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What Obstacles Prevent Students from Engaging in Environmentally Friendly Behaviors?

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Barriers to Environmental Friendliness: What Obstacles Prevent Students from Recycling?

By Carrie Cutler and Loretta Sohappy, Undergraduate Public Health, PEHR

BACKGROUND

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the United States generated 33 million tons of plastic waste in 2014, of which only 9.5% was recycled. The U.S. uses over 17 million barrels of oil a year to meet demands for plastic water bottles. Any reusable plastic that gets thrown away creates the need to harvest new raw materials, which contributes to pollution and energy consumption. Colleges and Universities in the U.S. consume large amounts of plastic. The average college student produces 640 pounds of solid waste each year, including 500 disposable cups and 320 pounds of paper (Boston College, 2016). To gain insight on our own campus recycling and waste consumption, we spoke with Scott Buck, the Transportation Director of the Eastern Washington University (EWU) recycling center. He stated that EWU generated over 1,300 tons of waste in 2016 (Scott Buck, Personal Communication, May 19, 2017).



PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to identify college students' attitudes, barriers, and beliefs regarding environmentally friendly behaviors such as waste reduction and recycling.

METHODS

A focus group was conducted to identify student attitudes towards and barriers for recycling and waste reduction. To recruit students, flyers were hung in various buildings around campus with our contact information advertising the focus group. Additionally emails were sent to 15 arbitrarily chosen professors on campus asking them to advertise the focus group to their students. There were no responses to the flyers, so the focus group was conducted with 9 public health students in the Health Behavior Change class. Qualitative data from the focus group was analyzed for important themes. A 12-item Likert scale online survey ("1" Strongly Agree to "5" Strongly Disagree) was administered to identify attitudes and perceived barriers for environmentally friendly behaviors. Just like the focus group, flyers advertising the survey were hung in various buildings around campus. The flyers featured a QR code so that students could take the survey on their smart phones. Additionally, emails including the survey link and flyer were sent to 80 arbitrarily chosen professors on campus asking them to advertise the survey to their students. Survey data was analyzed for descriptive statistics using SPSS.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Qualitative results were obtained from focus group responses.

Barriers for recycling and waste reduction on campus:

Convenience:

- "Having more convenient bins or recycling stations might make it easier"
- "There's a trash can right there to toss your bottle in instead of walking all the way to the recycle bin"
- "It's more convenient to fill [a reusable water bottle] up in a faucet"
- "Recycling bins are inconsistent around campus, it's easier to recycle in some buildings than others"

Knowledge:

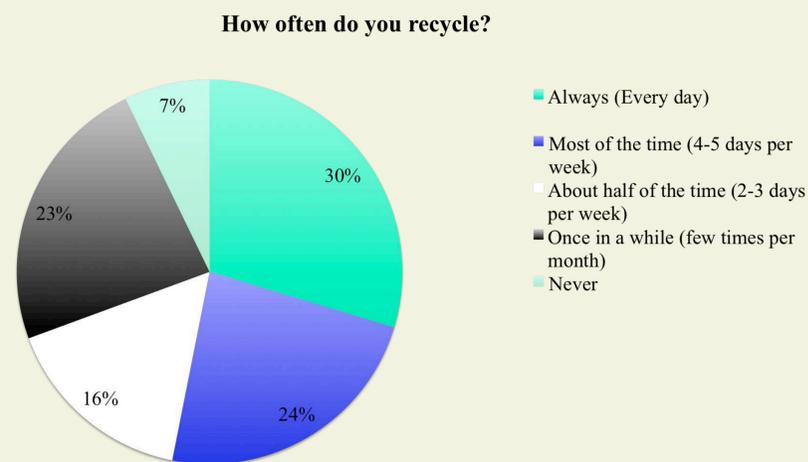
- "People throw something in their trash can and they don't give it a second thought, they have no idea where their plastic bottles are really going"
- "Some people don't know what [is recyclable], so they just throw it away or they put it in the wrong bin"
- "Some kids might not have even grown up with [recycling] knowledge, they live in a town like Cheney where they only throw things away in the trash bins"

Community Support

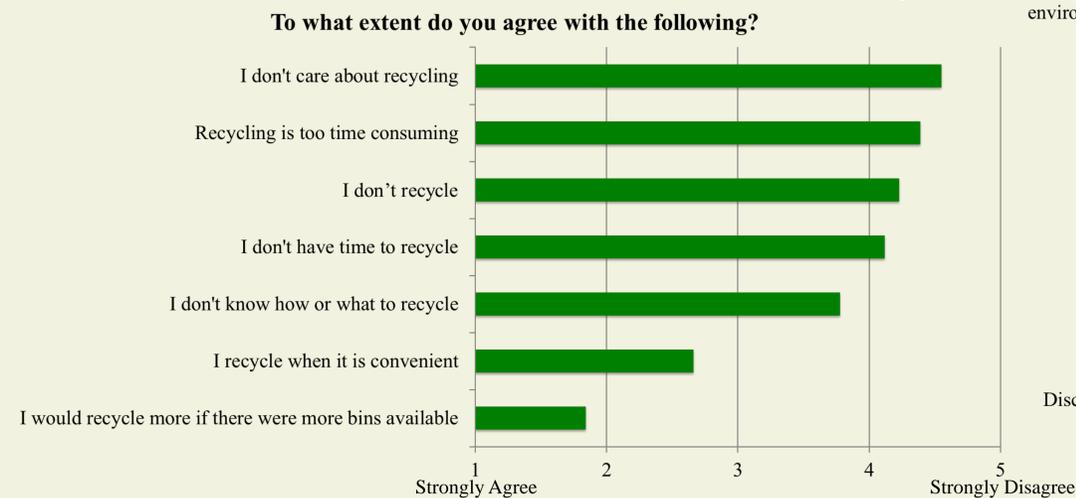
- "You're more likely to do something if your friends are doing it, or your organization is doing it, rather than just solo"
- "It's not a thought to be environmentally friendly, you have your recycling stations but how many people actually use those"
- "When I moved here I called the city and asked if I could get a recycling bin and they said 'we don't do that' and I thought I guess I'm just not going to recycle when I'm here"
- "If Cheney was advertising recycling more and making the behavior more visible then more people would be likely to do it"

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

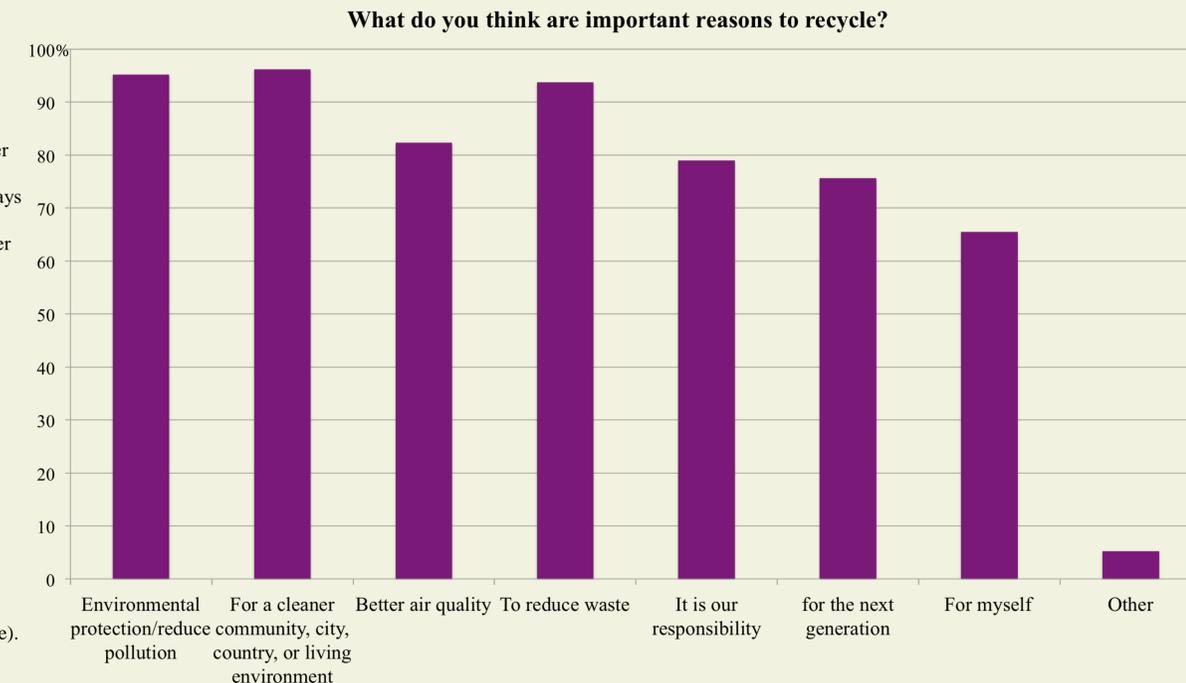
Figure 1: Self-reported frequency of recycling among EWU students.



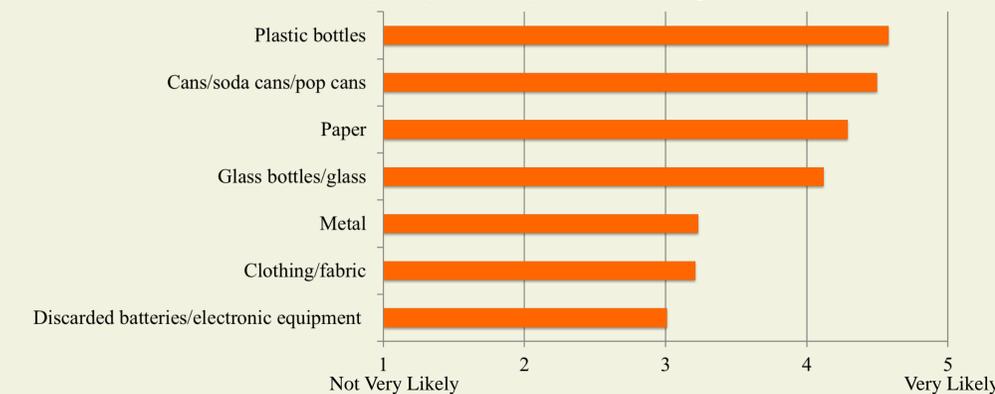
Graph 2: Student attitudes toward recycling (weighted average).



Graph 1: Most common reasons for recycling among EWU students (represented in percent of students who identified with each reason).



How likely are you to recycle the following?



Graph 3: Self-reported likelihood of recycling various materials among EWU students (weighted average).

DISCUSSION

Overall, the focus group and survey found convenience and knowledge to be the biggest barriers to recycling. Data suggested that there needs to be more bins in easy to access locations across campus, recycling bins should have labels showing what goes in each bin, and more signage is needed to increase visibility of recycling. When asked about a possible ban on the sale of plastic water bottles on campus, focus group participants felt that the majority of students would not be bothered by such a ban and overall thought it would be well received. This indicates that students could be in favor of a plastic bottle ban at EWU or another similar policy change in the future. Tukey post hoc analyses revealed a significant difference in recycling behaviors between males and females (29.02 vs. 26.24; $p=.009$), meaning that on this particular campus men report recycling more than women, but we can't generalize these findings to all campus populations. One limitation of this study was focus group participants were all Public Health majors. This limits the generalizability of the responses to the rest of the university. Another limitation was few survey responses from students living on campus, which inhibits understanding of recycling and waste reduction in the dorms.

SELECTED REFERENCES

- Boston College. (2016). *Know Your Facts*. Retrieved from <https://www.bc.edu/offices/sustainability/what-you-can-do/know-facts.html>
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