

Are students neutral to the UC Carbon Neutrality Initiative?

Carbon Neutrality Student Engagement Report | Spring 2015

Report of Berkeley students' current knowledge and suggestions for future increase in awareness.

SUMMARY

In April 2015, the Carbon Neutrality Fellows at UC Berkeley worked to gauge student knowledge of and participation in the UC system 2025 Carbon Neutrality initiative. In this report, we discuss our findings and recommendations for increasing student engagement.

We accomplished our goal of speaking to 100 or more students through leading discussions with various student groups and conducting a survey. As we spoke with more students, we discovered a low level of knowledge about the carbon neutrality initiative, despite a high concern for environmental issues.

Our recommended next steps involve a revamping of the initiative to increase marketing, including branding, outreach events, and collaboration with other student groups and efforts.

The logo for 'Carbon free Cal' is displayed on a blue rectangular background. The word 'Carbon' is in white, 'free' is in yellow script, and 'Cal' is in white. The logo is partially overlaid by a decorative geometric shape on the right side of the page.

Carbon
free
Cal

About the fellows:

Nadine Melamed is a 2nd year Near Eastern Studies major with an emphasis in Persian Language and Literature. She is a member of various religious and cultural organizations and Bare Magazine.

Charlotte O'Donnell is a 3rd year Society and Environment major with a minor in Spanish Literature and Language. She is a member of the Berkeley Student Cooperatives and Sports Club communities.

Sarah Stochak is a 2nd year Urban Studies Major with a minor in Geospatial Information Science and Technology. She is a member of the Panhellenic community.

Project Sponsor:

Kira Stoll is the Sustainability Manager with Berkeley's Office of Sustainability and Energy.

METHODOLOGY

Over the month of April 2015, we focused on reaching out to students and student groups in our personal networks. We began by trying to meet with student groups including Words of the Watershed and Panhellenic Sustainability Council. Then, we moved on to tabling in dining halls, including Clark Kerr, Crossroads, Foothill, and International House. On Earth Day, we tabled in the main commons of Dwinelle Plaza along with other environmental clubs. Finally, we decided to send a brief survey electronically to students via Facebook.

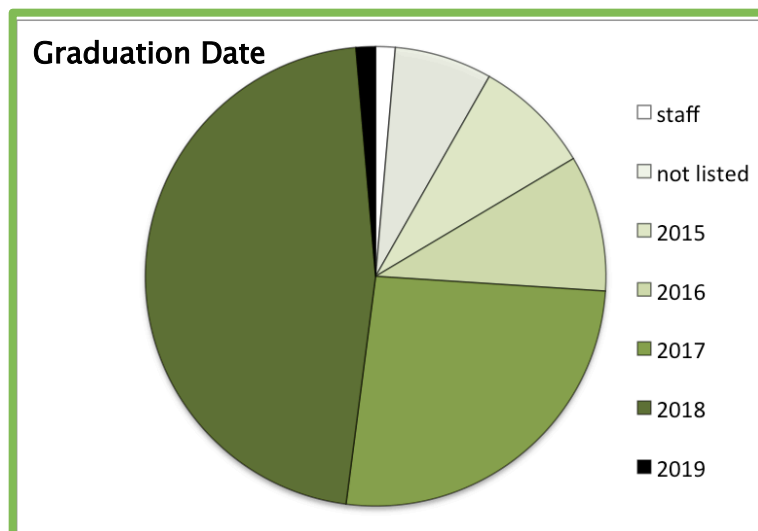
The Survey

The graphs and data presented in this report show results from our surveys given online and at several tabling events. They do not include students reached during discussions with clubs. None of these studies were carried out in a scientific manner. Results are not representative but do help us inform general trends among students.

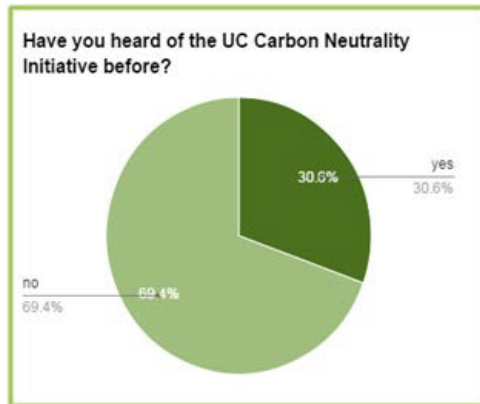
SURVEY QUESTIONS:

1. Anticipated year of graduation
2. Major
3. What does it mean to be Carbon Neutral?
4. What steps can you take to reduce your carbon impact?
5. Have you heard of the UC Carbon Neutrality Initiative?
6. By what year has UC Berkeley pledged to be Carbon Neutral?
7. How important is this issue to you?

From Mechanical Engineering to English, students from over 30 majors were surveyed; only 4 out of 73 participants were studying an environmental major. Students from every class standing were also reached with this survey, although the biggest group was first year students, as demonstrated below.

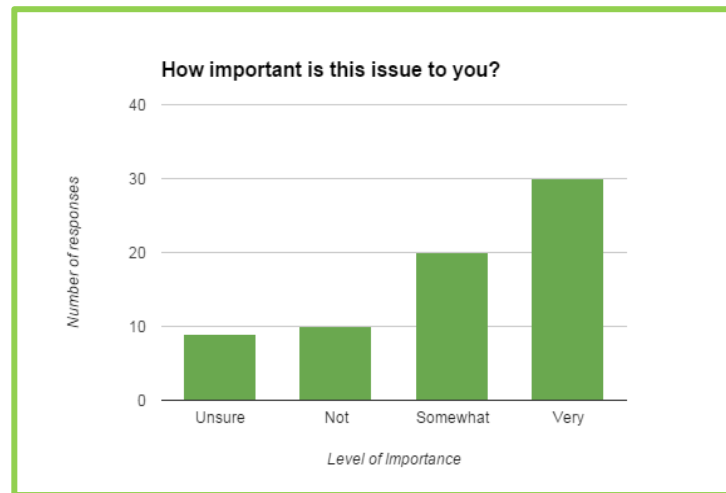


RESULTS: *Student's Thoughts on Carbon Neutrality and the Initiative*



Most students had never heard of the Initiative and fewer knew what it was about. The survey showed that 70% of the students we talked to had never before heard of the Initiative. **Only 30% of students reported previously hearing about the initiative.** When asked, "By what year has UC Berkeley pledged to be Carbon Neutral?" less than 10% of respondents provided the correct year, 2025.

Students thought this was very important but they had not heard of the Initiative specifically. **The majority of people listed the issue of carbon neutrality as a high concern.** However, many pointed to academic pressures, lack of information, or other important issues as reasons they were not as interested.



On the concept of Carbon Neutrality in general, students showed greater knowledge. When asked "What does it mean to be Carbon Neutral?" 31.5% students stated they were "unsure" while the remaining 68.5% wrote a definition that demonstrated an educated guess or even a clear understanding.

What does it mean to be Carbon Neutral?

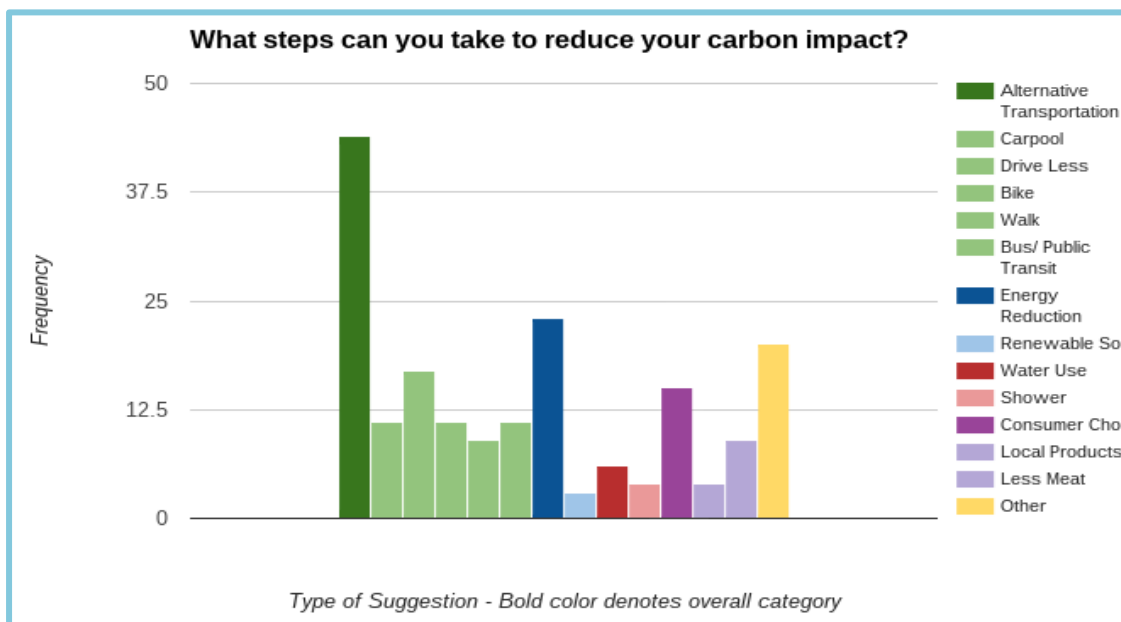
"Not contributing to climate change"

- Statistics major, 2016

"Having 0 Carbon Footprint"

- Gender Women Studies major, 2018

Student knowledge about reducing environmental impact



Students showed knowledge of what causes carbon impacts when responding to the question "What steps can you take to reduce your carbon impact?". **All students listed relevant actions which could help reduce carbon emissions.** The bolder colors denote the frequency in which the general categories of Alternative Transportation, Energy Use Reduction, Water Use Reduction, and Consumer Choices were mentioned. The lighter shades denote words used by students which fell into these categories although these do not represent all its occurrences.

Most students focused on Alternative Transportation. It was mentioned in 60% of surveys. This could reflect the sense that students do not feel that the topic of Carbon Neutrality relates to them since many students may feel their personal carbon footprint is already reduced since many do follow the suggestions they gave, such as driving less and walking more.

The survey focused on the individual's impact rather than the campus as a whole. The question "What steps can you take to reduce your carbon impact?" could be improved to help the Initiative by asking about the campus carbon impact. We could have asked "What steps can *UC Berkeley* take to reduce *our campus'* carbon impact?". Still these results show that concepts such as "Use Renewable Energy", "Increase Energy Efficiency", or "Decrease of Fossil Fuel" were nearly never mentioned while energy reduction in general was often on people's minds.

"CARPOOL!"

-Business and Sociology majors, 2017

"Eating less meat and going solar"

-Public Health major, 2017

"Plant trees"

-Genetic Plant Biology major, 2017

Reflections on Student Group Engagement

Overall, students were willing to engage and learn about the initiative during group meetings or tabling events. The survey results showed that students consider this a very important issue. Our conversations with groups allowed us to see how and why specific groups are interested or uninterested in engaging.

Benefits of holding meetings with student groups included that we had time to gather a group perspective in depth rather than the short answers we received on our more impersonal surveys. We also then had time to explain the Carbon Neutrality Initiative to the groups so they learned what it was. We found that many individuals were interested in getting involved with the initiative once it was explained, which points to a lack of marketing as one of the reasons for low engagement in the initiative.

Challenges in meeting with student groups also arose. Firstly, since we started later in the spring semester, groups often no longer had regular group meetings or time in their agendas to have guest speakers. Secondly, while meeting with several environmental groups (Words of the Watershed and Panhellenic Sustainability Council) proved useful, fellows were not prepared for the technical scientific questions. These students were also very concerned that there was not much they could individually do to help.

During the brief meeting with the Environmental Collaboration (ECO) - a coalition of representatives from different student environmental groups - concerns about what the initiative did not include in its count of Carbon Neutrality were raised. Environmental student leaders worried that foods and other products bought and sold by the University had large carbon impacts that are not included. The suggestions for greater administrative transparency and partnership with student groups were included in their hopes for the future of this Initiative. Many of these recommendations informed our final suggestions that follow.

"I believe anything we can do to help protect Earth's nature is critical, however I am not educated on the topic of Carbon Neutrality."

- Legal Studies major, 2017

"This is very important for all communities even though people do not put a lot of emphasis on it."

-History major, 2018

RECOMENDATIONS

Marketing and Outreach

In order to increase student engagement in the initiative, the first step is to get the word out on a much larger scale. From meeting with student groups and reviewing survey responses, it is clear that this is an issue of importance to much of our student body regardless of their study focus, but many lack the knowledge to be engaged in or contribute to the Initiative. Some initial steps to take are online marketing and visible signage around campus. Online platforms such as Facebook campaigns and the SERC and Office of Sustainability and Energy newsletter could prove successful in broadening awareness.

The development of a brand is also a beginning step. A brand for the UC Berkeley initiative would give an image to the movement, and would also work to increase the initiative presence on social media. A hashtag such as #CarbonFreeCal could tie in events and promotions to social media. A marketing plan will boost the cohesiveness of the Initiative and allow for greater messaging potential.



The development of a video about the campaign would greatly increase education and awareness. A video would be easy to distribute and could give a general understanding to a broad group of students. A Powerpoint or video including graphics could also be given to Faculty and Staff to show in classrooms and trainings.

What can we learn from the Zero Waste campaign?

When reviewing survey results, we believe that a large percentage of students believed that UC system had pledged to be carbon neutral by 2020 as a result of the Berkeley Zero Waste campaign. The Zero Waste team has been extremely successful in making their goal known around campus, with strategies such as visible signage in key locations and other marketing tactics, such as the Zero Waste basketball game. The basketball game attracted attention not only from students but also put the zero waste movement in a national spotlight. Both of these tactics can go a long way in promotion of the Initiative and would inspire further student participation.

“It's really important for us to have a greener campus, so I think this project is really important!”

- Molecular Cell Biology major, 2017

Collaboration

For events, projects, and media, collaborating with on campus partners could greatly increase the potential of the Initiative. Student groups could host educational events to teach members about Carbon Neutrality or rally behind specific upcoming campaigns such as the upcoming UC System-wide October Challenge. Students will be able to sign on to track, and reduce their individual footprint during this month for a chance to win prizes. Other student lead efforts which help lessen carbon emissions, such as the Solar Referendum recently passed by the ASUC or the lawns to meadows project could benefit from increased visibility and connection to the Initiative. Finally, blogs and other student publications such as SERC blog, BARE, Words of the Watershed, Daily Cal, could be pitched stories about these events and student lead plans.

Activism

One suggestion from UCSB Carbon Neutrality Communication fellows was the inclusion of petitions in future campaigns. Students would sign to show support of either the Initiative at large or a specific project working to make Carbon Neutrality a reality. This could be done online or in an area such as Sproul. The petition would then show the Administrators what students care about and could help spur action.

"If I knew more, it could be important."

- Mechanical Engineering major, 2018

CONCLUSION

The next steps for this program are to dramatically increase awareness. Students are essential to the carbon neutrality effort, as they are one of the driving forces behind the betterment of our school. While we were able to gauge understanding, the fellowship program this semester did little to educate students on this issue. Since the level of concern is so high, continuing to enhance the Initiative with more focus on students will greatly help move the UC system towards carbon neutrality.