



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

## 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



## 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 habits 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

OfC3.2.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...

ONC1.3F: **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 dry in the wet bin or something, or like a plastic wrapper or something, then you could actually get in a lot of trouble for it.

ONC3.1F: 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.

ONC3.7F: 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



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