The University of Richmond has made great strides as a community to decrease our carbon emissions and live in a more sustainable way. In November of 2007 President Ayers signed the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment, which commits Richmond to mitigate climate change. In response to this action, the Environmental Studies Senior Seminar of 2008 created a report outlining the view of our community about these issues, as well as, our recommendations for our campus. We, the Environmental Studies Senior Seminar Class of 2014, believe that we should continue to focus on climate change. We recognize that climate change is an imminent threat and that our community can make a difference in climate change mitigation. As a class, we have come to the conclusion that the key to prompting climate action on an individual and global scale is communication. We need to find the best way to communicate complex issues surrounding climate change to the general public. To that end, we chose to conduct surveys to the student body to assess student knowledge and concern regarding climate change and determine how best to communicate with UR students. This particular project had three goals: 1) to investigate how UR’s campus attitudes have changed over the past few years, 2) to compare our data to other studies, and 3) recommend new programs and options to address climate change at UR.

Methods

The Senior Seminar Class of 2008 chose to conduct a survey of the student body to evaluate student awareness of climate change and how the level of awareness relates to behavior. The survey was sent out to the entire student body, 2,785 people, and at time was taken by 301 students over a period of two weeks. Students were asked to answer 29 questions and were entered into a raffle for $50 after the completion of the survey. In addition, fifteen personal interviews were conducted related to the material in the survey. Participation was voluntary, and participants were selected in locations on campus based on availability and the appropriate conditions for conducting an interview. Interviews lasted about fifteen minutes and included similar questions to the survey with the additional follow up questions and requests for clarification. Based on the results of the survey, the class composed a report including thirteen recommendations for programs and initiatives for UR to implement. Of those thirteen recommendations, five have already been implemented since 2008.

Results

Based on the results of our survey, we found that the behaviors of University of Richmond students have remained fairly consistent over the past six years. Awareness and knowledge regarding climate change has slightly increased, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. However, students do not seem to be altering their behavior based on their awareness of these issues. This can be seen in Figure 3. Looking forward, we need to engage and educate our community in order to make necessary progress towards climate neutrality.

Recommendations

Our research suggests that the Richmond community can improve on our transportation sector. William and Mary has a carbon offset program, which is run by their Committee on Sustainability. The carbon offset program has pledged that 100% of their carbon offset will go to energy reducing projects on William and Mary’s campus. As a part of this program a pay scale has been developed using other carbon offset websites. All of these funds are easily collected via William and Mary’s website. If this plan was well advertised then this could become a viable option for UR. Another potential way to get students money back would be a “Heat Inversion”, which is a mandatory student green fee. University of Maryland-College Park established a Student Sustainability Fee in 2007. At Maryland, the Student Sustainability Fee goes toward projects that reduce environmental impact or improve sustainability education and awareness on campus. At UR, a student green fund could work in one of two ways: a mandatory annual fee like that at Maryland, or a voluntary donation of any amount. Carpool incentives could also be funded through a green fee. Under this system the carpooling system would be incentivized when a group of students or faculty come in together. The college also reserves parking spots for those who carpool adding that as an incentive. Another program that could be beneficial is creating a carpooling forum for students who live off campus. These students typically live in or near the Horsepen apartments and have to drive to campus every year. If a carpool could be set up this could minimize carbon emissions from daily commuting.

The other area where we could create a carpool network would be to facilitate rides home for break. The results of our survey indicated that only 10% of the student body utilizes carpooling as an option for returning home for break. In addition, many students indicated that they would be inclined to drive less if the carpool loops were available all day. One way to increase the effectiveness was find a way for the students to contact the contact the campus loop to signal where the students were.

Waste

Although the majority of students indicated that they recycle on campus, other data suggests that the campus community can do more in terms of waste minimization. UR can improve our waste reduction efforts by adding an organic waste component to our current system. At American University, organic waste collection bins are placed on trash and recycling bins throughout campus in residence halls and apartments. These bins are equipped with a recycling bin that is filled and emptied into larger recycling dumpsters by the apartment residents. A similar system could be put into place in University residence halls. Each room would be supplied with a recycling receptacle which residents would be expected to empty into larger recycling bins on their own.

References

Climate Change and the University of Richmond: Current Challenges and Future Directions. Earth Week, April 21-25, 2014

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Natural disasters and the University of Richmond: Current Challenges and Future Directions. Earth Week, April 21-25, 2014

Poster for Environmental Studies Geography and the Environment Senior Seminar

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Introduction

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Background

2008 Survey

The Senior Seminar Class of 2008 chose to conduct a survey of the student body to evaluate student awareness of climate change and how the level of awareness relates to behavior. The survey was sent out to the entire student body, 2,785 people, and at time was taken by 301 students over a period of two weeks. Students were asked to answer 29 questions and were entered into a raffle for $50 after the completion of the survey. In addition, fifteen personal interviews were conducted related to the material in the survey. Participation was voluntary, and participants were selected in locations on campus based on availability and the appropriate conditions for conducting an interview. Interviews lasted about fifteen minutes and included similar questions to the survey with the additional follow up questions and requests for clarification. Based on the results of the survey, the class composed a report including thirteen recommendations for programs and initiatives for UR to implement. Of those thirteen recommendations, five have already been implemented since 2008.

2014 Survey

In response to this action, the Environmental Studies Senior Seminar of 2014 created a report outlining the view of our community about these issues, as well as, our recommendations for our campus. We, the Environmental Studies Senior Seminar Class of 2014, believe that we should continue to focus on climate change. We recognize that climate change is an imminent threat and that our community can make a difference in climate change mitigation. As a class, we have come to the conclusion that the key to prompting climate action on an individual and global scale is communication. We need to find the best way to communicate complex issues surrounding climate change to the general public. To that end, we chose to conduct surveys to the student body to assess student knowledge and concern regarding climate change and determine how best to communicate with UR students. This particular project had three goals: 1) to investigate how UR’s campus attitudes have changed over the past few years, 2) to compare our data to other studies, and 3) recommend new programs and options to address climate change to UR.

After the completion of the survey, five questions were asked to participants to assess their demographics and included gender, class year, major, and housing status. The next group of questions assessed the subject’s attitudes towards and knowledge of climate change. The questions asked students whether they believed climate change was a major threat, what the consequences of global climate change are, whether global climate change is occurring due to human activity, and which activities students believed contributed to climate change. The next section addressed students’ concern about the environment. The questions asked what concerned students the most of a topic and whether or not they believed the University should be doing more to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The final section addressed the student’s behaviors on campus. Questions dealt with students’ electricity use, transportation habits, recycling, and concern about the health of the Westhampton lake. The content and methods of the survey were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which formally regulates research at the University of Richmond “as it pertains to the rights and welfare of human subjects.” Survey and interview responses were confidential, and participant names were not connected to their responses.

Climate Change and the University of Richmond: Current Challenges and Future Directions. Earth Week, April 21-25, 2014

Poster for Environmental Studies Geography and the Environment Senior Seminar

Figure 1. Student Responses to Question 5 in 2008 vs 2014

Figure 2. Student Responses to Question 7 in 2008 vs 2014

Figure 3. Student Responses to Question 15 in 2008 vs 2014

Current global climate change is occurring due to human activity...

Figure 4. Student Responses to Question 15 in 2008 vs 2014

How often do you consider the environmental impact of burning gasoline when you drive?

Figure 5. Student Responses to Question 5 in 2008 vs 2014

Climate Change is...

Percentage

2008

2014

A major threat and needs to be addressed new

60%

55%

A moderate threat to humans and ecosystems

20%

20%

A potential life threat to humans and ecosystems

10%

15%

A phenomenon that does not threaten humans or ecosystems

10%

5%

I do not believe climate change

5%
