

**SCHOOL OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES**

# 2019 Campus Sustainability Survey: Results and Trends

**A Report from the Environmental and Social Sustainability Lab (2020)**



**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY**

COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL,  
AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

In Collaboration with the  
Ohio State University  
Sustainability Institute

## **About the Environmental and Social Sustainability Lab**

The Environmental and Social Sustainability (ESS) Lab is a collaborative community of scholars working to build scientific understanding of environmental and social sustainability in an interdisciplinary context. Housed within the School of Environmental and Natural Resources within The College of Food, Agriculture, and Environmental Sciences, we are staffed by a core group of affiliated faculty members, students, and research staff representing a broad range of social science expertise. Our mission is to support a viable socio-ecological future through applied social science research, and to serve as a hub of sustainability research at Ohio State.

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# OHIO STATE SUSTAINABILITY GOALS

## Strategic Vision

Ohio State is a recognized leader in developing durable solutions to the pressing challenges of sustainability and in evolving a culture of sustainability through collaborative teaching, pioneering research, comprehensive outreach, and innovative operations, practices, and policies.

As progress is made toward realizing institutional sustainability aspirations, four overarching, foundational principles of the university must take hold to ensure that accountability and a culture of sustainability becomes pervasive throughout Ohio State's culture, practices and programs:

- Ensure a transformational approach by establishing a generational timeline to consider the impacts and trade-offs of decisions and economic, environmental, and social outcomes over many years and decades, instead of only the perspective of short-term economic returns.
- Utilize a council of internal and external stakeholders (i.e., students, staff, faculty, alumni/ae, companies, non-governmental organizations, agencies) to serve in an advisory capacity for the ongoing formulation, development, implementation, and assessment of goals, initiatives, and outcomes.
- Conduct research on our progress by developing and/or adapting research methodology to review and assess operational goals, and evaluate and publish the results with the aim of developing best practices and innovation for sustainability measurement.
- Incorporate relevant elements of sustainability into all college and support units' strategic plans, physical plans, and other university guiding documents.

## Teaching and Learning

1. Deliver a Curriculum that provides Ohio State students at all stages of instruction – from General Education to professional and technical programs – with opportunities to understand sustainability holistically, framed by the environment, science, technology, society, the economy, history, culture, and politics.
2. Address the Complexities of Sustainability through a variety of learning formats, strategies, and occasions.

## Research and Innovation

3. Reward Sustainability Scholarship, including the scholarship of engagement, by providing incentives for students, faculty and staff to make discoveries and stimulate creative efforts that promote and achieve sustainability.
4. Magnify Sustainability Scholarly Output and Impact to create new knowledge, solve real world problems, including for our own operations, and increase Ohio State's national/international reputation as a sustainability research leader.

## Outreach and Engagement

5. Foster Campus-to-Community, Students-to-Alumni Culture of sustainability-oriented practices and educational and research experiences that students and alumni transfer into local and global communities.
6. Catalyze Engagement, Ownership, and Buy-In to Sustainability via engaged and inclusive partnerships, on and off campus, that support the long-term economic, social and environmental welfare of the campus, surrounding neighborhoods and the global community.

## Resource Stewardship

7. Implement specific, "world-leading" university-wide operational goals to reduce resource consumption, neutralize carbon emissions and minimize waste, including:
  - a. Achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 per Presidents' Climate Leadership Commitment;
  - b. Reduce total campus building energy consumption by 25% by 2025;
  - c. Reduce potable water consumption by 5% per capita every five years, resetting baseline every five years;
  - d. Increase campus ecosystem services by 60%, by 2025;
  - e. Reduce carbon footprint of university fleet by 25% by 2025;
  - f. Achieve zero waste by 2025 by diverting 90% of waste away from landfills;
  - g. Increase production and purchase of locally and sustainably sourced food to 40% by 2025; and
  - h. Develop university-wide standards for targeted environmentally preferred products and fully implement preferable products and services by 2025.



# Executive Summary

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The Ohio State Campus Sustainability Survey represents a joint effort on the parts of numerous campus partners to measure current and longitudinal trends in undergraduate behaviors, beliefs, values, attitudes, and knowledge regarding sustainability at The Ohio State University. This report explores the results of that effort in 2019, through online survey responses from 3,276 Undergraduate students from the Columbus campus (out of 20,500 randomly selected students originally contacted; a response rate of approximately 16%). Please see the following sections for more details on our survey methods and student sample, as well as survey results in each of five major areas.

## *Engagement in sustainable behaviors:*

In total, undergraduate student engagement in sustainability-related behaviors such as carrying a reusable water bottle, turning off the lights in an empty room, printing on both sides of the paper, and utilizing public transportation remain quite high, suggesting progress towards OSU Sustainability goals #7a and #7b. However, opportunities to further promote campus sustainability goals continue to present themselves in emphasizing behaviors that are low cost, but that many students have not yet adopted, such as limiting purchases of new items and shifting purchases to second hand wherever possible, which could also inform OSU Sustainability goal #5 (For more on these results, please see Section 1).

**Recommendation:** When asked, students prioritized recycling and composting over other sustainability projects on campus, but 1 in 5 students mistakenly believed that recycling was more sustainable than reducing consumption. Likewise, roughly 1 in 5 students reported that they never or rarely purchased items second hand or limited purchases of new items, suggesting a gap that might be reduced by highlighting the 3 R's together: **Reduce, Reuse, Recycle**. By pairing these impactful behaviors in a familiar way with a high priority action, this simple messaging could improve sustainable behavior both on and off campus, in support of OSU Sustainability goals #5 and #6.

## *Sustainability knowledge:*

Similarly, when assessed through quiz-type questions **student knowledge of sustainability-related topics has increased by approximately 12% since 2014 (a continued upward trend from 2018)**. However, some misconceptions remain on

topics regarding the causes of pollution and environmental degradation (please see Section 2 for detail).

**Recommendation:** One-quarter of students incorrectly believed that keeping a cell phone charger plugged into an electrical outlet had greater environmental impact than producing a McDonald's quarter pounder or chicken sandwich. In addition, fewer than one-third of students correctly identified overfishing as a leading cause of depleted fish stocks. In terms of behavior, about two-thirds of students are currently omnivorous with no dietary restrictions, and most students reported often or always eating various animal products. Students seem to struggle to link diet with environmental impacts, so efforts to 1) correct misperceptions and strengthen that linkage while 2) providing opportunities to easily shift diets toward more sustainable consumption could improve sustainable behaviors among students overall. For example, communication efforts could highlight strong positive attitudes toward sustainability among OSU students (i.e., highlight the norm), while pointing out a common misperception and creating dissonance (e.g., that 2 in 3 students do not know that depleted fish stocks are primarily due to overfishing), and then provide a way to rectify these ideas moving forward (e.g., always choose sustainably-sourced fish, download the Seafood Watch app, etc.). Creating stronger cognitive linkages between diet and sustainability inside classrooms and at dining areas on campus would support OSU Sustainability goals #1 and #2, while providing greater opportunity for dietary shifts among students could support OSU Sustainability goals #7g and #7h

### ***Student awareness and support for campus initiatives:***

The 2019 survey contained several items developed in collaboration with the Sustainability Institute, the Office of Student Life, and OSU Facilities, Operations and Development. Together, these items provide insights about student prioritization of on-campus open spaces and sustainability initiatives. Additionally, we provide data related to sustainability curriculum development with the Sustainability Education and Learning Committee (see OSU Sustainability goal #1).

- A. **Open Space:** While over half of students indicated that there should be more open space on campus (60.5%), it is not clear if they would be willing to trade this with built spaces. Over half of students ranked natural habitat with public access as the highest or second highest priority (60.8%), and consistently ranked it higher than cultural/iconic areas or trails. See Section 4 for additional detail and findings. **Recommendation:** Students indicated that open spaces at OSU are a somewhat important aspect of their identity, would generally prefer more open space, and prioritized natural areas that could be accessed by the public. Most existing natural areas on campus are associated with water (e.g. the Olentangy River Trail, the Schiermeier Olentangy River Wetland Research Park, and the

Chadwick Arboretum), and all would inevitably benefit from better water quality (and would support OSU Sustainability goal #7d). Unfortunately, less than half of students knew that surface water runoff is the biggest contributor to water pollution. Public outreach efforts on campus to link common behaviors with their effects on the water quality in important natural areas on campus could benefit students, the community, and the resource (supporting OSU Sustainability goals #2, #5, and #6). Again, these efforts might start by highlighting the norm of positive sustainable attitudes among OSU students, point out the relevant misperception, and then suggest behaviors that both align with the norm of sustainability and correct the misperception.

- B. ***Sustainability Curriculum:*** Most respondents indicated that they had taken no classes related to sustainability or the environment at Ohio State (64.2%). On average, students agreed that employers are interested in students with sustainability-related knowledge and skills, and that they were aware and informed of opportunities to acquire such knowledge and skills. Likewise, there seems to be a small trend of increasing interest in sustainability courses since 2018. However, students generally disagreed with the statement, “I actively seek sustainability-related courses when enrolling in classes.” **Recommendation:** One approach to increasing interest and enrollment in sustainability-related courses might be to provide simple notations for courses that have officially integrated sustainability into their syllabi. The “Sustainability” theme that has been included in the new GE curriculum is also likely to result in an increase in the number of sustainability-related courses at OSU as well as an overall increase in enrollment in sustainability-related courses. See Section 5 for further detail and additional findings.

### ***Future plans:***

The ESS lab plans to continue using an annual survey and a panel of undergraduate students to measure changes in sustainability knowledge, attitudes, and values as well as engagement in sustainable behaviors. Such data is intended to help broadly inform and assess sustainability efforts taking place at Ohio State.





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