Belmont's Green IQ: How Residential Students Understand Sustainability

Alex Hamm

Department of Public Health, College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Belmont University

Introduction

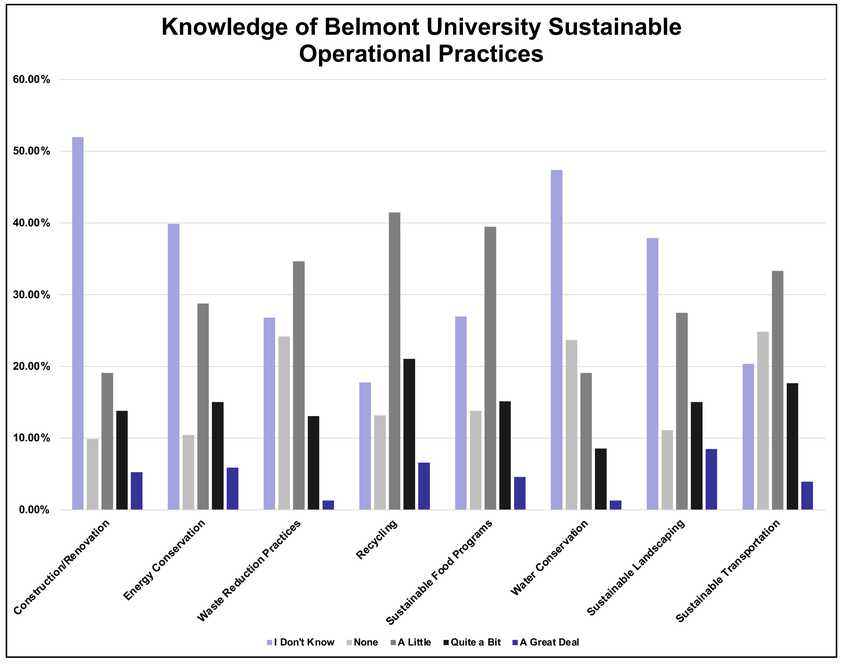
Sustainability is a critical global challenge, and universities play a key role in promoting pro-environmental behaviors[1]. Research shows that while many students recognize the importance of sustainability, participation in campus initiatives often lags due to barriers like convenience, lack of awareness, and motivation[3,4]. At Belmont University, efforts such as recycling programs and energy conservation demonstrate a commitment to sustainability[2]. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives in shaping student behavior remains unclear. This study investigates the relationship between students' attitudes toward sustainability and their engagement in pro-environmental behaviors, aiming to understand how Belmont's efforts resonate with its student body. By identifying gaps in knowledge and participation, this research seeks to provide actionable recommendations to enhance student involvement in sustainable practices on campus.

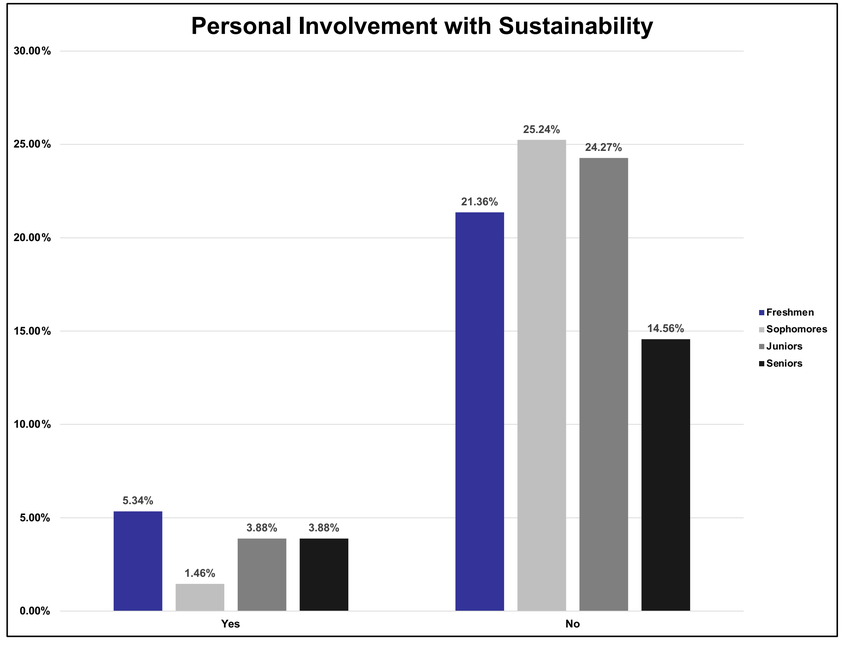
Methods

The study utilized a mixed-methods, cross-sectional design to examine sustainability knowledge and behaviors among Belmont University's residential students. Participants were recruited through collaboration with the university's residential housing office and pre-existing relationships. Data collection was conducted using a modified version of a validated survey tool from the University Leaders for Sustainable Development (2009), which includes 22 items across categories such as curriculum, research, operations, outreach, student engagement, and administrative plan[5]. The survey was tailored to Belmont's context and administered online via Qualtrics. Participants received the survey link through email, and it remained open for two weeks following IRB approval. Descriptive statistics were calculated using Microsoft Excel to analyze the data, providing insights into student awareness, attitudes, and participation in sustainability initiatives.

Results

Survey responses (n=155) reveal that while students recognize the importance of sustainability, participation in related initiatives remains low. Only 14.56% of respondents reported active involvement in campus sustainability measures, with participation highest in freshmen, and declining in subsequent years





Results Continued

A significant portion of students expressed uncertainty about operational practices on campus, with most responses falling in the "I don't know" or "A little" answers. Two of the highest categories, construction and energy conservation, are two of the most successful practices according to the university, highlighting an overall lack of communication and advertisement. These findings underscore a critical need for enhanced communication and visibility of Belmont's sustainability initiatives to bridge the gap between institutional efforts and student awareness or engagement, particularly focused on upper-year students.

Conclusion

The findings from this study reveal a significant gap between students' recognition of sustainability's importance and their active participation in campus initiatives. While a small percentage of students are actively involved, the majority remain disengaged, with low levels of awareness about operational sustainability practices. Key challenges include a lack of visibility and communication surrounding existing efforts. To enhance engagement, prioritization of clear and consistent messaging about programming, an increase in opportunities for student participation, and incorporation of sustainability education into campus culture are necessary. By addressing these gaps, the university can foster a more informed and proactive student body, aligning institutional goals with meaningful pro-environmental behaviors.

Acknowledgments

Christian Williams, DrPH, MPH
Frecia Gonzalez, DrPH, MPH
College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences
Department of Public Health
Belmont University

References

[1]Bloyd Null, D., Feeser, K., & Kurtzhals, G. (2021). An assessment of environmental literacy, behaviors, attitudes and lifestyle factors of college students. *Journal of American College Health*, *71*(8), 2485–2494. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1975720

[2]*Conservation & Sustainability*. Belmont University. (2022). https://www.belmont.edu/about/conservation-sustainability.html

[3]Kautish, P., & Sharma, R. (2019). Determinants of Pro-environmental behavior and Environmentally Conscious Consumer Behavior: An empirical investigation from emerging market. *Business Strategy & Development*, *3*(1), 112–127. https://doi.org/10.1002/bsd2.82

[4]Msengi, I., Doe, R., Wilson, T., Fowler, D., Wigginton, C., Olorunyomi, S., Banks, I., & Morel, R. (2019). Assessment of knowledge and awareness of "sustainability" initiatives among college students. *Renewable Energy and Environmental Sustainability*, *4*, 6. https://doi.org/10.1051/rees/2019003

[5]University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (2009). Sustainability Assessment Questionnaire (SAQ) for Colleges and Universities. Available at http://ulsf.org/wp-content/ uploads/2015/06/SAQforHigherEd09.pdf