



Sustainability Culture Among First-Year Students

This report, written by the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) Beginnings subcommittee, discusses first-year students' concerns about climate change and the environment, the importance they place on reducing environmental impact, and their engagement in sustainable practices. It follows up on a [2018 report](#) on the same topic and looks at how first-year students' knowledge and understanding of sustainable practices changed over the last five years.

CAWG partnered with the [Office of Sustainability](#) to develop survey questions to gauge sustainability culture at UMD as part of the campus-wide commitment to climate action. Many items were repeated from the 2018 survey to provide longitudinal measures of how students connect with the concept of sustainability. This helps to measure the success of the Office's sustainability programming over time and highlight issues students care about, enabling the Office of Sustainability to better provide students with actionable ways to reduce their environmental impact and maintain sustainable habits. These data can also help illustrate the progress towards the University's goal of taking on humanity's grand challenges, including climate change, as part of the university's [Strategic Plan](#).

About the 2023 Beginning Student Survey (BSS23)

The BSS23 was administered online to new, first-time undergraduates (including Freshmen Connection and Applied Agriculture) in select courses from October 16 - November 3, 2023.¹ During the Fall 2023 semester, 3,144 (50%) out of 6,250 new first-time students completed the survey. The distribution of respondents by race/ethnicity and first-generation status mirrored that of the population. Female students were slightly over-represented (55% of respondents compared to 50% of the population). In-state students were also slightly over-represented (73% of respondents compared to 68% of the population).

Concerns about Sustainability Issues

Since 2018, respondents' concerns about the environment have increased.

This section presents results from questions that asked respondents if they are "extremely concerned," "somewhat concerned," "not very concerned," or "not at all concerned" about several environmental issues, and compares longitudinal items from the BSS18 and BSS23.

- **The vast majority of respondents were concerned about environmental issues.** In 2023, most respondents were extremely or somewhat concerned about all the stated issues, from sea level rise and lack of renewable energy options (87%) to climate change (92%).
- **Respondents' concerns increased across the board.** For every item asked in both 2018 and 2023, the percentage of respondents who were extremely or somewhat concerned increased by 10 percentage points or more.
- **Concerns for climate change rose the most.** In 2018, 78% of respondents were extremely or somewhat concerned about climate change as an issue. In 2023, that increased to 92%.

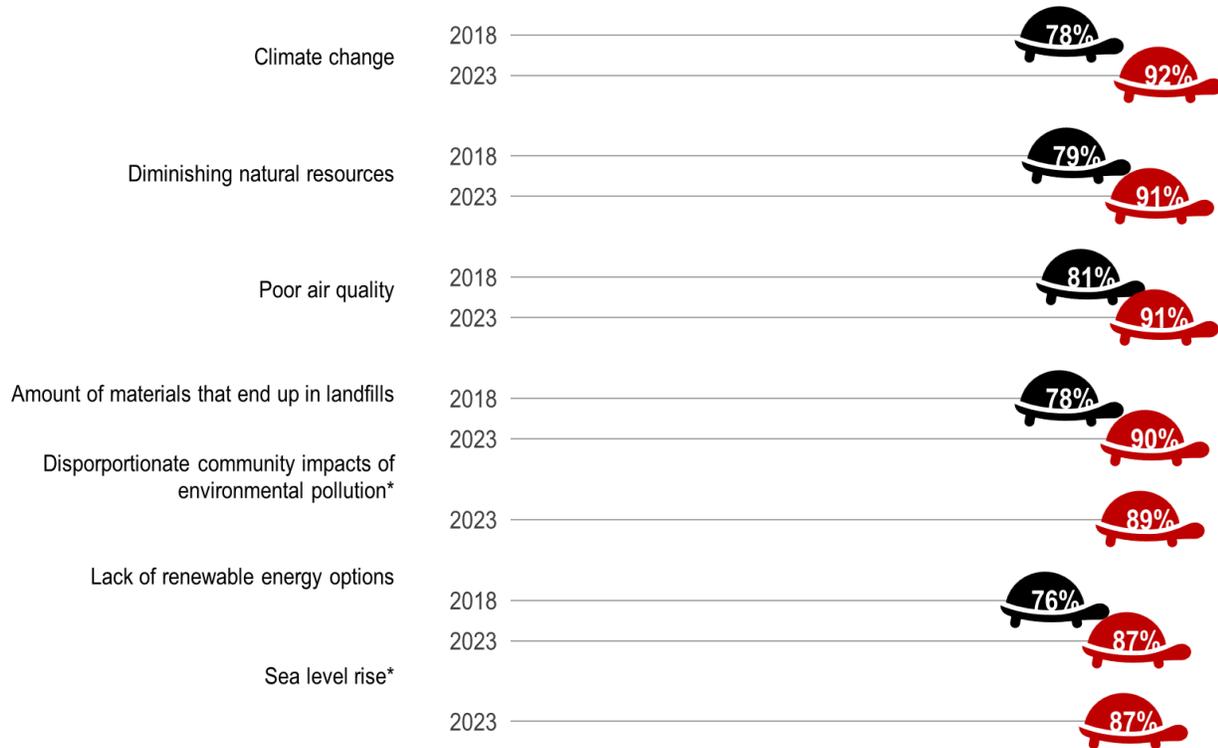
¹ The BSS survey was administered in ENGL101, UNIV100, BSCV181, BSCV191, CPET100, CPGH100, CPJT100, CPSA100, CPSF100, CPSG100, CPSN100, FIRE120, GEMS100, HACS100, HBUS100, HGLO100, HLSC100, HHUM105, HNUH100, IDEA101, PLCY201S, and TLPL288D. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.



Did You Know?

- According to the [Pew Research Center](#), 54% of U.S. adults in 2023 viewed climate change as a major threat, down from a peak of 59% in 2018.
- The State of Maryland first adopted [Environmental Literacy Standards](#) in 2011, becoming the very first state in the nation to enact an environmental literacy high school graduation requirement.
- At UMD, sustainability was incorporated into first-year lessons in 2008 through a pilot program. In 2018, these lessons became more widespread, with 62% of students receiving a sustainability lesson. More information is available on the [Education for Sustainability page of the Progress Hub](#).

How concerned are you about the following issues: % Extremely/Somewhat Concerned



* Item was not asked in BSS2018

*n*₂₀₁₈ = 3,182-3,185; *n*₂₀₂₃ = 3,068-3,072

Figure 1. Percent of respondents who said they were extremely or somewhat concerned about environmental issues, BSS18 and BSS23.

Questions to Consider

- How did respondents define climate change? Why might more respondents express concern for climate change overall than for more specific environmental issues?
- How do UMD’s academic programs incorporate discipline-specific learning outcomes around sustainability into their curricula?

Reducing Environmental Impact

Respondents recognized the importance of reducing their environmental impact.

This section presents results from questions that asked respondents if they “strongly agree,” “agree,” are “neutral,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree” with statements about the importance of reducing UMD’s and their individual environmental impact, and compares longitudinal items from BSS18 and BSS23.

- **An increasingly high percentage of respondents agree it is important to reduce environmental impact.**
In 2018, 83% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed it is important for UMD as an institution to reduce their environmental impact, and 85% agreed or strongly agreed it is important for all individuals to do the same. In 2023, percentages increased to 92% for UMD and 89% for all individuals.
- **Respondents continued to report strong responsibility for reducing their environmental impact.**
Respondents agreed or strongly agreed they tried to reduce their environmental impact in similar numbers in 2018 (84%) and 2023 (85%). This is one of the few longitudinal items that remained consistent over time.

Indicate how much you agree/disagree with the following: % Agree/Strongly Agree

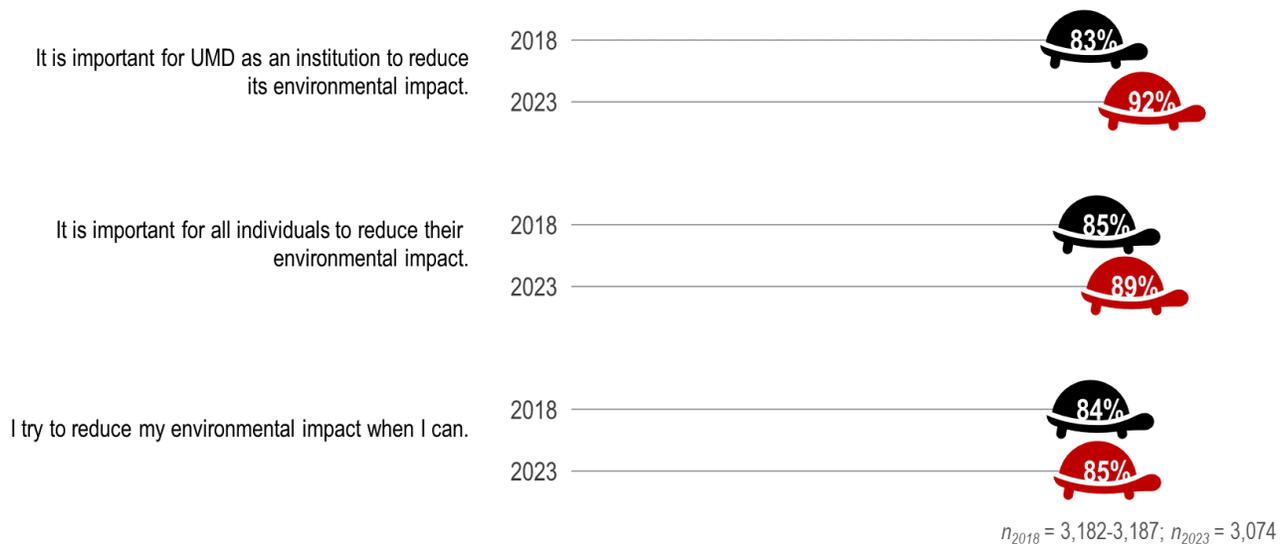


Figure 2. Percent of respondents who agree/strongly agree with items about environmental impact, BSS18 and BSS23.

💡 Did You Know?

- According to the [Pew Research Center](#), 67% of U.S. adults in 2023 said large businesses and corporations were doing too little to reduce climate change effects. Fifty-seven percent felt the same about ordinary Americans. However, only 43% of respondents said they, themselves, were doing too little.

Question to Consider

- Can the Pew Research noted above help explain why UMD respondents in 2023 had a higher percentage of agreement that it is important for UMD to reduce its environmental impact (92%) compared to individuals (89%), while in 2018 it was flipped (83% for UMD, 85% for individual)?

Engaging in Sustainable Practices

A third of respondents engage in more sustainable practices now than before they came to UMD.

This section presents results from questions that asked respondents about engaging in sustainable practices and academic plans related to sustainability.

- **Thirty-nine percent of respondents said they engage in more sustainable practices now than before they started at UMD.** This was similar to the survey results in 2018. When asked about specific sustainable practices, 87% of respondents in 2023 agreed or strongly agreed they tried to sort their waste properly.
- **Forty percent of respondents in 2023 said they are pursuing or plan to pursue sustainability-related majors or minors.** Similar percentages of respondents agreed/strongly agreed (41%) or disagreed/strongly disagreed (40%) when asked if they are pursuing or planning to pursue a sustainability-related major or minor while the remainder (19%) were neutral.

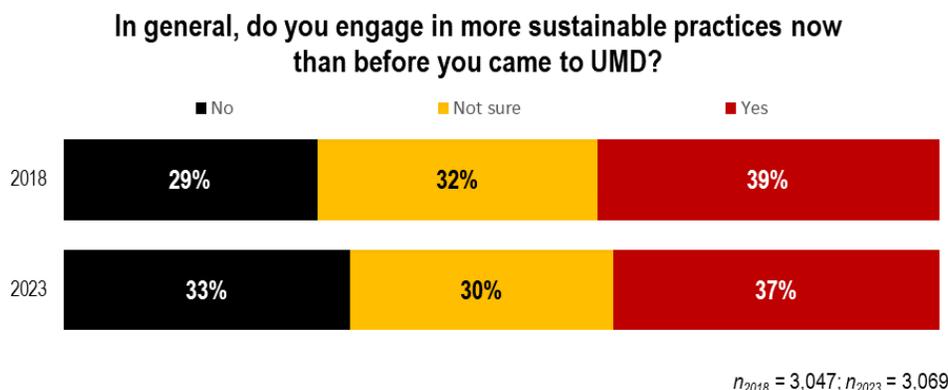


Figure 3. Distribution of responses to the BSS18 and BSS23 survey item, “In general, do you engage in more sustainable practices now than before you came to UMD?”.

Questions to Consider

- In both 2018 and 2023, just over a third of respondents said they engage in more sustainable practices now than before they came to UMD. However, this survey did not measure students’ self-reported sustainability practices and beliefs prior to coming to campus. What new strategies could be used to encourage greater levels of engagement in sustainable practices at UMD?

Moving Forward

Many first-year respondents expressed concern about environmental issues and an interest in engaging in sustainable practices, either through reducing their environmental impact or through their academic work. However, while 92% of respondents agreed it is important for UMD to reduce its environmental impact, a lower percentage (85%) agreed they individually try to reduce their environmental impact. As the University continues to develop its sustainability culture, this raises the question of how we can empower students to feel like their individual actions as well as their desire for institutional responsibility can directly impact UMD’s sustainability success. Through efforts like their new Sustainability Literacy Assessment, the Office of Sustainability will continue to assess students’ understanding of sustainability in the coming years.

This report was written by the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) Beginnings subgroup: Joann Prosser, Chair, Division of Student Affairs; Abby Do, Institutional Research, Planning & Assessment (IRPA); Traci Dula, Honors College; Jamie Edwards, IRPA; Danielle Glazer, IRPA; Melissa Hyre, Letters & Sciences; Lindsay Inge Carpenter, Libraries; Alia Lancaster, Academic Technology Experience; Alice Mitchell, Division of Student Affairs; Nick Orban, Enrollment Management; Tiffany Pao, Academic Technology Experience; Nicole Roop, School of Engineering; Tori Shay, Office of Orientation; Khris-Ann Small, Resident Life; Alan Socha, IRPA; Pearl Lo, Stamp Student Union. For more information, to view past reports, or to join a CAWG subgroup, visit <http://ter.ps/CAWG>.