

Emissions Profile of HBS Students:

Assessing student behavior & potential interventions

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Climate change is one of the most pressing issues facing the world today, and it is incumbent upon everyone to take action to mitigate its effects. Over 20% of U.S. emissions are directly attributed to household consumption, and this figure is closer to 80% when indirect emissions are considered. The average carbon footprint of the wealthiest households is over five times that of the poorest households. [Harvard Business School](#) (HBS) students' expected salary after graduation puts students in the top 10% earners in the U.S., making it even more important to create awareness around emissions and provide concrete trade-offs. HBS' mission of "educating leaders who make a difference in the world" reinforces the importance of creating awareness around the climate crisis among HBS students.

Over the past year, [Student Sustainability Associates](#) team developed a survey to identify emissions buckets and understand HBS students' emissions profile, provide practical advice on how to reduce emissions, and highlight the importance of behavioral changes to fight climate change.

Survey Overview

The goals of the survey were to raise awareness around HBS' average household emissions, provide practical advice on how to reduce the emissions footprint, and highlight the importance of behavioral changes and investments to fight climate change. The survey grouped activities into emissions buckets and asked questions intended to measure the respondent's emissions in each bucket. The SSAs team obtained feedback from various stakeholders on the survey before launching. The survey was conducted for a period of two weeks, and the results were analyzed and presented to stakeholders at HBS and Harvard University including the [Business & Environment Initiative](#).

The survey had 61 respondents and comprised five sections: transportation (ground, air), food, living, and consumption (goods, services). Participants received live feedback on their emissions profile (i.e., above/below U.S. average emissions) and built-in educational aspects with behavioral change suggestions according to each person's emissions.

Survey Interface

Questions

2 → How many miles do you drive/ride per week (including Ubers)? *

Note: The average American drives 14,000 miles per year, or 270 miles per week.

- A Greater than 400 miles (> 650 kilometers)
- B 270-400 miles (450-650 kilometers)
- C 135-270 miles (225-450 kilometers)
- D Less than 135 miles (less than 225 kilometers)

Results

" Above Average Transportation Emissions

Your emissions are estimated to be ~1.13 times larger than the American average.

[Continue](#)

Behavioral Change

Behavioral changes to reduce your transportation e...

" Behavioral changes to reduce your transportation emissions

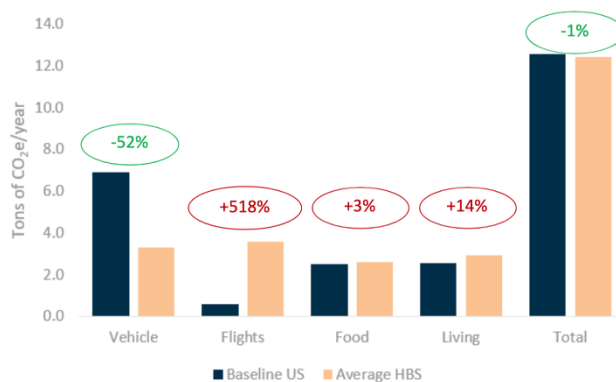
- **Opt for public transportation:** Consider taking buses, trains, or subways to school or work instead of driving your car.
- **Carpool or rideshare:** Try to coordinate with classmates, colleagues, or friends who are traveling in the same direction and share a ride.
- **Use fuel-efficient vehicles:** If you must drive, choose vehicles that are fuel-efficient or hybrid/electric.
- **Fly less:** Flying is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, so consider reducing the number of flights you take. If you must fly, choose direct flights and economy class seats, as they have a lower carbon footprint than first-class seats.
- **Offset your emissions:** Consider offsetting your emissions by purchasing carbon credits or supporting renewable energy projects.

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Survey Results

The results showed that total emissions of an average HBS student are roughly equivalent to an average American; however, there are key differences in the transportation bucket. HBS students drive half as much as the average American, largely due to lack of car ownership while in school. In terms of flights, HBS students emit over 6x CO₂e per year than the average American. Other behaviors are roughly equivalent.

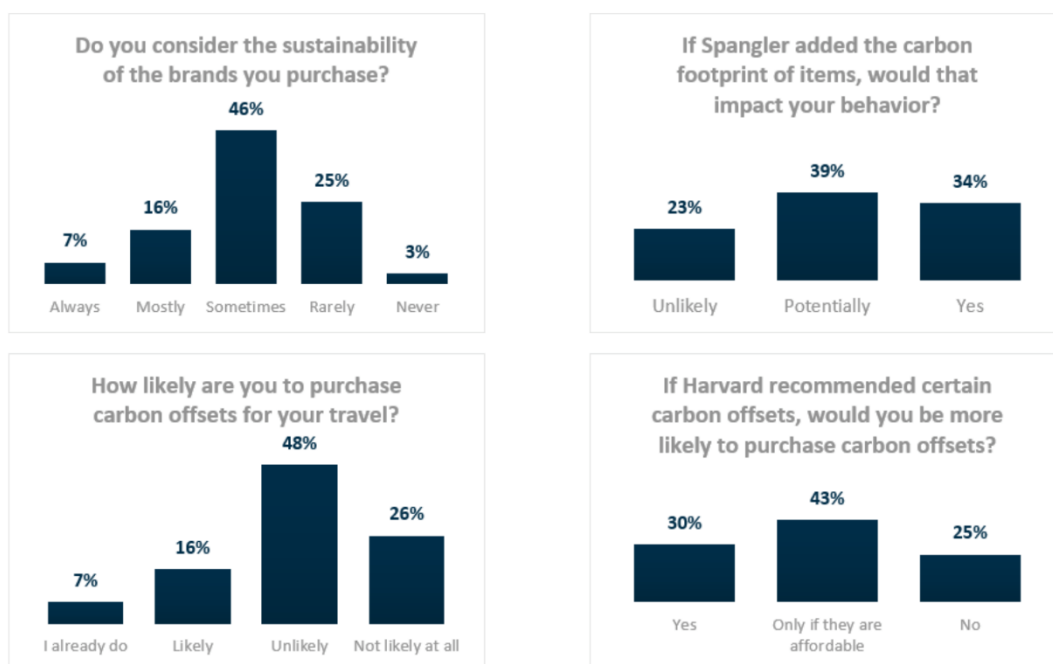
How the average HBS student's emissions profile stack up



Notes: includes on and off campus habits, e.g., Ubers

The survey also included qualitative questions. Less than 1 in 4 of HBS students regularly consider the sustainability of brands they purchase. There may be an opportunity to highlight the importance of shopping sustainably to students via a campaign, case study, or partner with the retail and luxury goods club. Adding the carbon footprint of Spangler meals could impact more than 3 in 4 of HBS students' purchasing behaviors. More than 3 in 4 HBS students said they are unlikely to purchase carbon offsets; however, 75% of the students said they are willing to consider purchasing carbon offsets if Harvard backed specific offsets. There is an opportunity to educate [Required Curriculum](#) students (RCs) via a case study on carbon offsets.

Student responses to behavioral prompts



Potential Interventions

1. **Encourage alternative transportation:** As the survey results indicate, HBS students drive half as much as the average American, which is a positive sign. However, there is still room for improvement. HBS could consider promoting alternative modes of transportation such as biking, walking, or public transit. The school could provide incentives such as discounts on transit passes, bike storage facilities, or even organize biking or walking groups for students who live near campus. Encouraging carpooling could also be a possibility.

2. **Reduce flying emissions:** HBS students emit over 6x more CO₂e per year than the average American in terms of flights. HBS could consider encouraging students to reduce air travel by promoting virtual conferences, remote work, and other alternatives.

3. **Encourage sustainable food choices:** The survey results indicate that labeling the carbon footprint of Spangler meals could impact more than 3/4th of HBS students. HBS could consider partnering with food providers to highlight and explain the more sustainable options, such as plant-based meals or locally-sourced produce. HBS could also consider sharing the carbon benefits of our food waste reduction program, which includes donating meals to Food for Free and anaerobically digesting kitchen scraps and plate scrapings. One final option is to temporarily include a red sticker next to foods that are carbon intensive to communicate to students the impact of their choices.

4. **Raise awareness around sustainable goods:** The survey results indicate that less than 1 in 4 HBS students regularly consider the sustainability of brands they purchase. HBS could consider partnering with the student clubs to raise awareness around sustainability and encourage students to make more sustainable choices. The school could also consider incorporating additional sustainability education into the RC curriculum, offering courses or case studies that explore sustainability issues in consumer goods.

5. **Endorse carbon offsets:** The survey results indicate that more than 3 in 4 HBS students are unlikely to purchase carbon offsets. However, 75% are willing to consider purchasing carbon offsets if Harvard backed specific offsets. HBS could consider endorsing carbon offsets and offering a platform for students to purchase offsets. The school could also consider partnering with a carbon offset provider to offer discounted or bulk purchases for students.

Conclusion

The emissions profile of HBS students shows that there is room for improvement in terms of reducing emissions. By raising awareness of the issue and providing practical advice on how to reduce emissions, students can make a significant contribution to fighting climate change. Behavioral changes and investments are crucial in this regard, and HBS has an important role to play in promoting both. By taking action now, HBS students can be part of the solution to this pressing global issue.