CENTER FOR
Sustainable
Climate Solutions

White Paper

What Students at U.S. Mennonite Colleges Think about Climate Change

Summary of Results, 2019-2020[1]

- A total of 614 students from the 7 U.S. Mennonite colleges responded to a survey of climate attitudes and practices.
- The majority of student respondents were alarmed or concerned about climate issues.
- Differences in climate attitudes correlate with political and religious ideologies.
- Overall there was similarity between students at the 7 campuses, despite notably different campus contexts.

Summary

Students that responded to this survey are concerned about climate change. As the survey was not truly random, the results are undoubtedly biased towards those that are already concerned about climate change, and therefore results are not truly representative of the entire campus population. However, response rates were fairly high (10-20%), and the large number of students at each campus that expressed climate concerns at least signals that each campus has a significant group of students ready to engage this issue.

Climate issues correlate strongly with ideology (political and religious) in general society, although less so with youth. The results of this survey are consistent with that trend. Individuals self-identifying towards the liberal end of the ideological spectrum have stronger concern about climate issues and (in some cases) report more actions in response. However, climate knowledge, attitudes and practices were less dependent on ideology than often assumed in general society. Campuses self-identifying as more conservative still had a high level of concern about climate issues, and favored actions to help address climate change. Given that partisan divides are a primary barrier to climate action, this signals campus environments as an opportunity for reaching across the ideological barriers and finding common ground on climate issues.

A major challenge in climate communication is translating climate concerns into effective actions. A unique combination of barriers makes this a 'wicked problem' that hinders action. There were signs of this dynamic in responses from students. In particular, although levels of concern were high, levels of actions were not. This is in part due to the ease of expressing concern compared to the difficulty of taking an action. However, it does give guidance in developing strategies to engage students - the opportunities may be greater in opening up avenues for action, rather than just working at changing attitudes.

[1] Author: Doug Graber Neufeld, neufeldd@emu.edu; surveys implemented by CSCS campus sustainability ambassadors at each campus.

Introduction

Youth have had a substantial contribution in raising climate awareness recently, and youth are often cited as the main reason for hope in the face of climate uncertainty[2]. Given the importance of youth in general on this issue, and the historical role of college campuses as change agents in society, this survey was undertaken to understand the knowledge, attitudes and practices of students at U.S. Mennonite campuses.

The survey was conducted in 2019 and 2020 at the seven Mennonite colleges in the United States. We present the pooled results in addition to campus ranges, and some selected comparative data that were particularly insightful. Overall response rate was 11.5%: out of a total estimated enrollment in the six schools of 4800, 550 responded. Surveys were distributed by email, responses were therefore self-selecting and likely not representative of the total population

1. Most students are alarmed/concerned

Responding students are skewed towards the alarmed side of the six Americas segmentation. As the campus survey was self-selected responses, the higher concern in students undoubtedly reflects a bias in the responses. However, it is also consistent with the higher concern of youth in general, and does indicate a substantial pool of students in the colleges who view climate as a serious issue.

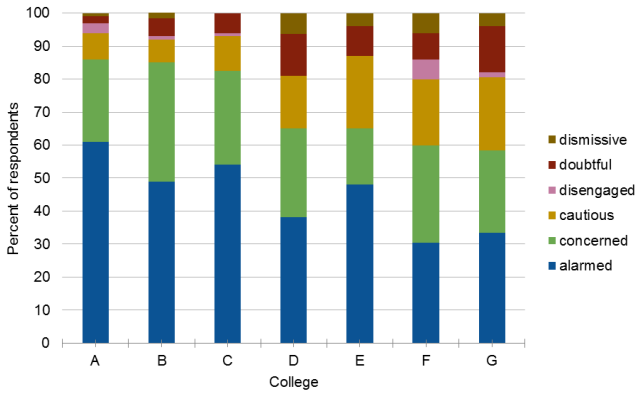

Fig.1. Six Americas categories of students at individual Mennonite colleges.

There was some variability between colleges in respondents Six Americas segmentation. For instance, several colleges (F & G) show a lower proportion of respondents that are alarmed. These colleges also show a higher proportion on the dismissive/doubtful/ disengaged side of the spectrum.

2a. Differences correlate with self- identified positions on a conservative/liberal spectrum.

Evidence in general society suggests that attitudes about climate change correlate most with political and theological ideology. When pooled data from colleges were disaggregated, students' knowledge, attitudes and practices were strongly correlated with self-identified political and theological positions.

Self-identified conservative respondents were more likely to be on the doubtful/dismissive end of the spectrum, while liberal respondents were more likely to be on the alarmed/concerned end of the spectrum.

"When it comes to your religious beliefs, compared to other religious Americans, do you usually think of yourself as…"

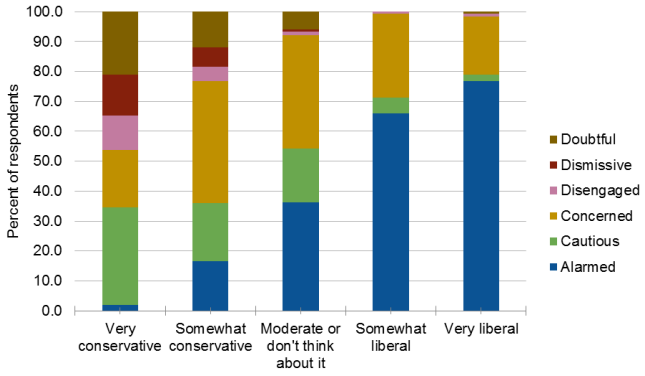

Fig.2. Six Americas segmentation by self-identified ideology.

Mennonite campuses reflect the general trend of climate attitudes correlating strongly with how people identify with their political and ideological communities. Overall the dismissive/disengaged side of the spectrum is a small proportion of the population, identifying mostly as conservative and/or Republican.

[2] "A climate of hope", AAAS address, 2019
https://livestream.com/aaasorg/ClimateofHope/videos/200007029

2b. Ideological differences and climate *knowledge*.

Differences in knowledge appear to vary less dramatically with ideology. Most respondents feel they know "a moderate amount" or "a little" about environmental problems, with the liberal side of the spectrum feeling slightly more knowledgeable.

"How much do you feel you know about the causes of environmental problems?"

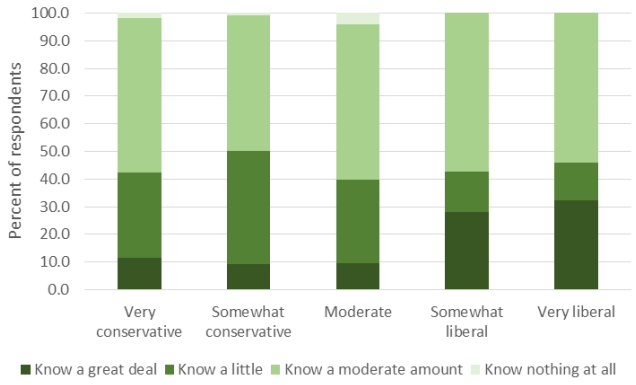

Fig.3. Perceptions of environmental knowledge by self-identified ideology.

2c. Ideological differences and climate *attitudes*.

Most respondents believe global warming is at least somewhat important. The intensity of this conviction correlates strongly with ideology - respondents on the liberal end of the spectrum are more likely to view global warming as extremely important.

How important is the issue of global warming to you personally?

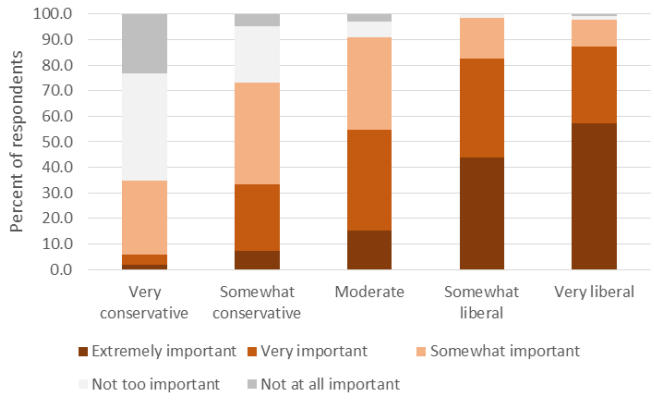

Fig.4. Feelings about global warming importance by self-identified ideology.

2d. Ideological differences and climate *practices*.

Ideology was also predictive of specific actions related to climate and other environmental issues, with respondents on the liberal side of the spectrum generally more likely to engage in environmental practices.

"What are some of the changes you have made in your shopping and living habits to help protect the environment?"

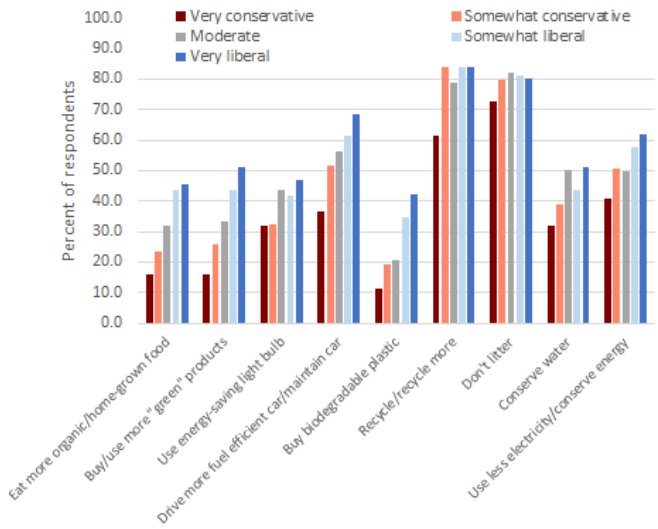

Fig.5. Environmental actions by self-identified ideology.

Differences are especially notable for actions described in "environmental language" (such as "organic" or "green"), whereas the differences are less notable for those using less loaded terminology ("conserve") or those that are more socially mainstream (such as littering or recycling).

3. There were some differences between campuses

When comparing individual campuses, differences centered around actions which occur on campus.

There was a dramatic difference in some campuses (A & B) where most respondents said that climate is discussed at least occasionally, whereas other campuses (D, F & G) where more respondents report that climate is discussed rarely or never. Campuses A & B self-identify as more liberal, whereas campuses D, F & G self-identify as more conservative (data not

shown); this generally mirrors the perceptions of those campuses held by those are familiar with them.

How often have you discussed climate change in classes at your current college or university?

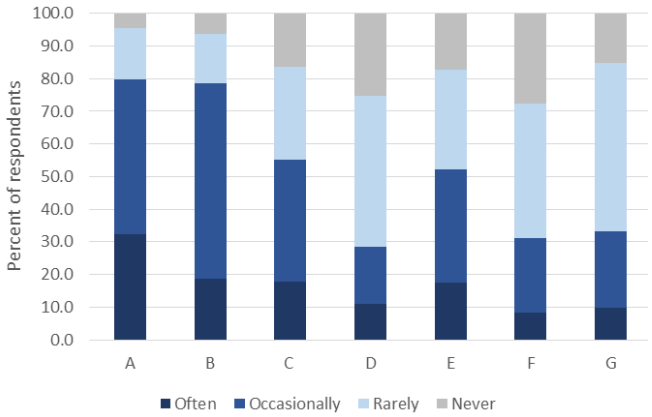

Fig.6. Frequency of class climate discussions by campus.

There are similar differences in respondents' reported growth in concern towards environmental issues. Divergence in these items point towards different campus environments regarding sustainability issues.

My concern towards environmental issues has grown due to the events, activities and/or courses offered by my campus.

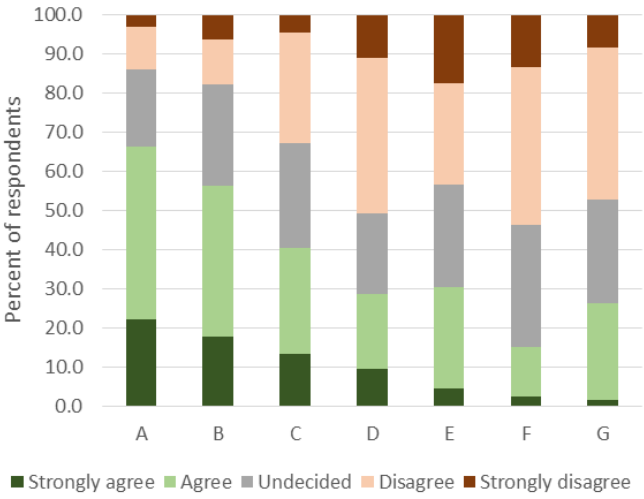

Fig.7. Growth in environmental concern by campus.

Some campus sustainability efforts appear to differ between campuses (e.g. energy conservation). Other sustainability efforts were either consistently present (waste recycling) or consistently absent (sustainable purchasing practices).

Which of the following sustainability efforts are you aware of on your campus? (respondents can mark multiple reasons)

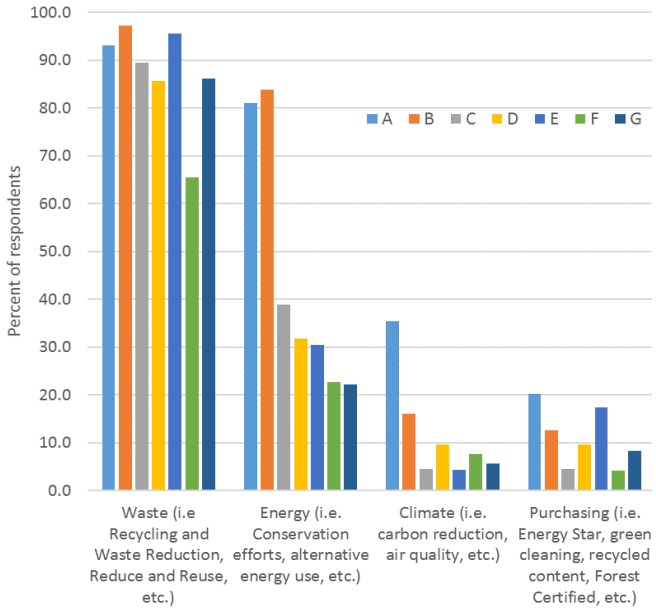

Fig.8. Student awareness of campus sustainability efforts, by campus.

4. However, overall there were more commonalities between campuses than differences.

In many items, respondents at campuses were largely similar in their personal knowledge, attitudes and actions regarding climate change, although the intensity of their feelings on these items did vary.

4a. Knowledge

Although the survey did not directly test for climate knowledge, several indicators pointed towards similarities in self-reported perception of how much they know (see Fig. 3 for breakdown by ideology), and in their knowledge of how much environmental scientists agree about global warming. Notably, at all campuses the majority of students did not recognize the near complete agreement on climate change. This mirrors general society, where the misperception about the degree of scientific consensus has been highlighted as an important problem.

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "Near complete agreement" and 5 means "No agreement at all", to what extent do environmental scientists agree among themselves about the existence and causes of global warming?

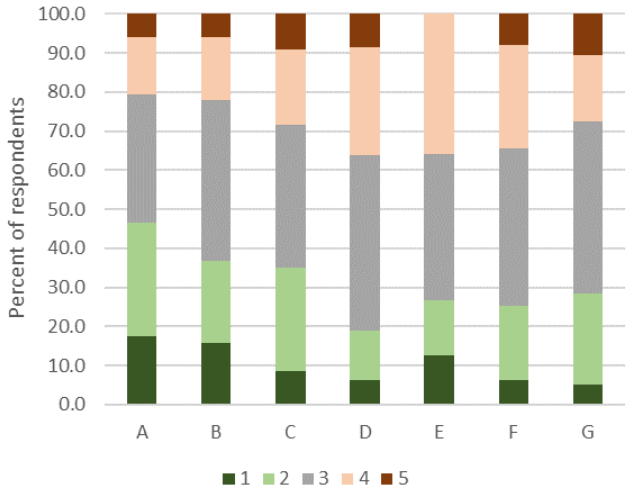

Fig.9. Awareness of scientific consensus on climate change, by campus.

4b. Attitudes

Most students recognize that global warming will harm future generations, Similar results were found for other attitudinal questions (e.g. how many respondents worry about climate change, etc; data not shown).

How much do you think global warming will harm future generations of people?

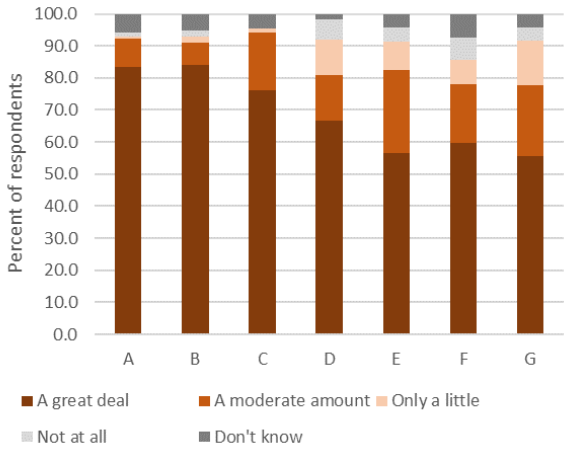

Fig.10. Perceptions of climate effects on future generations, by campus.

Concern about climate change is reflected in an overwhelming sentiment that the issue should be at least a medium priority for congress.

Do you think global warming should be a low, medium, high, or very high priority for the President and Congress?

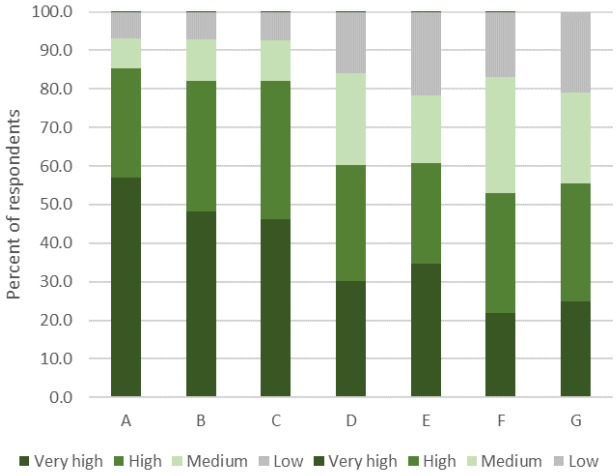

Fig.11. Feelings about how much Congress should focus on climate issues, by campus.

4c. Actions.

Similarities also existed in the degree to which students take action on climate change. In general, action levels are lower than would be expected based on the level of concern. This is particularly illustrated by the degree of political engagement - most students at all campuses had not engaged public officials on the issue in the last year.

Over the past 12 months, how many times have you talked with public officials (for example, offices of local representatives) about global warming?

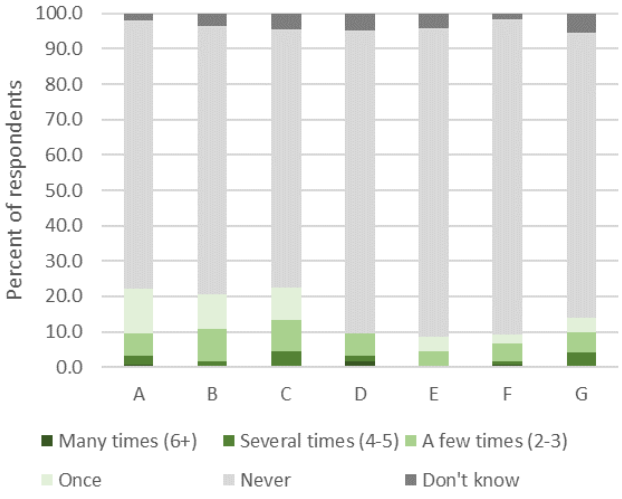

Fig.12. Self-reported engaged with public officials on climate issues, by campus.

Political engagement did not correlate with ideology (data not shown); neither conservatives nor liberals are more apt to advocate on climate change at the political level. Similar results were found for self-reported assessment of the degree to which they have made lifestyle changes (data not shown); most students said they had not made major lifestyle changes. On the other hand, engagement in actions which are socially mainstream (not littering, recycling; see Fig. 5) were high.

5. Attitudes on institutional and community-level actions

Respondents expressed the desire for institutional-level action, as indicated by support for colleges having carbon neutrality targets. Although there was somewhat lower support at some campuses D, F & G, in no cases was there a high proportion of respondents indicating that targets were unimportant.

How important or unimportant is that your college or university has a goal to reach carbon neutrality?

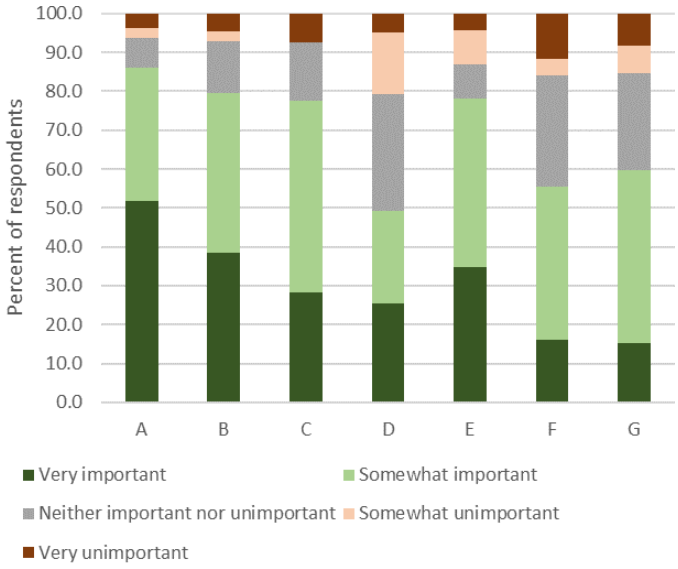

Fig.13. Importance of institutional carbon neutrality targets, by campus.

Students were notably pessimistic about the likelihood of humans addressing climate change. Respondents overwhelming felt that the problem could be solved, but that it is unlikely or unclear whether changes will be made. These sentiments predominate regardless of ideology, with the exception of a trend in very conservative respondents where a larger proportion deny global warming is happening, or think it's too late for humans to reduce global warming.

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

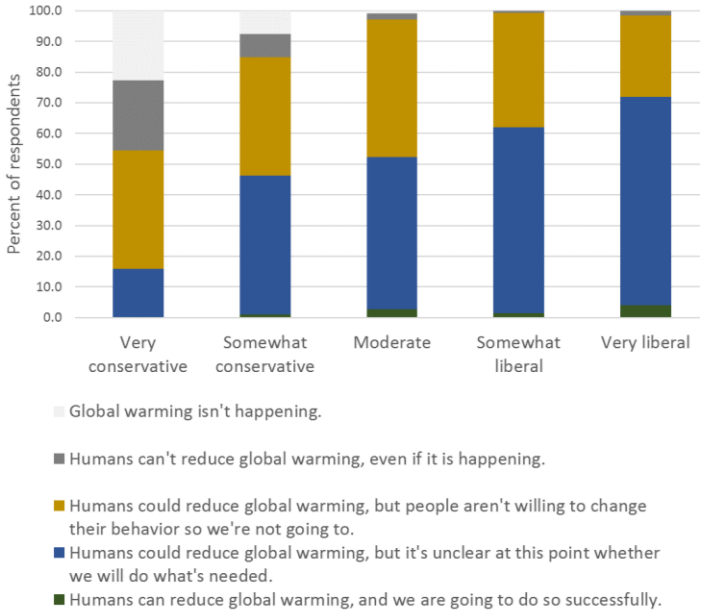

Fig.14. Perceptions of the likelihood that climate issues will be addressed, by ideology.