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## Psychology research supports UCSC water reduction practices



UC Santa Cruz sophomore Kellie Melendres talks to one of her roommates, Megan Roby, in their Cowell College dorm, while a classmate works on homework. (Dan Coyro – Santa Cruz Sentinel)

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SANTA CRUZ >> It's nearly impossible to avoid the water conservation messages on the UC Santa Cruz campus. Posters on bulletin boards give statistics on water usage. Placards by sinks give subtle reminders about the drought. Even in the shower, you're not safe: five-minute timers remind students to keep it short.

It's a campus-wide campaign to convince nearly 18,000 students to change their individual habits — and social psychology says it just might work.

The hefty fines levied at water-wasting homeowners act as a strong motivator for change, at least in the short-term. Students on campus don't have such a financial incentive. But research suggests that a collective approach with ample feedback could make them change their habits.

"People are much more likely to do something if they believe that others around them are also doing things," said P. Wesley Schultz, a psychology researcher at Cal State San Marcos who studies habit formation.

For instance, if people believe that five-minute showers are the norm, they'll participate more willingly than if they feel they're being asked to make a special sacrifice.

According to Patrick Testoni, energy manager at UCSC, getting students to lead drought awareness campaigning has been a particularly successful strategy. "You as a student have a lot more impact of peer pressure than an RA or a facilities person is going to have," Testoni said. Student task forces are working to create a culture of water awareness on campus through posters, events and cross-dorm competitions.

Feedback is also important, said Schultz, because often people aren't aware of how much water they're using. Upgraded water meters on the campus now provide hour-by-hour feedback on water usage, broken down by building.

The tone of the message matters, too. "Rather than highlighting the fact that people use way more water than they need, highlight the fact that people are reducing their consumption," Schultz said.

It seems that students are getting the message. Teddy Handleman, a senior, lives off campus where water is included in his rent. Still, he and his housemates are taking shorter showers and not flushing the toilet as much. "We try to use as little water as actually possible," he said.

Kellie Melendres, a sophomore living on campus, agreed. "Just people talking about the drought" is enough to convince her to conserve, she said.

UCSC has reduced its water use more than 25 percent since 2013, according to Testoni. The greater challenge might be to keep the momentum going once the immediate crisis lifts.

"People are generally fairly positive about doing their part to solve this immediate threat," Schultz said, but then they tend to revert to their old behavior.

Some students are taking a longer view. Handleman said he sees the drought as just one symptom of global climate change. "Anything that can help prevent that is really worth it," he said.

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