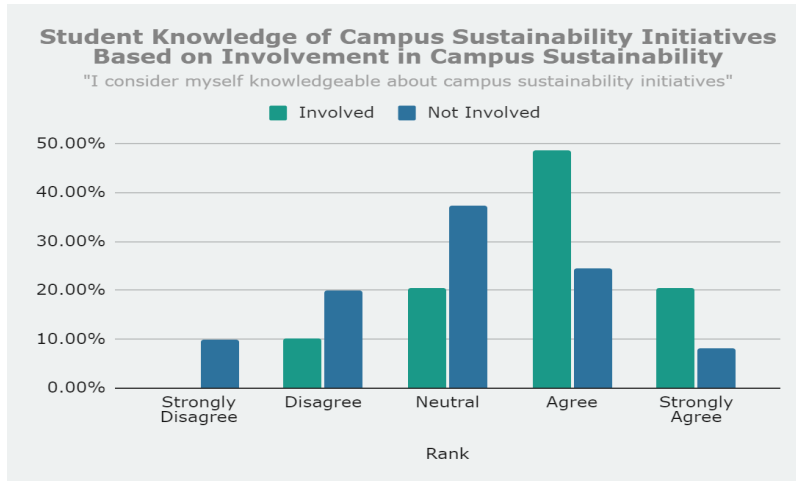
[Figure 4: Comparison of Participants Involved or Not Involved in Sustainability on Campus with the Degree to Which They Agree to the Statement “I Understand the Purpose of UCLA Undertaking the Initiatives Mentioned in the Survey”]

- 76.92% of those involved in sustainability said they agree or strongly agree that they are aware of the behaviors they can adopt to further the initiatives, versus only 55% of those not involved in sustainability



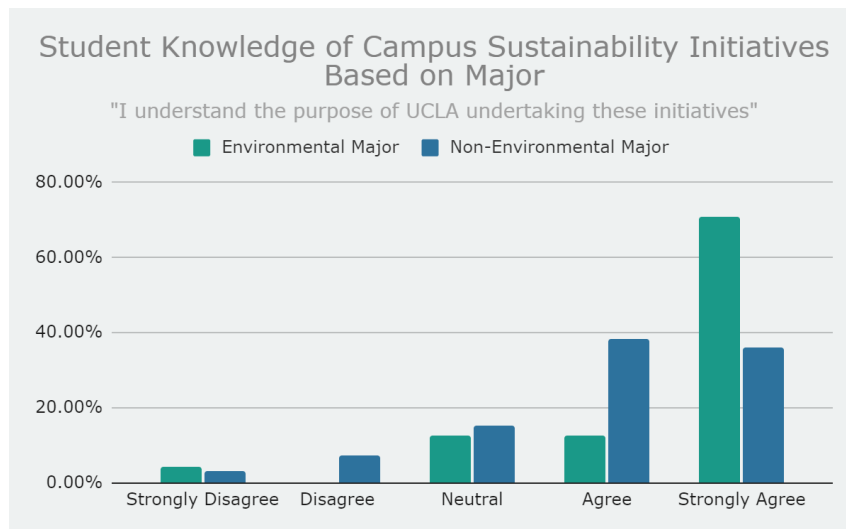
[Figure 5: Comparison of Respondents Involved or Not Involved in Sustainability on Campus with the Degree to Which They Agree to the Statement "I Am Aware of the Behaviors I Can Adopt to Further the Goals of These Initiatives"]

- 42.3% of ALL respondents to our survey considered themselves knowledgeable about campus sustainability initiatives
 - However, 69.23% of those involved consider themselves knowledgeable while only 32.73% of those not involved consider themselves knowledgeable



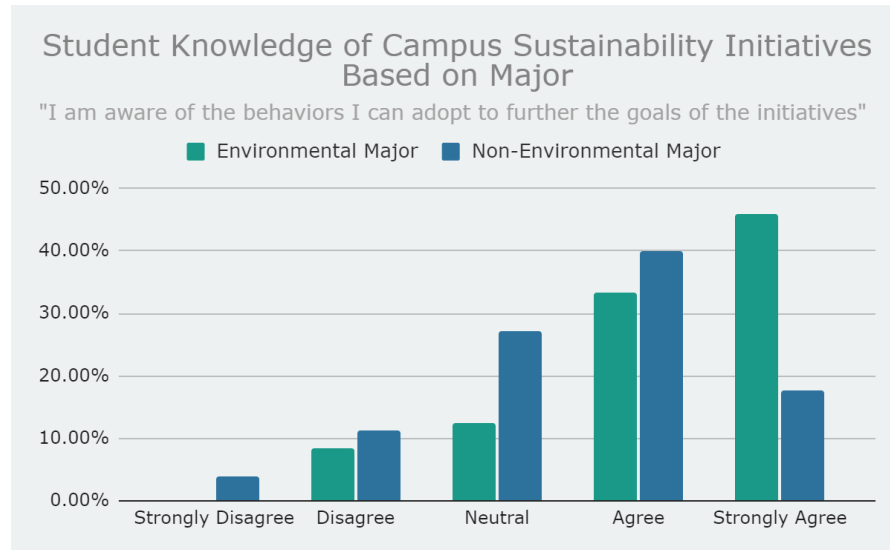
[Figure 6: Comparison of Respondents Involved or Not Involved in Sustainability on Campus with the Degree to Which They Agree to the Statement “I Consider Myself Knowledgeable About Campus Sustainability Initiatives”]

- Discrepancy between environment-related majors and non-environmental majors
 - 83.33% of environmental majors said they agree or strongly agree that they understand the purpose of undertaking the campaigns, versus 74.4% of non-environmental majors



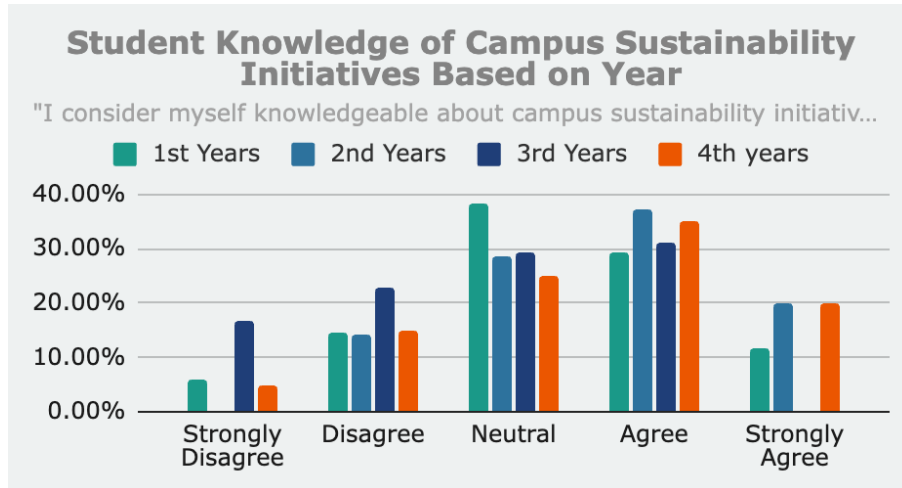
[Figure 7: Comparison of Environment Majors or Non Environmental Majors Respondents with the Degree to Which They Agree to the Statement “I Understand the Purpose of UCLA Undertaking the Initiatives Mentioned in the Survey”]

- 79.17% of environmental majors said they agree or strongly agree that they are aware of the behaviors they can adopt to further the initiatives, versus only 57.6% of non-environmental majors



[Figure 8: Comparison of Environment Majors or Non Environmental Majors Respondents with the Degree to Which They Agree to the Statement "I Am Aware of the Behaviors I Can Adopt to Further the Goals of These Initiatives"]

- Interestingly, there was barely a discrepancy between environmental and non-environmental majors for "my behavior has been impacted".
 - In fact, 38% of non-environmental majors rated the "my behavior has been impacted by these campaigns" highly, compared to only 37% of environment-related majors.
 - This suggests that even among those who are interested in the environmental issues the campaigns have not really inspired behavioral change
- So messages of sustainability are disproportionately reaching students who are already interested in sustainability and environment, and therefore more likely to seek out the information
- Discrepancy based on year in school



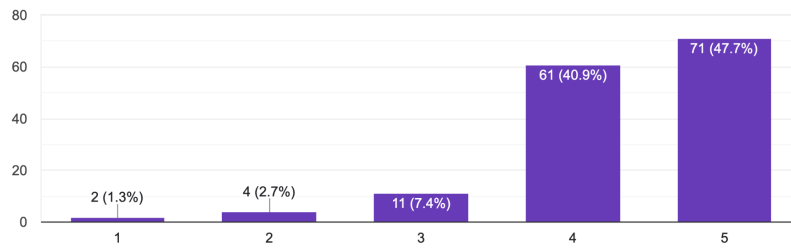
[Figure 9: Comparison of Respondents' Year with the Degree to Which They Agree to the Statement "I Consider Myself Knowledgeable About Campus Sustainability Initiatives"]

- We found that students in different years of school have differing knowledge about sustainability initiatives. As shown in the graph below, the peak of the curve of 4th year respondents is at "agree" while the peak for 1st year students is at "neutral." Although there is not a stark difference by year, this shows that, to some degree, students are learning more about sustainability initiatives as they spend more time at UCLA.

- Behavior

- Specific target behaviors –
 - The most common sustainable behavior cited was separating waste with 88% of respondents ranking 4 or 5 on a scale of never to always

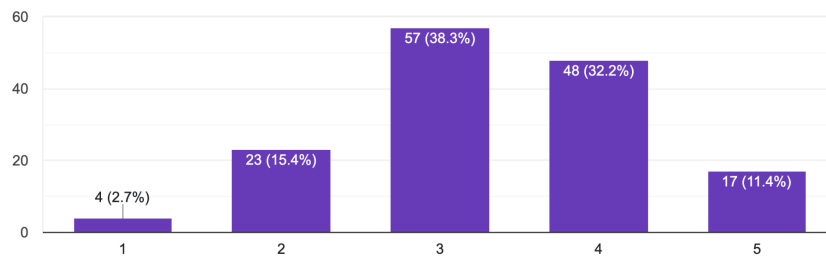
How often do you separate waste on campus?
149 responses



[Figure 10: Percentage of Respondents Who Ranked Each Level of Frequency in Response to the Question “How Often Do You Separate Waste on Campus?”]

- Only 43.6% of respondents ranked 4 or 5 on avoiding single waste plastic

Do you avoid single-use plastics?
149 responses

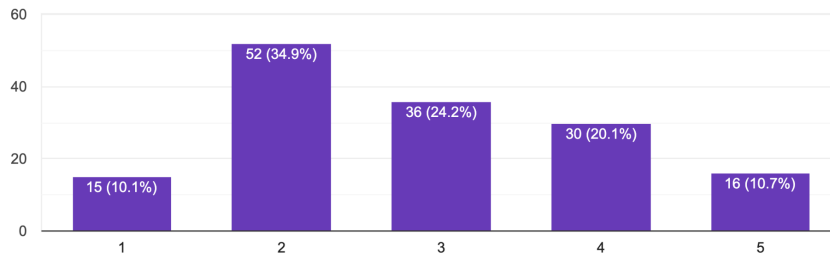


[Figure 11: Percentage of Respondents Who Ranked Each Level of Frequency in Response to the Question “Do You Avoid Single-Use Plastics?”]

- Only 30.87% of respondents ranked 4 or 5 for frequency of vegan/veg meals

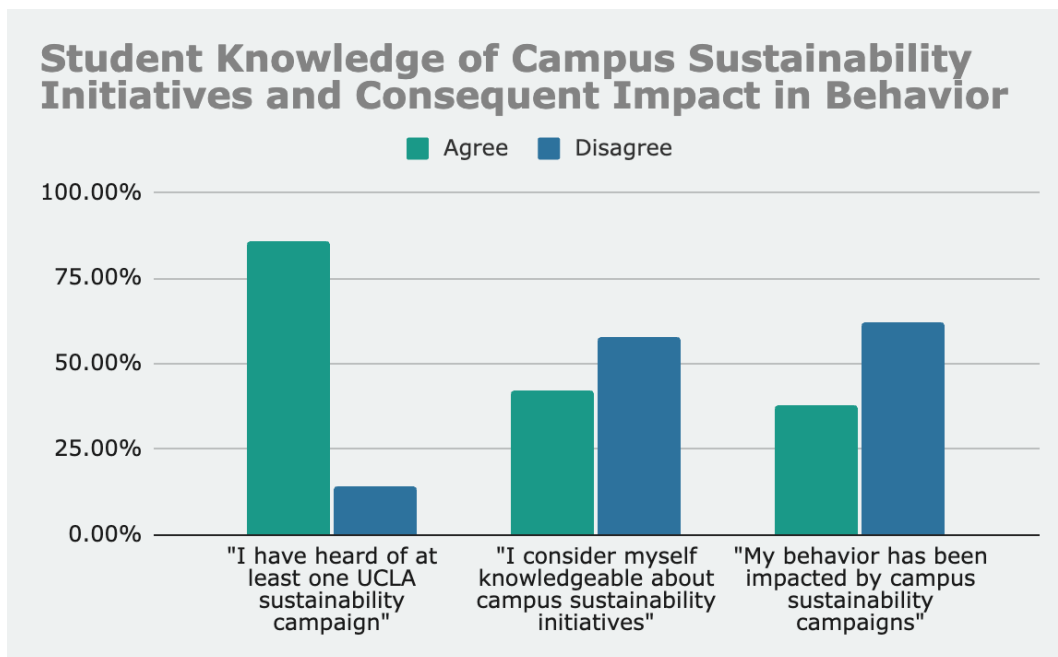
How often do you eat vegetarian/vegan meals?

149 responses



[Figure 12: Percentage of Respondents Who Ranked Each Level of Frequency in Response to the Question “How Often Do You Eat Vegetarian/Vegan Meals?”]

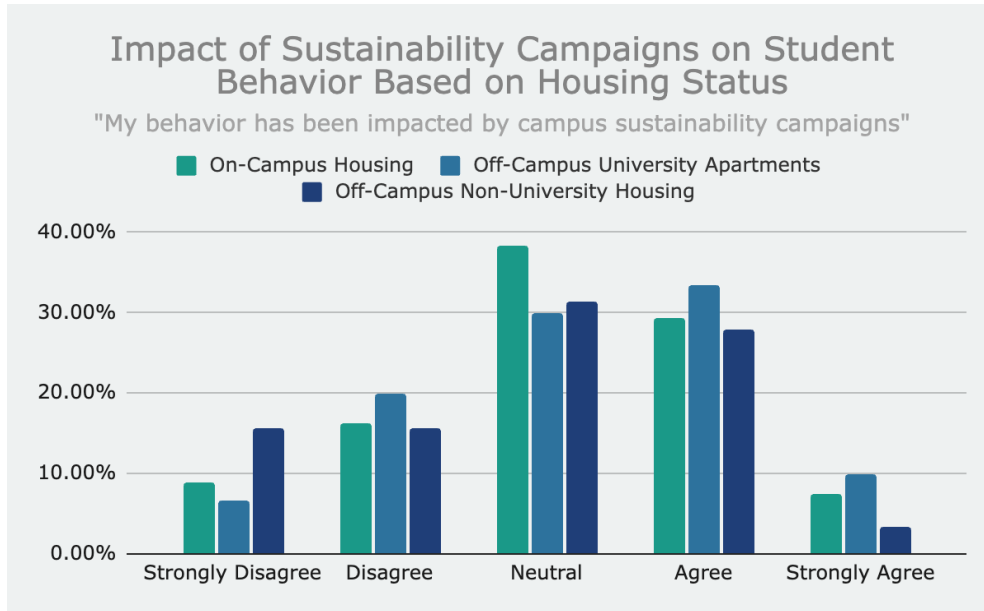
- Our responses revealed a massive gap between students having heard of a campaign and having their behavior impacted by it



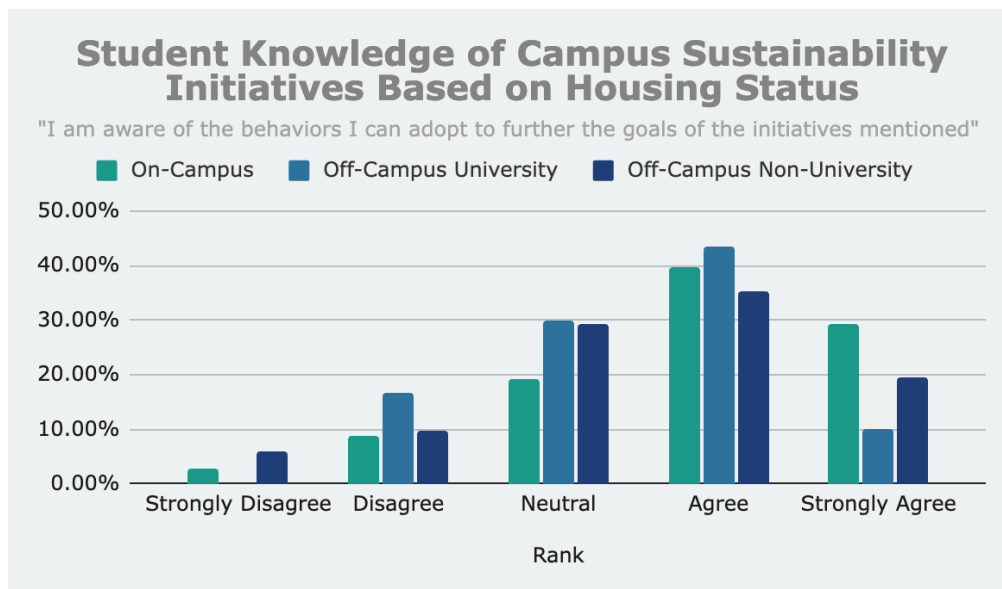
[Figure 13: Comparison of Percent of Respondents Who Agreed or Disagreed with the Knowledge and Behavior Statements]

- Even though 84% of respondents said they had heard of at least one campaign,

- only 43% considered themselves knowledgeable (ranked at 4 or 5)
and
- only 38% said that their behavior had been impacted (ranked at 4 or 5)
- The gap between knowledge and behavior was further analyzed based on where students reside
 - Students living on the Hill – 69% said they are aware of behaviors but ONLY 36% said their behavior was impacted
 - Students living in University apartments – 53% said they are aware of behaviors but ONLY 43% said their behavior was impacted
 - Students living in non-UCLA housing – 54% said they are aware of behaviors but ONLY 37% said their behavior was impacted
 - That those living on the hill were most likely to be aware of target behaviors but the least likely to have their behaviors impacted suggests that spending more time on UCLA campus and therefore having more exposure to campaign messaging is not really making a difference in altering student behavior. This points to a problem of messaging content and management



[Figure 14: Comparison of Respondents' Location of Living with the Degree to Which They Agree to the Statement "My Behavior Has Been Impacted by Campus Sustainability Campaigns"]

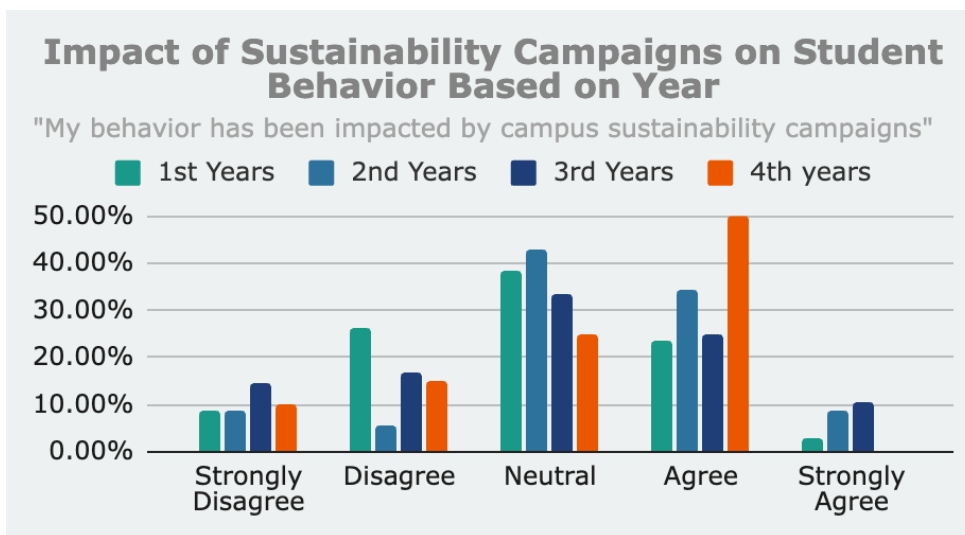


[Figure 15: Comparison of Respondents' Location of Living with the Degree to Which They Agree to the Statement "I Am Aware of the Behaviors I Can Adopt to Further the Goals of the Initiatives Mentioned"]

- Separating waste was the most common behavior exhibited, but in-depth analysis

showed that this may not be a result of campus sustainability campaigns.

- 82.93% of respondents who rated (1-2) for “My behavior has been impacted by campus sustainability campaigns” said that they always or almost always (4-5) separate waste on campus
 - 100% of people who rated (1 or 2) for “I am aware of the behaviors I can adopt to further the goals of the initiatives mentioned above” said that they always or almost always (4-5) separate waste on campus.
 - This indicates that even though most students are exhibiting the target behavior of separating waste on campus, they may not be motivated to do so by the communication about campus campaigns, but personal habits or accessibility and convenience.
- Discrepancy based on year in school



[Figure 16: Comparison of Students' Year with the Degree to Which They Agree to the Statement “My Behavior is Impacted by Campus Sustainability Campaigns”]

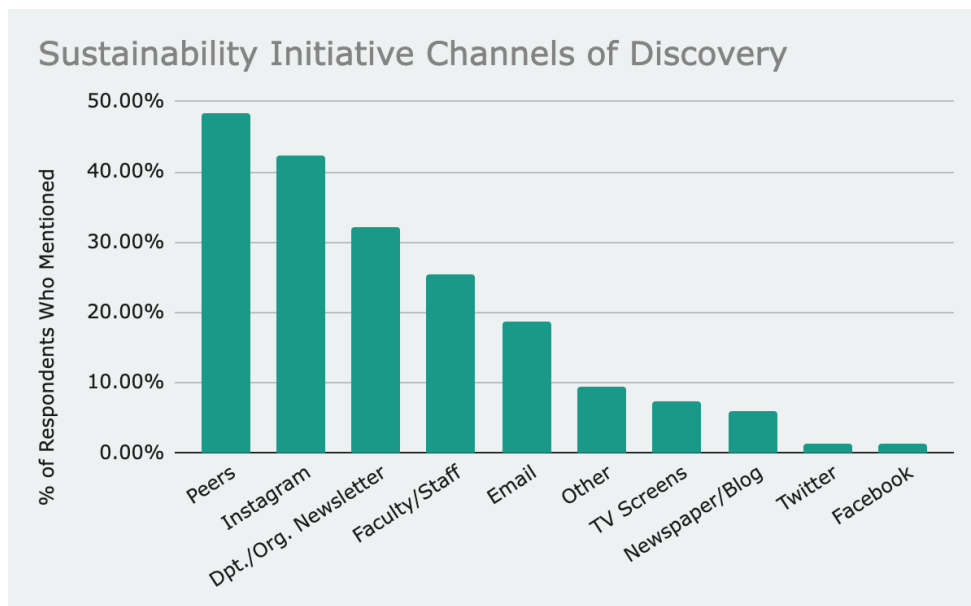
- We also found a discrepancy in behavior by year. As shown on the graph

below, the 4th year students were most likely to respond that they feel their behavior has been impacted by campus sustainability campaigns while 1st years were the most likely to respond that their behavior has not been impacted. Additionally, the peak of the 1st year curve is at neutral, while the peak of the 4th year curve is at agree. This suggests that students may be increasingly impacted by campaigns as they spend more time at UCLA.

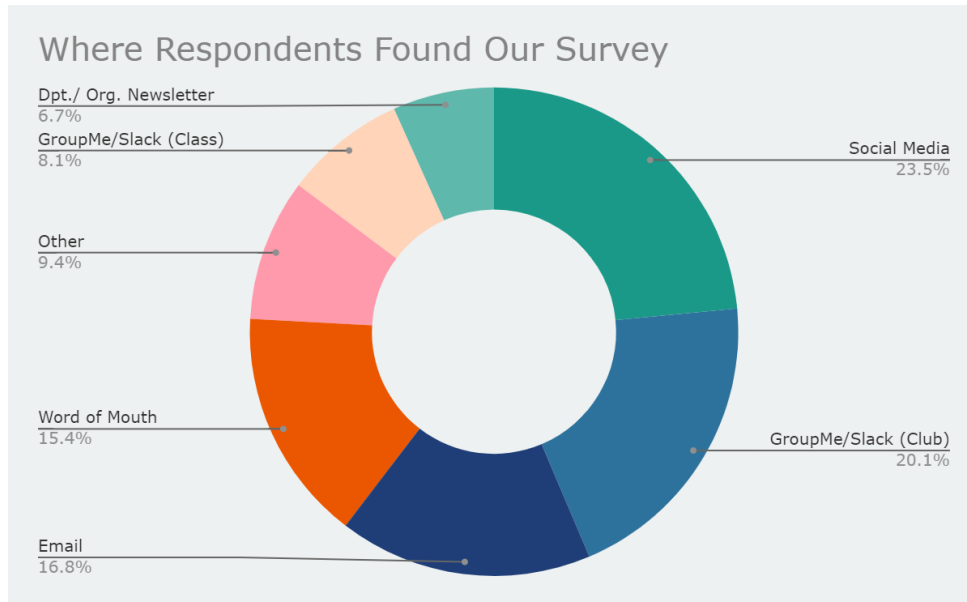
- **Channels**

- When asked to select all applicable channels in which our respondents received information about UCLA sustainability initiatives, 48.3% of respondents reported that they learned about these initiatives through their peers.
 - 42.28% of respondents learned about these initiatives through social media, specifically instagram.
 - For students, emails seem to be an ineffective way to receive information on sustainability initiatives. Only 18.79% of respondents reported receiving sustainability information through this channel
 - Once again evident how through peers whether by physical conversation or social media, information is effectively disseminated
- These findings are similar to the reported preferences of how respondents found our survey. The data shows an emphasis and favorability towards dissemination by peers.
 - 23.49% of respondents found our survey through social media (not specified which channel) and 20.1% of respondents found our survey through GroupMe/Slack for clubs.
 - These can be considered to be through peers

- However, our survey was not as effective when disseminated by word of mouth as only 15.44% of respondents found our survey through talking to others
 - Peers play a large role in how information is communicated
- With this in mind, social media, particularly Instagram, seems to be a common channel through which most students receive their information on sustainability initiatives and messaging as seen by using our survey as an example.



[Figure 17: Percentage of Respondents Who Mentioned Preference of Each Channel of Communication]



[Figure 18: Percentage of Respondents Who Found Our Survey in Each Location]

Focus group

- Focus group participants shared that most of their sustainability information was received from the following places on campus: Bruinwalk, graphics on trash cans, dining hall screens, and hill events
 - They primarily use instagram as a form of social media and stated they would return to this channel to receive future sustainability messaging/more information if they wished to learn more.
- Have these messages influenced your attitude about sustainability at ucla and beyond: overall consensus, no

- We then presented them with campaign graphics from past UCLA Sustainability Initiatives, specifically from the Zero Waste Campaign
 - We numbered the graphics 1-8 (these can be found in the Appendix)
- After we let participants look through each graphic, we asked about their opinions on the effectiveness of this messaging.
 - Graphics 7 and 4 were not popular
 - On the other hand, participants gravitated more towards graphics, 2, 5, and 6
 - They offered possible improvements for certain graphics which they stated “would catch their attention” if some aspects of it were changed. For example, for graphic 1, participants agreed that the idea of showing a landfill is good but the picture itself could be better, saying it was too “cheesy”. Instead, they suggested having pictures of an actual landfill or photos of communities impacted by improper waste management to improve this graphic.
 - They also shared that more eye-catching graphics would make them more enticed to read them. They would not read graphic 3, but if graphic 8 had a more interesting headline, they would take the time to notice and read the messaging.
 - Participants mentioned including a QR code on graphics in the case that students wished to learn more in order to declutter graphics and make them more effective.
 - According to our focus group graphics should be simple but not without meaning. It should be simple enough to garner attention yet not too simple so that there is no takeaway.
 - Ultimately, participants want to understand their position in the larger implications of sustainability campaigns. This could explain the disconnect between knowledge and action. This bystander effect leaves participants confused as to where they are placed in the bigger picture (or grand scheme of things), and thus unable to grasp the moral

aspect of their behavior. They emphasized the need for transparency along with being provided more information on the consequences that sustainability initiatives seek to avoid. They also expressed that information about the successes of the sustainability initiatives and the positive impacts of adopting sustainability policies.

- We also asked participants for their opinions on potential activities that UCLA could implement to engage students.
 - First we brought up potential monthly workshops for UCLA students. Participants showed some interest, but brought up the issue of personal responsibility and accountability. They shared that students would be less likely to attend, possibly due to the “why bother” attitude. Participants echoed that this attitude could be mitigated by once again showing students the impact of their actions through sustainability messaging. Impacts could be shown through depicting groups that are affected by inaction, the impacts and results of ucla sustainability efforts (like where waste ends up)
 - If we do follow through with this recommendation, focus groups participants highlighted the effectiveness of incentives. Incentives like free food or a fun event could bring students to these workshops.
 - We also asked for their thoughts on a new student orientation sustainability talk. Participants voiced concern that this method could slip through the cracks due to the overload of information new students receive. Alternatively they suggested giving out sustainability kits (the likes of which were given as prizes during UCLA’s Think Outside The Landfill challenge) instead.
- Focus group participants also highlighted the importance of showing the involvement that students have in Ucla sustainability

- They were unaware of the large community of students at UCLA involved with sustainability and shared that if we publicized this more, student interest could turn into more involvement and action.

Interviews

- In order to have a better understanding on how we could improve current UCLA sustainability messaging, we conducted informational interviews with contacts at other UCs to learn more about their current endeavors and successes in sustainability communications.
- Our first interview was with Kira Stoll, the Director of the Office of Sustainability a UC Berkeley and Chief Sustainability & Carbon Solutions Officer
 - In regards to sustainability communications, Stoll is also the lead communications person for all of UC Berkeley's sustainability campaigns. Stoll works with PR and other communications specialists on campus as well as Berkeley's Student Environmental Research Center.
 - She shared that sustainability initiatives are mostly disseminated to students through other students organizing themselves into groups. However, it is still difficult to get info around at such large institutions
 - As a result, Berkeley Stoll said that information regarding sustainability campaigns have to come from all directions to combat this
 - In terms of who is in charge of sustainability communications, Stoll states that student fellows within the sustainability office are involved in handling a lot of their communications. There is an understanding that student fellows would best know which communication tools would resonate with the student body the most

- When asked about what has been successful in UC Berkeley's sustainability communications endeavors, Stoll shares that
 - Emails for staff and faculty were effective while word of mouth and events captured the student population
 - They used to do a newsletter yet found only 100-200 people were reading it
 - In order to track how effective these methods were in garnering more attention towards UC Berkeley's sustainability campaigns, they would refer to monthly google reports of how many people are looking at their sustainability website
- Another aspect of their sustainability communications that has been successful is their online sustainability onboarding module alongside a sustainability walking tour that students are encouraged to take during new student orientation (NSO)
 - Stoll stated that it "must have made some impact" as people know more since they have been doing it for a while
 - Students every year are in turn more and more knowledgeable about sustainability campaigns, initiatives, and information at UC Berkeley
- UC Berkeley has also been sending out surveys to collect interest in adding a requirement for each student to take a sustainability related course and had very positive feedback
- A challenge which Stoll highlighted was the difference between communications and behavior change, stating that behavioral change is "another animal" yet could come from persistent communications as well as tapping into people's passions
- Elida Erickson - Director of the Sustainability Office, UCSC

- When asked about how their sustainability communication was disseminated, Erickson shares how their communications and education around sustainability has a lot to do with their relationship with the Department of University Relations
 - This allows them to add sustainability info to the campus wide newsletter
- What has been successful for sustainability communications as UCSC has been:
 - Using students to their advantage
 - 20 students employees at the office → core part of their strategy is engaging students and helping them becoming leaders, discussing issues with them to get their input
 - Created a people of color sustainability collective in order to incorporate diversity and inclusion into sustainability
 - This provides perspective in sustainability as communities of color are most impacted by these initiatives
 - Also opens up space to make sustainability more effective as it creates an environment where students can connect their passions and know their work has an impact
- We asked Erickson about the challenges sustainability communications at UCSC faces
 - One big obstacle is getting factual information to students
 - There is misinformation about what happens to recycling and compost, these rumors must be debunked as many students think its getting thrown out
 - This is work to bridge the gap between knowledge and behavior

- She also mentioned that students don't pay attention to emails (yet faculty and staff do). She reiterated that social media for students proves to be more effective
- Erickson shares that there are many things which UCSC has been working on to improve their sustainability outreach.
 - Something they would like to expand on is Adding sustainability to required trainings
 - There is also work being done to expand sustainability in order to make it something for everyone instead of just a niche population —> accessibility to gain a broader audience
- Something echoed once again is
 - The best way to reach the student audience is with students

Overall Results

- Both our focus group and survey indicate that there is a gap between knowledge and behavior
 - Students are aware of campaigns, but do not feel their behavior has been impacted by them
 - Interestingly, that gap reduces significantly once students consider themselves knowledgeable about initiatives, but a relatively small proportion currently consider themselves knowledgeable
 - According to our interviews, changing student behavior is overall is also an extremely difficult task

- Kira Stoll highlighted the relationship between communications and behavior change explaining that behavior change is difficult to achieve, yet could come from persistent communications.
- Our focus group stressed the importance of tying sustainability communications back to the bigger picture
- All three methods indicated the effectiveness of student to student communications

- Channel overview:
 - Social media, specifically Instagram, is the most effective
 - Through peers, information is more effectively communicated whether it be through word of mouth, social media, or group messaging
 - Emails ineffective for students, but Kira mentions its effectiveness for staff
 - Possibly future studies can focus on this gap
 - Focus group participants mentioned they would return to instagram to receive sustainability messaging

After careful consideration of our vast results, we formulated recommendations for improving sustainability communications strategies at UCLA. In accordance with preferences expressed by our stakeholder, our final deliverable is a presentation that thoroughly details the background, methods, and results of our research project and includes our specific recommendations for improvement. This presentation will be shared with our stakeholder along with a copy of our survey responses. Our stakeholder will share our presentation with her team. And plans to implement the recommendations in future marketing and communications efforts to shift the behavior of campus community members to help UCLA meet its sustainability goals and initiatives.

Discussion

Over the course of two quarters, our team conducted important research that will help improve UCLA Sustainability Communications and serve as the groundwork for future communications research projects. Communication is an integral, though often overlooked, factor in ensuring the success of sustainability initiatives, specifically at UCLA. If the target audience of the campaigns, in this case, students, are unaware of target behaviors advocated by UCLA sustainability initiatives, success of these initiatives will be heavily jeopardized.

We plan to use our research findings to make recommendations for improvements of sustainability communications on campus. Our first recommendation is evidenced by an observed difference in students having heard of sustainability campaigns and concrete knowledge of these campaigns, as indicated by the student survey. Though many students are aware of UCLA sustainability initiatives, our research shows that their behavior is less likely to be altered by them due to a lack of knowledge of target behaviors. This is where more strategic communications are necessary. Sustainability communications must expand beyond tag-lines, or the names of campaigns. Rather, we advocate for the creation of simple, clear, actionable plans for students. We believe that shifting communication towards this end will improve the efficacy of sustainability initiatives in terms of motivating students to exhibit target behaviors. This assumption is corroborated by student input from our focus group.

To illustrate what this recommendation would entail in practice, we will use the Zero Waste campaign as an example. Instead of simply telling students that UCLA aims to divert 90% of waste from landfills by 2025, communications should tell them how their actions can contribute to meeting this goal.

Simple actions items – “Bring a reusable water bottle to the dining hall!” “Compost your container!” could be beneficial to effectively engage students. Additionally, students have expressed skepticism regarding the necessity and the impact of their actions in relation to sustainability. Many believe misinformation that all waste goes to the same place, reducing the motivation for waste separation. Besides dispelling myths, it would be helpful to make clear what the impact of student actions will be, so for example communicating successes of initiatives such as the total volume of waste recycled or composted. Also, these successes should be connected to broader issues – for instance, expanding on the positive impacts of diverting waste from landfills (especially on communities).

Apart from messaging concerns, our research has yielded additional channels that we believe could be utilized by UCLA Sustainability Communications. From our key informant interviews and our focus group, we recommend discussion of UCLA sustainability initiatives at new student orientation. Utilization of this channel has the potential for reaching a wide-range of students, as all freshmen and new transfer students will be tuned in to sustainability practices at UCLA and have an understanding of how to further the goals of these campaigns. This channel could also work to overcome a common difficulty expressed in our key informant interviews in that there is large student turnover, meaning that every four years there is a completely new pool of students who need to be educated about sustainability at UCLA. If all students are informed of UCLA sustainability initiatives upon their arrival at UCLA, some of these concerns may be minimized. Though this channel has a large breadth of potential, we identify possible drawbacks such as information overload. Navigating UCLA is already a daunting task for new students, so adding an additional sustainability component could do more harm than good. A possible solution for this is the use of sustainability walks (as in Berkeley) and fun yet educational activities encouraging students to participate in sustainability initiatives.

Another finding from our research is the importance of student-to-student communication. We found that often students feel intimidated or alienated by sustainability messaging that comes from UCLA faculty or institutions. Students respond better to hearing from other students. If they know that others at their campus are passionate about sustainability, they are more likely to be susceptible to sustainability messaging from their peers. No one likes being told to do things, but they may be more likely to exhibit target behaviors if they are prompted by their peers rather than those who reside in the ivory tower of authority.

Our final recommendation includes the creation of a Student Environmental Resource Center at UCLA. This new body would centralize information regarding sustainability at UCLA, creating a one-stop-shop for interested students. This Center would produce easily digestible informational materials that could help educate students about sustainable behaviors. The SERC could also host educational workshops and sustainability campus tours at UCLA, highlighting current and planned initiatives. Lastly, this new body would provide a medium for coordination of environmental student organizations at UCLA. Groups such as Sustainability Action Research could partner with other clubs to ensure consistency and efficacy of sustainability communications at UCLA.

Our research is a critical component of campus sustainability. More messaging means getting more students involved. As part of SAR, we have seen the power of the student voice and the student researcher. While current efforts by UCLA students towards reaching a sustainable campus are admirable, they fail to scratch the surface of the potential of the largely untapped student body. To get more students involved, communications must be meticulous and purposeful. Communications should be informed by research such as ours in order to reach best practices.

Moving forward, we hope that sustainability communications are treated with the importance that they demand. The initiatives of UCLA Sustainability are impressive, but their efforts will be in vain if not paired with strategic, effective communication to students. Further research is absolutely needed to continue to inform sustainability communicators about what channels and messaging works. The scope of our project largely dealt with channels, so a more comprehensive analysis of messaging would be a great start. A future SAR team could work directly with the Communications Department to hone messaging, prioritizing content proven successful by research and data.

Our research concerns student attitudes about sustainability, which we believe to be the most important factor in ensuring success of sustainability initiatives. That said, it is far from the only piece of the puzzle. Specifically, analysis of sustainability communications in the context of UCLA faculty and staff is also paramount. UCLA faculty has the ability to reach a wide audience of students and UCLA staff are often directly responsible for the execution of sustainability initiatives such as reducing waste, water, and energy use.

As the first ever SAR team dedicated to communications, we believe that our research will serve as an important benchmark for future projects. Communication is critical to sustainability and sadly is not treated as such. In an era dominated by discourse of climate change, winning the battle over hearts and minds will be of utmost importance. To ensure UCLA remains a sustainable and resilient campus, communication must improve. This will make sure that students are at the center of the conversation for determining their own futures.

Appendix

Survey Questions

Section 1: Background

- What is your major?
 - Short answer write in question
- Where did you get the link to this survey?
 - Departmental / Organizational Newsletter
 - Email
 - Social Media
 - Bruinwalk
 - Groupme
- What year are you?
 - 1st
 - 2nd
 - 3rd
 - 4th
 - 1st Year Transfer
 - 2nd Year Transfer
 - Graduate Student
- Where do you currently live?
 - University On-Campus Housing
 - University Off-Campus Housing
 - Non-University Off-Campus Residency

Section 2: Knowledge

- Which of the following have you heard of (select all that apply)?
 - UCLA Zero Waste Campaign
 - UC Plastic Policy
 - UCLA Sustainability Plan
 - Native Bees and Pollinators
 - Sustainable Food Choices
 - None of the above
- If you selected any of the above, how did you hear about the initiative? (Select all that apply, choose N/A if you selected "None of the above")
 - Twitter
 - Facebook
 - Instagram
 - Email
 - Newspaper/Blog
 - TV Screens
 - Departmental/Organizational Newsletter

- Word of mouth
- N/A
- I understand the purpose of UCLA undertaking the initiatives mentioned above
 - Scale question from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)
- I am aware of the behaviors I can adopt to further the goals of the initiatives mentioned above
 - Scale question from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)
- I consider myself knowledgeable about campus sustainability initiatives
 - Scale question from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Section 3: Behavior

- My behavior has been impacted by campus sustainability campaigns
 - Scale question from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)
- Do you consider cost when deciding whether to opt for a more sustainable option?
 - Scale question from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always)
- How often do you separate waste on campus?
 - Scale question from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always)
- Do you avoid single-use plastics?
 - Scale question from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always)
- How often do you eat vegetarian/vegan meals?
 - Scale question from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always)

Section 4: Current Involvement

- Are you currently involved in any environmental/sustainability clubs or organizations at UCLA?
 - Yes
 - No
- If yes, please specify
 - Short answer write in question

Focus Group Questions

I. How you receive/ what is effective → general background and foundational knowledge

- How do you usually receive sustainability communications at UCLA?
- What channels and sources do you find most effective at communicating sustainability messaging at UCLA?
- What was it about their stories and messaging that captured your attention?

II. Current Actions

- Which sources and channels have you returned to for posts or stories about campus sustainability?

- As a result, did you follow up to find out more about campus sustainability?
- Are you looking forward to receiving additional posts and stories from these channels and sources?"
- Our current data suggests that people consider themselves knowledgeable about campus campaigns, but don't think their behaviors have been altered by these.
- What do you think could contribute to a reluctance to change behaviors among students?
 - Do you think providing more information/opportunities to educate oneself would help encourage behavioral changes?
- Present UCLA Zero Waste campaign messaging
 - <https://ucla.app.box.com/s/zajhfekg4uh1lv74p5ptussnzuoux5ew/file/1038579149200>
 - Would any of these encourage action from you?
 - If yes → what about it is effective?
 - If no → what about it is ineffective?
 - Are there any images/messages from these that you would prefer over another?
 - On Instagram would you take the time to read the caption or prefer that the graphic had all the necessary information?

III. Effective/Ineffective messaging

- Which channels and sources did you find ineffective in conveying sustainability messaging?
- What was it about them that failed to capture your interest?
- What kind of messaging on these sites did you find effective?
- Have any of these messages influenced your attitude about sustainability, at UCLA and beyond?

IV. Possible Improvements

- If UCLA Sustainability was to hold monthly workshops educating students about practices and policies and how they can contribute, would you attend?
 - Do you think people you know would attend?
- Do you think it would be helpful for UCLA to have a sustainability talk during new student orientation?
- Would you be interested in a UCLA sustainability podcast?

IV. Wrap Up

- What is your overall impression of UCLA's Sustainability messaging?
- Do you have any suggestions for how to improve UCLA sustainability communication
 - What kind of information campaigns would you respond to/like to see in the future?

Sustainability Messaging Graphics from Focus Group



Informational Interview Questions

- What campaigns has your university implemented to improve sustainability on campus?
 - Do any of these require students to alter their behaviors (like those related to waste, plastics) on campus?
 - If yes → What are they?
 - How have you informed students about these initiatives?
 - How successful have those efforts been?
- How have these campaigns been communicated to the campus community?
 - Explain what UCLA does – messaging over TV screen, social media, etc and ask what their messaging campaigns include
 - How successful have those efforts been?
- What channels have been most successful/used most effectively in communicating sustainability information to campus audiences?
 - Social media? Newsletters?
- What challenges have you faced in reaching a campus audience (students) with sustainability messaging?
 - How have you responded to these issues?
 - Have these responses been successful?

- Have you found it difficult to convince students to alter their behaviors on campus?
- Have you made a conscious effort to reach students who were not previously engaged with sustainability?
 - Has this been successful?
 - If yes → what has worked? What channels/messaging were used to target these students specifically?
- Who directs sustainability communications at your university?
 - Is it the purview of the [Institute of Environment and Sustainability/University equivalent] or the University Communications department?
 - Is there a specific team that is dedicated to informing the campus community about sustainability practices and initiatives?
 - How big is this team?
 - Is the social media run by students or marketing professionals?
- What is the system by which information on sustainability initiatives is conveyed to the campus community?
 - Does your sustainability communications team utilize university-wide channels, or do you partner with external organizations, such as student organizations, residential life, or individual campus departments?
 - If yes to third party → Who do you go through?
 - Do you think that this method is effective for your university?
- Are your university's sustainability communications efforts grounded in university policy (i.e. are your communications efforts a part of targets outlined by university policy)?
- Have you conducted any assessments for how effective university information campaigns have been in effectively engaging students?
 - If yes → could you elaborate on the type of data collected and nature of analysis for this assessment?
- Does your university have future plans to expand and improve on current communication strategies?
- Do you have any advice for us given the context of our research project?

Works Cited

UCLA Sustainability Plan | *UCLA Sustainability*. (n.d.). UCLA Sustainability.
<https://www.sustain.ucla.edu/plan/>