Changes in Pro-Environmental Behaviors from Home to High School to the College Campus

Alexandra Venth
College of Arts and Sciences Class of 2025

Dr. Femida Handy, School of Social Policy and Practice
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Goal of Research

Central Research Question: Are pro-environmental practices augmented or lost during the transition to campus life?

Background: Universities are often hailed as epicenters of environmental advocacy and education. Given the studied positive correlation between higher education and pro-environmental behaviors, we ask if this is true for Penn students.

Setting: Qualitative pilot study examining pro-environmental behaviors in relation to young-adult life transitions.

Limitations: This study’s findings are from one campus and are not generalizable but nevertheless provide valuable insights for policy makers at university campuses.

Methodology

Thematic Analysis of Focus Groups:
- Six focus groups, 40 total participants
- November 8-18
- University of Pennsylvania undergraduates
- Semi-structured interviews
- Sample of convenience utilizing personal networks
- Demographics: male and female participants from diverse origins in different fields of study

Table 3: Frequency of Pro-environmental Behaviors and Reasons at Penn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conservation Behaviors</th>
<th>Time/Energy (Transaction Costs)</th>
<th>Economic (Transaction Costs)</th>
<th>Environmental</th>
<th>Family/School Influence</th>
<th>Religious</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Specific Behaviors at Penn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Shutting off lights</td>
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<td>Water usage (i.e., Shower or sink)</td>
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<td>Paper usage (i.e., For office)</td>
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<td>AC - heat usage</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Shutting off the TV</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food Consumption Behaviors</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wasting food</td>
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<td>Following a plant-based diet</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cooking at home</td>
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<td>Single Use Behaviors</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Using reusable water bottles</td>
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<td>Using reusable bags</td>
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<td>Using reusable food containers/cutlery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recycling Behaviors</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Recycling</td>
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<td>Unique Opportunities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Choosing to buy more sustainable</td>
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<td>Fashion trends</td>
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<td>Engaging in environmental education and maintaining habits</td>
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Total 50 19 20 19 0 0

Findings

Family:
- Themes of consistent practices and awareness derived from parental authority
- Economic and environmental reasons also frequently played into students’ behaviors

High School:
- School policies and practices impacted students’ pro-environmental behaviors
- Many high schools provided the systems necessary to maintain pro-environmental habitats used at home while also incorporating environmental education programs

University:
- Abandonment of pro-environmental behaviors learned and practiced at home and in high school
- Higher transaction costs at school – increased time and effort needed to be eco-friendly
- Lack of institutional infrastructure to continue conservation and recycling efforts

Some Quotes

OF3.2.F: I probably practiced more eco-friendly behaviors in high school. My family composted and recycled. And I think that having a household structure and where you’re under parental supervision, I was a lot more adherent to those ideas of practicing eco-friendly disposal of waste...

ONC1.3.F: So my high school, it’s like K through 12. But we had, for trash, we had a wet and dry and recycle bin things... If you’d like put something that was like supposed to be in the dry bin or something, or like a plastic wrapper or something, then you could actually get in a lot of trouble for it.

ONC3.1.F: I mean, I think the schedule kind of plays into it, like being very busy. But I would tend to think it’s mostly the lack of accessibility. For example, I live in Gregory... I don’t know where the recycling is. The trash chute is right on my hall.

ONC3.7.F: I think a lot of my peers do want to be environmentally conscious... It’s not any kind of malice. And it’s not even probably apathy. It’s that you don’t want to have to structure your life personally around trying to be environmentally conscious.

Discussion

- Change in motivations from home to Penn largely in response to the shedding of family life and assumption of increased personal responsibility
- Students rely on Penn’s institutional behaviors to inform, direct, and support their individual behaviors
  - For on-campus students, everything, from heating to food to waste, is heavily guided if not enforced by the school
- University policies and practices that reduce transaction costs would almost certainly lead students to become much more pro-environmental
- Some potential solutions:
  - Switching to biodegradable packaging to reduce plastic waste across campus
  - Improving the recycling systems in Penn’s college houses and other campus buildings
  - Implementing more detailed policies and educational programs around individual waste management