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Climate change, education system are priorities for young adults, according to Forum survey



By [Vanessa Eveleth](#) on May 11, 2022



Westminster College students collect trash around Emigration Creek during Earth Day Clean-up April 20 on Westminster College campus. "I think that people want to know, and people want to save the world," said junior biology major Harbor Larsen. "And if we can help them understand and help them recognize these oppressive systems, that there can be meaningful [climate] change done." Photo courtesy of Vanessa Eveleth. Image description: Around eighth female students search for trash in between trees and by a river bank during the Earth Day Clean-up April 20 by Emigration Creek, on Westminster College campus.

Dealing with climate change and improving education dominate legislature concerns for students at Westminster College, according to a recent survey conducted through a Google Form by The Forum*.

The Forum survey results aligned with results from a January [Pew Research Center study](#) where respondents were asked to select what should be the president and Congress's top priority to address this year.

"The economy is often front and center on people's minds because it's something that is part of, you know, our daily life," said assistant justice studies and honors professor Connie Etter.

In the study, 71% of adults overall said their top policy priority was strengthening the economy, in contrast to the 42% concern for addressing climate change. For adults aged 18-29, the greater policy priorities were not the economy but specific issues which impact the economy, according to the Pew Research Center.

Etter said the economy is a generalized problem and concept, but it seems young adults are recognizing the specific elements of economic issues, such as climate change and education.

Ninety percent of surveyed Westminster students chose dealing with climate change as one of their top three priorities, according to The Forum's survey.

Thirty-five percent of surveyed students selected improving education as one of their top three priorities for the president and Congress to address this year, according to The Forum's survey.

Addressing these specific issues will improve not only economic well-being, but also other elements of people's well-being, according to Etter.

**The Forum survey cited was conducted between April 5 and April 12, 2022. The survey was distributed via The Forum's Facebook and Instagram accounts and hosted on Google Forms with a total of 20 responses collected.*

Dealing with Climate Change to Prevent the Sixth Extinction

"The lofty goals of the Paris Climate Agreement have not been met, not even close," said Harbor Larsen, junior biology major and communication coordinator for the Environmental Center. "And government action is really required, now more than ever."

Larsen said dealing with climate change is their number one policy priority.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recently released a report summarizing the world only has a few more years left before the only thing humans can do is damage mitigation, according to Larsen.

Larsen said scientists describe the sixth extinction as what will happen if humans do not revert the changes made to the climate.

"What this entails is complete ecosystem collapse," Larsen said. "And that will affect everything from agriculture to the way we live our lives on a day-to-day basis to coral reefs that are disappearing right now."

When entire ecosystems fall apart, humans will not be able to avoid that collapse, according to Larsen.

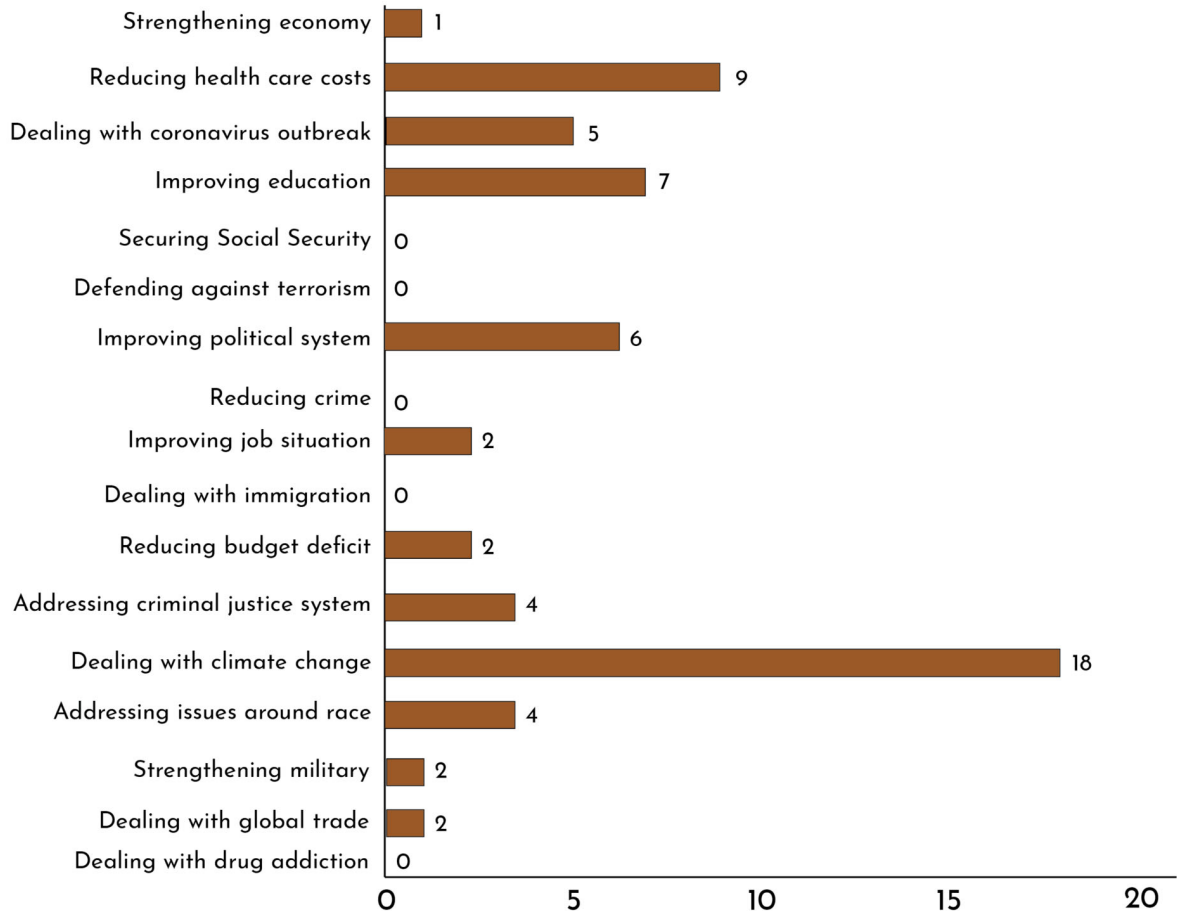
"[Climate change] feels like an issue that's been passed down to younger generations for decades now – which it isn't," said justice studies and honors professor Connie Etter. "It's shortsighted, selfish and it's just a pressing issue."

Larsen said he has heard the phraseology "Two steps forward, three steps back" to describe governmental responses to the climate crisis.

"[It's] where steps are being made, but they're not big enough and they're not happening fast enough," Larsen said.

What should be a top priority for the U.S. president and Congress to address this year?

Surveyors were students of Westminster College and they chose their top three choices via an a Google Forms link shared on The Forum's Instagram story



Ninety percent of surveyed Westminster College students chose dealing with climate change as one of their top three priorities, according to a survey conducted through a Google Form by The Forum. The Forum survey results aligned with results from a January Pew Research Center study, where respondents were asked to select what should be the president and Congress's top priority to address this year. Graphic courtesy of Lauren Shoughro. Image description: A breakdown of Westminster College students responding to the question of what should be a top priority for the president and Congress to address this year, from a Pew Research Center study. Title reads "What should be a top priority for the president and Congress to address this year."

The recent Utah legislation to mitigate the long-term drought in the state is a great example of this, according to Larsen.

"Every measure that [the legislature] instituted was subpar," Larsen said. "It's an acknowledgement of the problem, but it's not stepping up to actually confront it."

Larsen said the policies promoted Utahns to implement drought-resistant landscaping for their homes, replacing green lawns with rocks or native grasses.

"But when it came time to pass a law that would ban homeowners' associations from requiring you to have a green lawn, [legislatures] didn't pass that law," Larsen said. "Which means that the green lawns that take up [...] 60% of residential water use are

still required by homeowners associations.”

Improving Education for Societal Equity

For Ann Day, a junior educational studies major, improving education is her number one policy priority.

“Education as an institution holds a unique position as it can reach every demographic of society,” Day said in an email interview.

Day said unlike many other social institutions, schools require attendance from all U.S. children. The strict stipulation of education means schools are responsible for providing welfare and other resources to children in need, according to Day.

“Further, education serves as a sort of playground of the trajectory of our society,” Day said. “The inequities in which we see throughout our society are learned and perpetuated through schools and their structures, which are determined by legislation.”

Education is not neutral, according to justice studies and honors professor Connie Etter, who said she is drawing on Paulo Freire’s education ideology.

“I often talk in my classes about how [...] education can serve to maintain the status quo in a really inequitable society,” Etter said. “Or, education can be liberatory and working towards transforming our world and making it more just.”

Etter said a liberatory education can empower people to try to abolish the inequitable structures that a society is built on, and instead create something new.

“Education is something that I’ve struggled with my whole life, because it’s not a system that’s actually designed to be educational,” said Harbor Larsen, a junior biology major. “It’s a system to make people conform, and teach them how to exist within the structure that has been laid out.”

Day said pessimism is the sentiment she leans toward while looking for improvements in the education system, although it depends on the situation.

“This entire year I have been involved in a research study looking into the implementation of state and local education policies in schools,” Day said.

Day said she observed the complete opposite of promising attempts in local legislation addressing education improvement.

“The barriers educators face when trying to do the best for their students is absurd and leaves no room for any focus on the actual science of education,” Day said. “Instead, everything is focused on the involvement of parents and the distraction of [critical race theory] and the ‘LGBTQ+ agenda.’”

With similar reasoning as Day, Larsen said they prioritized improving education as their second policy emphasis.

“There are a lot of bills being passed throughout the U.S. and elsewhere, specifically banning [...] critical race theory and anything related to gender identity or sexuality,” Larsen said.

Teaching CRT is to show children the world around them through a lens of systemic racism, not teaching children that “white kids are born racist,” according to Larsen.

Ann Day said people should stand with teachers to help invoke educational policy change.

“Attend marches at the capitol in place of educators so that they can continue doing their job, but also support educators when they strike and do not go into schools,” Day said. “I just hope that the community will begin to value teachers for the important role they play in society, and truly understand the important work they do.”

Strengthening the Economy with Science Education

Justice studies professor Connie Etter said concerns such as climate change and the education system emphasize the human interactions and community impacts. These concerns are more specific rather than just a generalized idea of strengthening the economy, according to Etter.

“When the issue is pinpointed as an economic issue, it kind of flattens out the human relationships involved in the problem,” Etter said.

Science education is crucial for understanding and taking action on climate change, according to junior biology major and Environmental Center communication coordinator Harbor Larsen. Yet, science curriculums across the US are inconsistent, Larsen said.

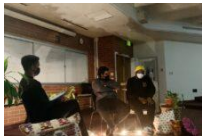
“We live inside these infinitely complex biological systems and geological systems all our lives,” Larsen said. “And it’s important for people to know from a young age how those relationships work and why those relationships are important.”

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