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Jump to Story:

An inconvenient truth:...

An inconvenient truth: Students calculate College's carbon footprint

Students in Assistant Professor of Biology Jeffrey D. Corbin's Environmental Studies class recently examined the College's energy usage, transportation habits, dining services production and consumption, waste and paper production.

Their unscientific peek into the campus community's habits last term revealed that the College produced between 19,500 and 28,000 metric tons of CO₂ (carbon dioxide) last year.

That's equivalent to the emissions produced by 7,100 cars in a year of typical driving; 30,000 rainforest trees or the average annual emissions produced by 3,000 Americans.

"We have to know where we stand before we can begin to devise strategies to reduce our carbon emissions," said Corbin, who, along with Stephen Po-Chedley '08, co-chairs U Sustain, a committee of students, faculty and staff committed to establishing a carbon baseline for the campus.

The group teamed up with the Environmental Club for Earth Day last week, sharing information about sustainability and environmental initiatives with the campus community.

"There's no one way to calculate a carbon footprint," said Corbin. "Factors such as the size of the school, student population, age of the buildings and types of energy used all produce dramatically different results. So we had students calculate a range to serve as our baseline for future comparison."

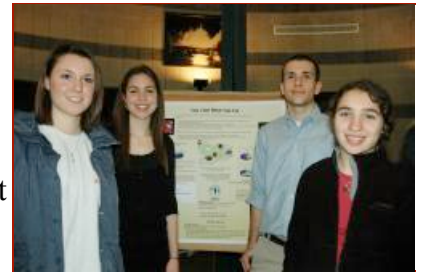
Union's carbon footprint averaged 9.5 metric tons per student, typical for a school of its size.

Students learned that energy usage accounted for between 60 and 80 percent of the total carbon footprint, and that each student used nearly 2,500 sheets of paper, or five reams, annually. They also found that food choices, particularly how much red meat is consumed, can greatly impact carbon emissions.

"We eat a lot of red meat at Union," Corbin said. "Cows are tremendous methane producers. That, and the cost of raising them, has a negative impact on carbon emissions."

Implementing simple changes, such as reducing meat consumption by merely one meal per day, can reduce an individual's carbon footprint by 20 percent.

"Recycling is by far the easiest process to implement," said Sam Basta '08, who researched Union's energy usage by studying the amount of waste produced and the way it's recycled or disposed. "Reducing is best, but it's much harder to implement."



"You Emit What You Eat": From left are Rebecca Schlenker '11, Lauren Randall '10, Max Jack '10 and Rivka Fidel '10.

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