

Sustainability Survey

October 19, 2023

Prepared for UASU Executive Committee by
Department of Research and Advocacy



Overview and Key Takeaways

This survey ran on the UASU Perks survey platform from September 26 to October 9. To reduce self-selection bias, the survey ran under the generic title "How do you REALLY feel about...?" It reached 1,174 unique respondents, representing roughly 40% of active users in that time frame. The survey explores whether students consider various environmental sustainability priorities to be meaningful and worthwhile. It also establishes significant levels of climate anxiety and grief, benchmarked against international data.

- Students generally consider a wide variety of actions related to environmental sustainability to be worthwhile. However, of the eight actions we asked about, three distinct groups emerged:
 - Students overwhelmingly considered UASU long-term carbon neutrality goals, the UASU educating students on sustainability, and green standards for UASU businesses to be worthwhile. (70-75% somewhat + strongly agree, 7-9% somewhat + strongly disagree, on a five-point scale.)
 - Students also considered the Sustain SU campus garden and Reusable Dish Program to be worthwhile. (61-62% somewhat + strongly agree, 8-10% somewhat + strongly disagree.)
 - Students were somewhat divided on divesting from fossil fuel investments, changing banks away from the current frontrunners in fossil fuel investments, and, generally, climate protests. (49-57% somewhat+strongly agree, 18-21% somewhat + strongly disagree.)
- 85% are somewhat or very concerned that global climate change will harm them personally at some point in their lifetime.
 - Responses to this question were very highly impacted by gender, but a random subsample with corrected gender ratios (n=900) still held at 80%, compared to 75% of Canadians aged 18-29 in a [2021 Pew survey](#).
 - Only 4% are not at all concerned about this.
 - Concern levels rise among upper-year students (4th year or higher).
- 38% frequently feel anxiety and/or grief about climate change.
 - 8% of all respondents feel this so often that it impacts their day-to-day life, rising to 26% for non-binary students.
- Dozens of students suggested that the University should pursue better/additional recycling bins, solar panels, and motion-sensitive lights (and/or process adjustments) to reduce power use in buildings (e.g. when classrooms are not being used, or buildings almost fully lit at night). Students also highlighted unnecessary paper waste in some of their courses.

Demographics

The primary demographic this survey collected was gender, using a simpler construction than the full two-question approach in the current UASU Annual Surveys.

- Woman: 62.4% (compared to 59.1% in the [UAlberta Student Diversity Census](#))
- Man: 29.1% (compared to 38.3% in SDS)
- Non-binary or another gender identity: 8.4% (compared to 3.0% non-binary, 0.2% two-spirit, and/or 0.7% another gender identity in SDS)

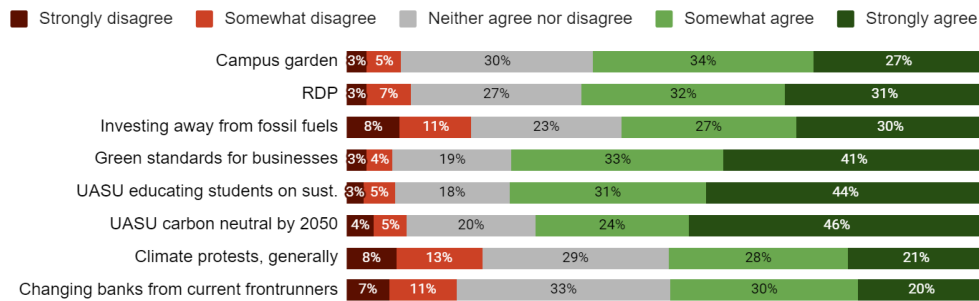
Since the sample leans toward gender minorities and, to a lesser extent, women, and since responses to several of these questions were highly gendered, gender-based cross-tabulation is used throughout.

Worthwhile Priorities

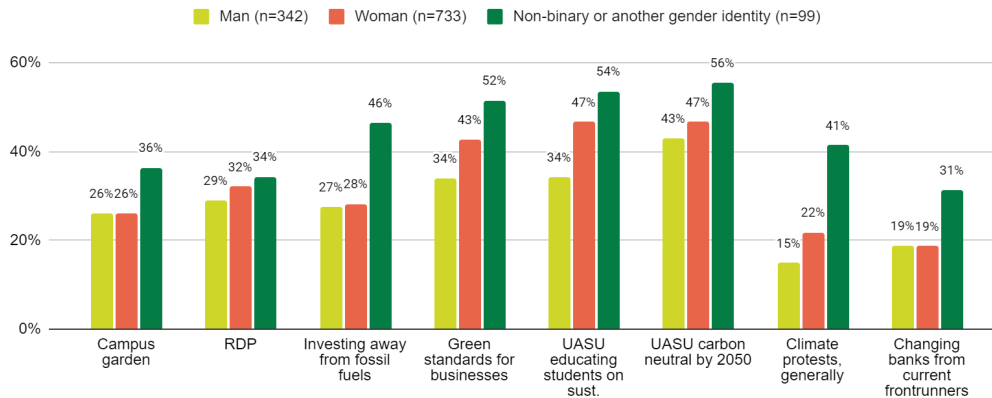
The survey ran eight parallel questions on a five-point Likert scale, with a brief preamble indicating that the focus of the survey was environmental sustainability. Some of the questions included qualifiers or context with an aim to get as clear a picture as possible of students' opinions.

- "Agree or disagree? The Sustain SU campus garden is a worthwhile effort."
- "Agree or disagree? The Sustain SU Reusable Dish Program is a worthwhile effort."
- "Agree or disagree? Completely re-allocating investments away from fossil fuels is a worthwhile effort."
- "Agree or disagree? UASU businesses meeting green standards for environmental sustainability is a worthwhile effort."
- "Agree or disagree? The UASU educating students on sustainability is a worthwhile effort."
- "Agree or disagree? The UASU's goal of carbon neutrality by 2050 is a worthwhile effort."
- "Agree or disagree? Climate protests are generally a worthwhile effort."
- "Understanding that banks regularly invest in fossil fuels and that changing banks is a long and potentially costly process, do you agree or disagree? Changing banks away from the current frontrunners in fossil fuel investments is a worthwhile effort."

Students generally tended to feel all of these were worthwhile, though less so with investment changes, protests, and changing banks. By far the most positively received approaches were a long-term carbon neutrality goal, the UASU educating students about sustainability, and green standards for UASU businesses. (The UASU's businesses are Green Spaces Gold Certified.)



Students who strongly agree this is worthwhile

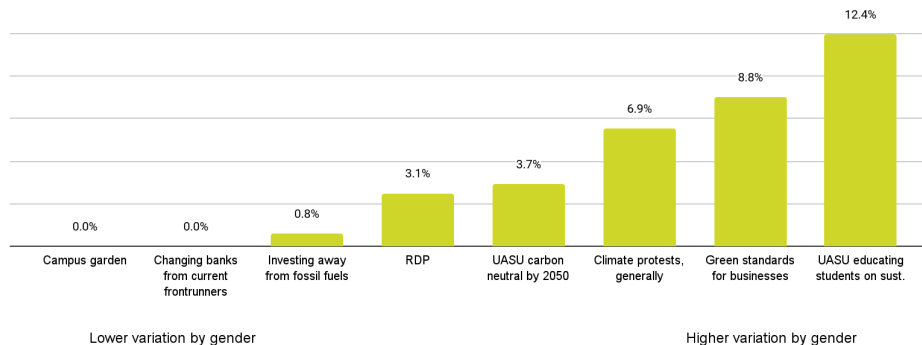


There was notable variation by gender in some cases.

- Non-binary students were quite likely to strongly agree that almost all of these actions were worthwhile, particularly in relation to investments, protests, and changing banks.
- Women were notably more likely than men to strongly agree that green standards for businesses, UASU education efforts, and climate protests were meaningful. The following chart shows the difference between women's and men's 'strongly agree' responses (the difference between the salmon and green columns in the previous chart):

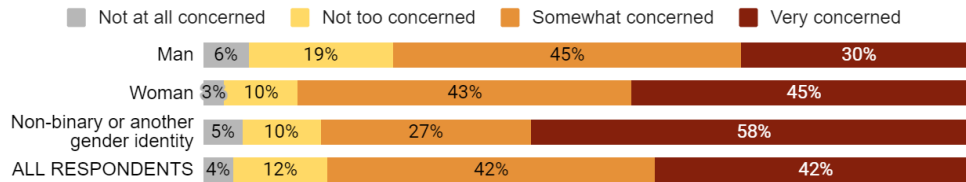
Students who strongly agree this is worthwhile

Gender variation: women minus men



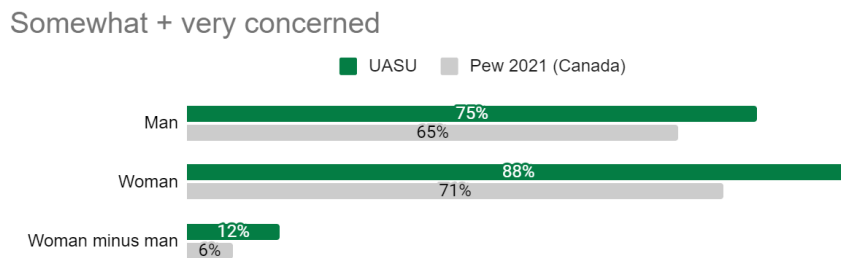
Climate Anxiety and Grief

"We'd like to benchmark against nonpartisan international survey data; here's one commonly used question. Are you concerned that global climate change will harm you personally at some point in your lifetime?"

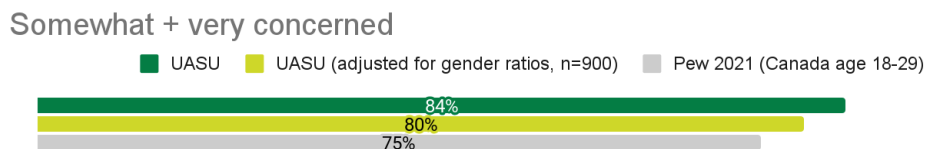


This question was drawn from [2021 Pew data](#).

In comparison to the Pew data for Canada, UAlberta students showed a much higher gender variation: a 12-point difference in women's and men's concern levels, comparable to the U.S. and U.K.

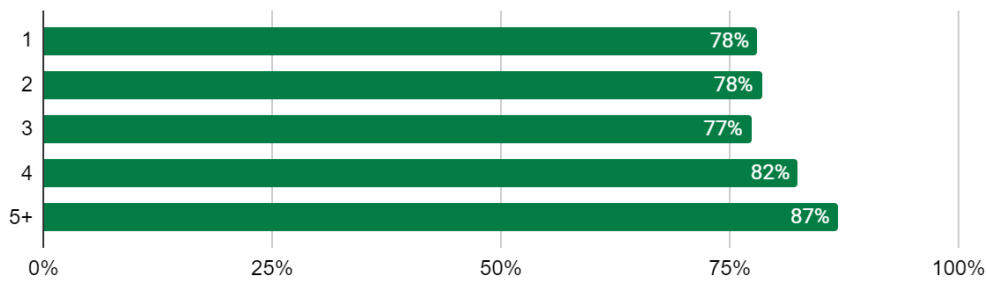


Students showed a higher level of concern than Canadians age 18-29 two years ago, comparable to people of that age group in France or Greece, and higher than the rest of the Anglosphere. This difference appeared to be because the data is highly gendered and men are underrepresented in the UASU's sample. To test this possibility, we created a random subsample (n=900) with gender proportions that varied from the UAlberta Student Diversity Census by <1%. Even after compensating for gender this way, however, concern levels remained quite high.



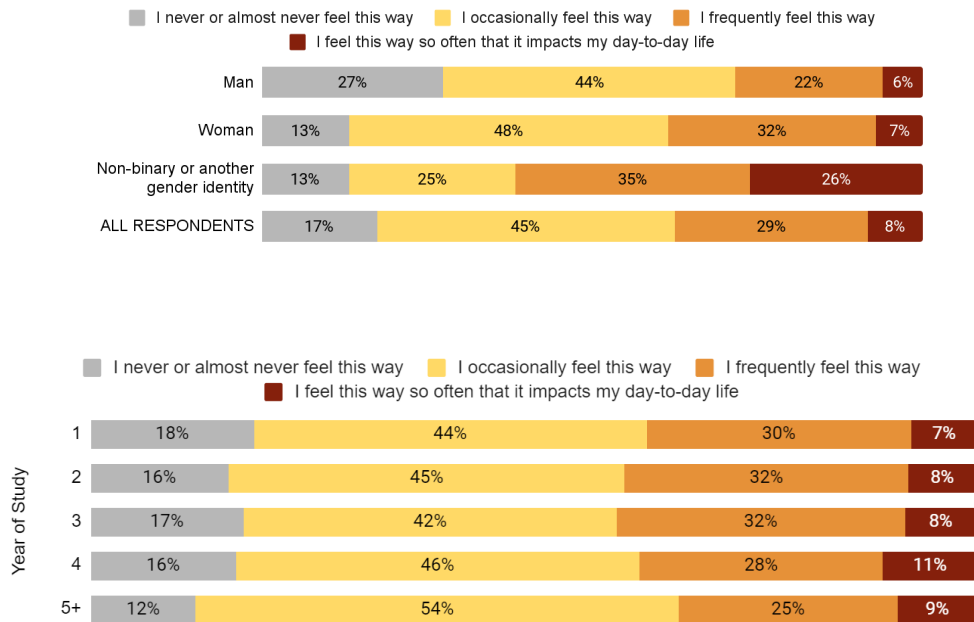
Concern levels remained stable in early years, but upper-year students were more likely to be concerned.

Somewhat + very concerned versus year of study



There was not much variation by faculty; most faculties hovered around the average. High points included Medicine and Dentistry (88%), Pharmacy (89%), and CSJ (91%); the only notable low point was Engineering (78%).

"Do you feel anxiety and/or grief about climate change? Pick the closest answer."



Rates of frequently feeling climate anxiety/grief were especially high in ALES (51%). (This could easily correlate with the recent wave of declared [agricultural disasters](#) in Alberta.) Conversely, at the lower end, 27% of Engineering students and 29% of Nursing students still frequently feel this way.

"Are there other environmental sustainability initiatives that you think the UASU should pursue?"

This question produced around 260 substantive responses (around 3700 words), not counting frequent responses like 'not sure,' 'what's being done is fine,' and 'I don't think I know enough to respond.' There were no particularly frequent responses or major patterns. The most common types of responses (e.g. suggesting more aggressive carbon neutrality goals, support for the reusable dish program, requesting more recycling bins, or reducing use of plastics) had fewer than ten mentions, usually closer to five.

Some suggestions of note:

- As a textile science student, I believe the UASU should aim to use only sustainable textiles when creating and selling merchandise.
- Can you give students and companies more encouragement maybe to switch towards more green and sustainable practices?
- Check into the Reuse Centre. Collecting things for them and holding events around things they collect would be super fun, and give them some much needed publicity.
- Cleaning campus together with many students.
- Continue/bolster the promotion of active transportation to and from campus. As well as for more affordable housing close to campus/along major transit routes.
- DIVEST FROM RBC - STOP WITH THE FUTILE TINY LITTLE SUSTAINABILITY THINGS AND DO SOMETHING THAT ACTUALLY MATTERS.
- Educate people not on climate change or the negative future ahead of us, but on realistic and individual ways to stand against the climate crisis. Not everyone is going to or is able to join a protest, switch to more expensive products, stop driving themselves places, or advocate against the primary source of our province's income. Choices like disallowing climate change to be a passive issue are what drive climate change on in our generation, so the social way we handle the topic is what needs to be addressed.
- Encouraging and educating students on sorting garbage and composting.
- Events that promote sustainability such as tree planting, recycling drives and others.
- Fast fashion awareness? Don't buy from shein 🕸
- Have seminars on the importance of sustainability.
- Give more scholarships to those who study environments and research in the field.
- I think it's great to educate people on sustainability. Not just in terms of the future, but how our habits impact us today. I also think initiatives that consider the needs of the people (and accessibility) while addressing environmental concerns are important. For instance, there's bike lanes in Edmonton - to promote biking. But really, the economic cost of biking and convenience of biking is difficult to justify (in my opinion). Public transit is a more accessible option (and using the LRT can be more convenient in driving) but there are safety concerns. If those were addressed, it'd be easier to use public transit and

"be green." I believe that sustainability initiatives should focus on what we can implement the easiest, and also help to make people's immediate lives better. That way, it'd be easier to unify and incorporate sustainable changes.

- I think that students probably have a better understanding of environmental and climate changes, and have taken this cause more seriously to heart than many other generations, so I wonder if educating students is the best approach. I think we need more education of staff and senior faculty at the university, as well as governments and policy makers, and the community at large.
- I wish there were more sustainable options for pens available in the bookstores with refillable cartridges so pens can have a longer life.
- I would like to see more rooftop green spaces if that is feasible.
- Idk. Sustainable tuition?? I don't want to pay 6k a year anymore.
- Impose boycotts and revoke privileges from particularly environmentally harmful organisations regarding career fairs, scouting, and advertising on campus.
- Increasing waste-free and plant-based food options on campus (e.g. during free food events).
- It would be cool to learn how to fix things that could be repaired rather than having to dispose of them. It can be so expensive to find someone who can repair stuff (e.g. shoes, hemming clothes, broken tech). I know there's training on bikes and such already, but maybe more workshops on practical skills for self-sufficient sustainability.
- Less free promotional plastic junk.
- Lobbying for energy efficient buildings for heating/cooling, especially older parts of buildings on campus.
- More frequent busses to St. Albert to take them rather than drive.
- More information on what Sustain SU is doing and better marketing.
- More water fountains for reusable water bottles.
- Pen recycling for students (RDC had this. Maybe highlighters and white out too, if that's possible). And battery recycling. Maybe a forum where students can find carpools.
- Plant more plants inside... make everywhere more green. I have seasonal depression and this really helps in the winter.
- Regular communication with local Indigenous groups and learning from what they have already explained (rather than repeatedly asking them questions they have already answered) should absolutely be pursued by the UASU.
- Return money to students who are able to walk/bike/etc to school rather than charging everyone for a bus pass they may or may not ever use.
- Save Water awareness and how to improve the quality of tap water through filters.
- Specifically how sustainability will affect disabled and hospitalized people. Such as how many people require plastic straws, one use instruments etc. for those who don't require it. Hospitals on campus should be sterilizing and reusing equipment as they used to do. Many sustainability practices directly harm chronically ill and disabled people, the above one is only one example of many.
- Support on-campus students groups that support the UN's SDG's, including environmental ones such as Engineers for a Sustainable World but also social/economic ones such as Helping Hands for Homeless Youth.

- Sustainability during election periods as posters etc. can generate a lot of waste... are there ways we can get people's names out there without relying on so much single-use marketing?
- Switching the UASU bank account from a fossil fuel funding bank to a credit union.
- Tbh, students, unless they're "full-time activists" and virtue signallers, they usually do not care as much, and they keep doing their day to day life as best as they can with what they have. There are way too many stresses in life to give yourself anxiety about things like the climate, and the future. Unfortunately, life is designed in a way that keeps you focused on your daily struggles, and that doesn't leave too much room to worry about the future of humanity or the consequences of human activity and existence, unless it is required for an A in a class. The UASU, I found, has been too preoccupied with very trivial and unimportant things that normal students don't worry about. Normal students worry about debt, tuition, school, work, family, and personal struggle. The normal student is not privileged enough to worry about sustainable practice, and the UASU should strive to help students have a lighter load when it comes to these real struggles instead.
- Try to reduce landfill garbage to zero in the student union building.
- Unsure; but it frustrates me that to-go cups are made of plastic whereas the straw is paper.
- We had a eco club in high school, we were given mentors that were in sustainability courses but they were from Ontario so they didn't really understand the oil feild and the overall differences we have to them. Maybe get involved in grade school communities in Alberta.
- What you're doing isn't good enough, neutrality by 2050 means being damaging to the environment for the next 37 years and at the end not even doing anything to fix it, just promising not to do anymore damage.

"Are there environmental sustainability initiatives that you think the University should pursue on your campus?"

While the volume of answers was comparable to the previous question, trends emerged more clearly on this question. Out of ~260 substantive responses:

- Around 50 suggested better bins, e.g. more recycling bins, compost bins, or better use of sorted-waste bin setups.
- Around 30 suggested the University pursue solar panels.
- Around 20 indicated that lights are on far too often, e.g. when classrooms are not being used or at night, and the use of motion-controlled lights came up often. CCIS and DICE were each mentioned.

Other common responses included reducing the amount of physical waste in academic work, e.g. printing less, no longer requiring hard-copy homework printouts, etc.

Some additional responses of note:

- A bit ambitious but studying in the sun! Sometimes it's good to get away from the tech (which uses lots of energy predominantly from non-renewable sources) and study in the natural environment!
- Accessible menstrual products on campus (even reusable such as diva cups).
- Actually enforcing people to follow disposal standards. Too many people just throw things in whatever bin they want.
- Again, the UASU should worry more about advocating for lower tuition and better treatment of students at the UofA instead.
- Better transit so that less students and staff have to drive to campus.
- Coffee places (Starbucks, Remedy, etc) encouraging reusable drink ware more.
- Could explore more green buildings/resource-efficient ways of operating buildings.
- Create more sustainable workspaces and aim to create a carbon neutral campus by 2040.
- Designated smoking areas.
- Educating people even more about how to use the trash bins, especially on products where it's unclear to most which bin it goes in!
- Establishing and facilitating free post-secondary level courses about environmental science for those interested so that they can in turn educate other people in their own local, social network.
- Find a better way to keep the cold from entering the buildings with all the student traffic. That way they don't need to heat the building as much.
- Funding for student initiatives.
- Generally leading by example as opposed to trying to get students to work on it. Major corporations or the University are the largest producers of GHG emissions and if they properly move towards carbon neutrality or negative carbon impact it will lead to more than just students acting towards it and lead students by example too.
- Green roofs to reduce heat flux from buildings on campus, attract birds/insects, CO2 sink.
- Honestly, not all recycling and garbage disposals have a compost nearby. If the city of Edmonton is capable of processing compost, and UAlberta has the resources, we should put more compost bins on campus.
- I love that CSJ finally got compost and recycling bins throughout the campus.
- I notice the lights on for some buildings (like CCIS) full brightness at the dead of night when the building is closed. I understand the building should have some light as lab workers stay later and for safety, however I think ALL lights being on at maximum brightness is wasteful.
- I'd like it if there was more biodiversity on campus. It seems like there are maybe 4 tree species, 4 small plant species, and 5 shrub species. At that point, labels around the plants would be great because students could learn about them casually.
- Regular communication with local Indigenous groups and learning from what they have already explained (rather than repeatedly asking them questions they have already answered) should absolutely be pursued by the University.

- Setting up a machine where they can refill shampoo or body wash or soap. Especially nearby the residence. I saw one at UBC campus and thought it was a great idea.
- Work towards obtaining certifications like LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) for campus buildings.
- I'd like to see something for each sustainable development goal outlined by the UN.
- Less pushing retail, more recycling. In textbooks, school supplies, clothes. More spaces to trade what we have for what we need with no money involved
- They use too much AC. Rooms are always freezing for no reason. They could be saving electricity if they didn't run it so powerfully.