

# **We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally-Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**

The Honors Program  
Senior Capstone Project  
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## **Table of Contents**

Abstract .....	1
Introduction .....	2
Topic Rationale .....	2
Audience Rationale .....	2
Format Rationale .....	3
Evoking Action .....	5
Mitigating Factors .....	6
Hypotheses .....	7
Methodology .....	9
Film-Making Process .....	9
Testing Process .....	11
Results .....	12
Discussion .....	13
Survey Findings .....	13
Limitations .....	16
Appendix A .....	17
References .....	19

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to explain and justify my choice of film as the medium employed to persuade my audience of the need for environmentally-friendly lifestyle changes to be made by individuals. In order to effectively stimulate action by college students, the target audience, film was used to communicate the necessity of developing green habits. During these years students in higher education develop intellectually and mature into adults. It is a prime time to learn simple green lifestyle changes and translate them into their daily behavioral repertoire.

To begin my project I researched current information about the state of our environment, how individuals can do their part, and why it is important to reduce your impact on the environment. Then the documentary was produced, the steps of which will be detailed in the paper. In order to validate my use of film, academic databases were searched for applicable articles of the influential powers of television and documentaries specifically. After the documentary was produced it was tested on an ecology class and a control group was utilized. The results showed an increase in desire to perform green habits.

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Topic Rationale

The rationale for choosing to research and advocate for environmentally-friendly lifestyle habits was formed from observations of the lack of environmental awareness in young adults. Too little importance is placed on the profound impact individuals can have on our environment and the longevity of our planet. Many people feel that their small contributions to the planet are so marginal that their efforts are not worth it; they do not see the powerful effect collective action can have and that action can start with them. It was observed that individuals regarded the environment as a commodity at their disposal rather than a fragile entity people are responsible for keeping healthy. The long-term consequences of indifferent treatment of the Earth and its resources are immensely threatening for future generations and that truth is too commonly ignored. The apathy of individuals concerning the wellbeing of our planet is a serious concern and one worth researching and attempting to educate others about. It is vital for future generations that we take action now. This topic inspired me to work diligently on the project for a year because I felt as though I could make a difference and positively influence students.

Audience Rationale

The grounds for choosing college students as the target audience to educate and provide with a call to action is based off of several principles. To begin, convenience was a consideration. The time intensive nature of the capstone project in addition with the added amount of time needed to produce a documentary called for the need for a readily reachable audience. Having an accessible audience to consult and capture footage of is an important logistical consideration in order to viably produce a comprehensive, poignant film to inspire action. More significant than convenience, college has been coined as a major transitional period in a young adult's life. It is often considered a defining phase in which adolescents mature greatly and learn lasting life lessons and form their personal habits. As these are traditionally the first years of real independence, students tend to develop routines based upon their upbringing and newly learned norms. Through trial and error, they begin to create a lifestyle that works for them. During these years, young adults learn invaluable lessons not just about academics but

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

---

about themselves, society, and the convoluted issues that affect people both locally and worldwide. Because time spent in higher education is such a transitional and defining time in life, it is a great time to expose those students to positive lifestyle habits, including environmentally friendly practices. The phrase 'going green' is often thought of as a time-consuming, expensive, and difficult process but it doesn't have to be any of those negative descriptors. With the right knowledge and instruction, maturing college students can understand the value of contributing to the sustainability of our Earth and adopt environmentally friendly habits. They are a favorable market segment to target in order to create life-long Earth friendly routines.

Format Rationale

In order to effectively persuade my audience of the need to adopt green lifestyle habits, I used visual media as the medium through which I could have the most influence. The decision to utilize film is based upon a literature review that indicated the influential nature of visual media in eliciting action. The studies looked at validated the unconventional use of broadcast media in a Capstone Project to reach my viewers as opposed to the more traditional written thesis. Visual media has been proven to increase the audience's knowledge of issues and increase the likelihood of action being taken by viewers. Several mediating characteristics of viewers have been found to increase or decrease the chance that the audience member will be swayed by film.

Broadcast media has been proven to increase knowledge of issues viewed. This is illustrated through the documentary film *Fahrenheit 9/11* created by Michael Moore in 2004. After viewing the politically oriented documentary viewers were not only more likely to agree with the opinions of the film but also to engage in conversation in personal settings about the main topic of the film, political corruption (Stroud, 2007). The film's ability to provoke discussion about the topic attests to visual media's power to elicit emotional responses in their viewers. Even when political affiliation was accounted for, viewers were more likely to participate in conversations about what they viewed than those who just intended to see the film but did not.

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

---

Broadcast media has also been found to have higher levels of information retention than print and other forms of media (Brothers, Fortner, & Mayer, 1990). These researchers tested the environmental knowledge of locals about a large natural resource close to where they lived geographically, the Great Lakes. Through their efforts to disseminate information on the need for conservation of the lakes they determined that film “can be an effective way to educate the public about the environment.” The adult population relies most heavily on broadcast media to learn about and form opinions on environmental issues (Brothers, Fortner, & Mayer, 1990). These findings mean two important things. First, much like the first study discussed, it verifies that broadcast media is a powerful medium to increase the audience’s knowledge of a topic. Secondly, these findings further support my use of the media for environmental purposes. It was determined that through visual media environmental issues specifically can be communicated effectively to the viewer in order to augment their understanding of the topic. This is very applicable to my project as I am attempting to inspire environmentally friendly action through my film.

A separate study affirmed that broadcast media was a successful medium for communicating details of a topic (Atwater, Saloven, & Anderson, 1985). It is well known that general issues could be transmitted via televised broadcast but this study confirmed that details of a particular subject can be conveyed effectively through film. Atwater, Saloven & Anderson found that there was a significant relationship between a viewer’s intrapersonal salience and media salience (1985).

Holbert, Kwak and Shahn (2003) conducted research that examined the effectiveness of fictional versus non-fictional broadcast media in communicating information and inspiring action. It was found that non-fictional media was more successful in arousing post-viewing action. The study states specifically the ability of nature documentaries to have a “positive influence in creating a greater desire within individuals to recycle, purchase products that are environmentally friendly, and [be] more energy efficient in their daily routines” (Holbert, Kwak, & Shah, 2003). These results accurately summarize the goals of my documentary in

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

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fostering environmentally friendly habits in viewers and attest to the potential positive influence my film could have.

These prior studies prove that film is an effective medium to:

- increase a viewers' knowledge of an issue
- increase the likelihood that the viewer will partake in action consistent with what was observed after seeing the footage
- communicate environmental topics
- communicate details of a particular subject

For these reasons, creating a documentary is the most effective method to transmit information about environmentally friendly lifestyle habits to my audience.

Evoking Action

Inspiring the audience to take action after viewing a persuasive documentary involves employing tactics for motivating action. Trying to arouse action from those who view a film with an environmental message takes more than just presenting the ideal to save the environment. Tangible and social reasoning have been proven to increase the likelihood that post-viewing action will be taken (Axelrod & Lehman, 1993). Appealing to the students need for social acceptance and material benefits is necessary. Presenting the action as achievable and appealing to their inward sense of self-efficacy will result in a higher chance of action being taken. Highlighting the ease with which the acts can be accomplished is likely to result in higher levels of participation (Axelrod & Lehman, 1993). Addressing environmental concerns, appealing to self-efficacy, and reaffirming the ease of the task will enhance the likelihood of action.

In a separate study it was determined that viewers are more likely to act in a manner consistent with the message if they believe their actions can be viewed in a positive light, if there are low costs associated with the behavior, and they believe their behaviors will pay off and have an effect. These cognitive strategies utilized by the audience in determining

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

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whether or not to take action are identified as the attention-shifting strategy, the low-cost strategy, and subjective-rationality strategy, respectively (Diekmann & Preisendorfer, 1998). Presenting the social benefits of taking environmental action as well as highlighting the low-cost and the conspicuous benefits to the Earth will result in an increased chance of post-viewing action.

Mitigating Factors

Although it has been determined that visual media is an effective medium for both communicating detailed information to a viewer and increasing the probability that the viewer will participate in action consistent with the opinions observed, there are several mitigating factors that either enhance or diminish the effect film is likely to have. A few of these factors that directly affect my particular study is: previous knowledge of environmental concerns, age, and education. Numerous studies conducted have found that the effect broadcast media can have on a viewer is increased by previous exposure to the topic in print media (Brothers, Fortner, & Mayer, 1990) (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Those who are previously aware of the issues and have been exposed to them through print media are more likely to be affected. Similarly, viewers who are already concerned with the topics being presented and share attitudes consistent with those addressed in the film are more likely to be affected and take action (Brothers, Fortner, & Mayer, 1990).

Age is considered to be positively linked to the likelihood of post-viewing action. The older the viewer, the higher the chance that they will take action consistent with those presented in the visual media (Holbert, Kwak, & Shah, 2003) (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Those aged 18 to 36 are said to be less likely to partake in environmental action because of lower levels of social factors including income, home ownership, and church attendance (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Although this statistic is a concern because of the age of college students some factors are trivialized because of the nature of college campuses. The study specifies that the common lower-income housing that younger adults live in is part of the reason that they do not participate in environmental practices. But, the communal nature of



**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

---

college campuses would likely eliminate this negative factor. Living in college housing would eradicate the concern that living in poorer communities inhibits a person's access to and willingness to participate in environmentally sound habits. Moreover, it is possible that being engrossed in the college dormitory atmosphere and surrounded by people of the same age who engage in green routines could augment a student's motivation to get involved. Thus, this could be a positive factor as opposed to the negative association commonly attached to it.

Education has been proven to be a mitigating factor that positively effects participation in environmentally-friendly acts. Higher levels of education are noted as the demographic characteristic most closely linked with environmental concern (Brothers, Fortner, & Mayer, 1990). Because my target audience is college students, this association between education and sustainable practices is encouraging. Because students are earning a college degree and increasing their knowledge in academics, they will be more likely to partake in sustainable habits. This positively associated factor justifies further my choice of target viewers.

Hypotheses

Prior to holding a viewing of the short film to a group of college students several hypotheses were developed. These hypotheses dealt with the effect the film would have on:

- the modifications of cognitive consideration in regards to the need for individuals to take personal responsibility for their lifestyles
- the urgency in which action must be taken
- intention to personally partake in more environmentally-friendly habits
- viewers' consciously reshaping attitudes towards simple routines to increase personal levels of green living.

These important effects that were considered in creating the film led to several hypotheses.

H1: The film will increase the viewer's understanding of the importance of simple green lifestyle changes.

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

---

This hypothesis was tested through numerous questions on a survey administered after viewing the film. There were questions on the survey such as:

- I believe there is a need for college students to be involved in environmentally-friendly practices.
- I believe that ‘reducing’ is an important part of living a green lifestyle.
- I believe that ‘reusing’ is an important part of living a green lifestyle.
- I believe that ‘recycling’ is an important part of living a green lifestyle.

These questions were used to gauge a respondent’s personal opinion of the necessity of simple sustainable habits.

H2: The film will increase the viewer’s knowledge of how to partake in environmentally-friendly practices.

This second hypothesis was tested by numerous questions on the survey, including:

- I understand what ‘reducing’ means in terms of living a green lifestyle.
- I understand what ‘reusing’ means in terms of living a green lifestyle.
- I understand what ‘recycling’ means in terms of living a green lifestyle.
- I believe that water does not need to be conserved.

The answers to these questions were recorded with the intentions of gauging whether or not the film had a positive impact on a viewer’s comprehension of reducing, reusing, and recycling, specifically.

H3: The film will increase the viewer’s intentions to partake in environmentally-friendly practices.

This hypothesis was tested with two questions on the survey. The question used to specifically assess a student’s intentions to get more involved in campus recycling was:

- I plan to start recycling more on campus.

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

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This question was asked to measure immediate intentions of the viewer and test the influence the documentary had on the audience's knowledge of recycling on campus. The survey question asked to gauge more long-term future intentions was:

- I would like to learn 'green' habits and adopt them into my lifestyle.

This question was asked to assess the film's success in creating the stigma that creating a green lifestyle is a positive lifestyle change and its ability to influence a viewer's motivation to learn sustainable habits.

The last hypothesis formed was to assess the film's success in creating the belief that making green lifestyle changes do not have to be a difficult task.

H4: The film will decrease the viewer's belief that adopting green habits is difficult.

This hypothesis was important for the documentary because it was a goal of the project to break the common ideology that partaking in sustainable habits is challenging and requires high levels of involvement. The question asked on the survey to measure this was:

- I believe that adopting 'green habits' is difficult.

These four hypotheses summarize both the goals of the film as well as the likely results the documentary will have on viewers if measurable levels of persuasion were achieved.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Film-Making Process**

In order to conceive, design, produce and finalize the short film several independent steps were taken to complete the project. To begin, secondary research was completed to acquire pertinent information about the current state of our environment. Books, primarily, were consulted to collect current statistical facts, information, lifestyle changes, popular trends, and other details about green habits. Websites created by environmental organizations and websites with the goals of raising awareness of sustainable practices were consulted to gather

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

---

the most up-to-date statistics as well as specific information about topics discussed, such as compact florescent light bulbs and water conservation. The most pertinent and influential facts were compiled to be used in narration.

After gathering information a tentative script was created which outlined the order of topics for the film. In order to add credibility to my film, experts were searched out and interviews were conducted. Five separate interviews were held that were approximately twenty minutes each. Because the portion of the film concerning recycling was the main focus for persuasion in the documentary, four of the interviews were included in the recycling portion of the film. The interviewees included the Recycling Manager at the Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corporation, the Director of Campus and Environmental Planning at Bryant University, a Custodian at Bryant University involved with Campus Management, and a student who is both the President of Emerging Green Leaders as well as the writer of the 'Green Column' for the *Archway* at Bryant University. The fifth interviewee was the Manager of Communications and Training at the Providence Water Supply Board. This interview was conducted to communicate the importance of conserving water and the process of purifying water for human consumption. While on location at the off-campus locations, footage was taken to provide visuals of what the interviewees were discussing as well as footage to overlay narration I would record. Footage was gathered throughout the entire process as I pieced together the individual shots taken and needed more accurate or extra footage.

After conducting interviews and collecting the bulk of my footage, the narration of the film was written and recorded. This was the most difficult step of the process I encountered.

Attempting to

- write in a conversational tone
- not overload my audience with statistics
- keep the narration short enough so I had enough footage to lay on top of it
- and incorporate the sound bites from the interviews

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

---

was very challenging. When the narration was finalized, recording it was a time-intensive process. Normal speaking modulation is not appropriate for film so learning to control and adjust the inflection of my voice was challenging. Slowing down my speech was also difficult. Pacing the narrating while controlling the modulation of my speech was difficult to master. There is approximately fifteen minutes of narration and recording it took about eight hours. The time invested into drafting the narration was lengthy, spanning over several weeks. After the narration was spliced in the correct order and laid out, the next step was time to edit the piece and put visuals to the narration. This was the most time-intensive portion of the film, as editing requires a great deal of tweaking lighting, sound, timing, as well as adding effects. For the thirty minute film, about forty-five hours of editing was invested. The film-making process is a time-consuming and often frustratingly slow process but the rewards when the piece is finished are worth the effort put in. To be able to *see* what you created on a big screen and *see* viewers react to it is extremely rewarding.

#### Testing Process

In order to assess the success of my film, exploratory research in the form of a survey was utilized. A control group was used in order to compare results between those who viewed the film and those who did not. An Ecology class of twenty-four juniors and seniors was used at the test group. They viewed the film and then filled out a thirteen questions survey (See Appendix A). A Communication Seminar attended by twenty seniors was used as the control group. They were simply given the survey to fill out, without viewing the film or hearing an explanation about my project. The first question simply asked:

- Does Bryant have a recycling program?

Options of ‘Yes,’ ‘No,’ and ‘Maybe’ were given. The subsequent questions survey posed a statement and asked the respondent to answer based upon how much they personally agreed or disagreed with statements. For example, a question asked was:

- I believe that water does not need to be conserved.

Respondents were asked to answer on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 = “Very Inaccurate” and 7 = “Very Accurate.” This scale was used to provide the respondent with ample options to

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

---

express how they felt about the statement proposed. The surveys were then collected and the answers were placed in an excel spreadsheet then analyzed using SPSS.

## **RESULTS**

The results of the survey showed some significant changes in viewer perception as well as numerous consistencies between the test group and the control group. By comparing the medians of questions numbered one, two, four, six, eight, and fourteen positive results were shown. The question that was expected to have the greatest positive increase from the control group to the test group was the first question. This asked:

- Does Bryant have a recycling program?

In the control group, only 50% answered 'Yes' and 50% answered either 'No' or 'I don't know.' The test group answered 96% 'Yes' and only 4% 'No.' This was the most significant percentage increase. Less significantly, the statement:

- I believe it is difficult to recycle on campus.

showed a positive improvement by viewing of the film. The median for the control group was 5.00 and the median for the test group was 3.50. This translates into a response of "Somewhat Accurate" for the control group to "Inaccurate." Both groups had a standard deviation of 1.8 for this question. The statement:

- I plan to start recycling more on campus.

was answered more positively by students who viewed the film. The control group answered with a median of 5.00 while the test group answered with a median of 6.00. This showed increased intentions to augment personal recycling on campus by viewers. The standard deviation for the control group was 1.7 and 1.1 for the test group. The statements concerning knowledge of reducing and reusing also saw slightly more positive responses:

- I believe that 'reducing' is an important part of living a green lifestyle.
- I believe that 'reusing' is an important part of living a green lifestyle.

The statement concerning reducing was answered with a median of 6.00 for the control group and a 7.00 for the test group; there was a standard deviation of 1.4 and .65, respectively.

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

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The answers by the control group about reusing showed a median of 6.00 and the answers by the test group resulted in a median of 7.00, a mirror image of the reducing statement. The standard deviations for the answers were 1.1 for the control group and 0.8 for the test group. The last question on the survey asked how they felt personally about the following statement:

- I believe that adopting ‘green habits’ is difficult.

The film proved to lessen student’s agreement with this statement. The median for the control group was 4.00 while the median for the test group was 2.50. This translates into an answer of “Somewhat Accurate” by the control group to “Inaccurate” by the test group. The standard deviation for the control group was 1.8 and 1.3 for the test group.

While these analyses communicate that the film had positive effects on viewers’ opinions of environmentally-friendly behavior, several statements remained consistent between the responses of the two groups. The statements:

- I believe there is a need for college students to be involved in environmentally-friendly practices.
- I understand what ‘reducing’ means in terms of a green lifestyle.
- I understand what ‘reusing’ means in terms of a green lifestyle.
- I believe that ‘recycling’ is an important part of living a green lifestyle.
- I understand what ‘recycling’ means in terms of a green lifestyle.
- I would like to learn ‘green habits and adopt them into my lifestyle.

all showed little to no change in answers between the control group and the test group. The medians and means of the group’s responses were very similar with no noticeable positive environmental concern from those who viewed the film.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Survey Findings**

The findings from the survey reveal several effects of the film. As expected, the film increased awareness that Bryant University provides a recycling program to its students. There was a 46% increase in ‘Yes’ answers between the control group and the test group.

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

---

Since the film explicitly states that the campus does offer a recycling service and gives a step by step guide of how to get involved, this increase was expected. While providing the viewer with the steps, the film also highlighted the ease with which students can recycle on campus. There was a median difference between the two groups of 1.5 for this question, proving that the majority of viewers considered recycling on campus to be easier after watching the film. Consistent with strategies to evoke action discussed earlier, the film aimed to emphasize the low-effort and low-cost associated with recycling on campus. Improving student's perception as to the difficulty of recycling on campus was a main objective of the documentary so to see this improvement is encouraging. Along the same lines, the increase in students who saw the film and said they planned to recycle more on campus from those who did not see the film is a positive result. As stated directly in the documentary, a call to action was asked of viewers to do their part. The 32.5% increase in students who answered with some level of 'Accurate' (answering with a 5, 6, or 7) from those who didn't view the film to those who did is an accomplishment for the piece. This statistic attests to the film's ability to inspire intentions to perform immediate action on the part of the environment. Thus, the third hypothesis:

H3: The film will increase the viewer's intentions to partake in environmentally-friendly practices.

was correct and viewer's had more intentions to partake in green habits than non-viewers. The increase in those who responded that 'reducing' and 'reusing' is important was expected as well. The intensification of viewer's perspective of the importance of these simple green habits proves the first hypothesis correct:

H1: The film will increase the viewer's understanding of the importance of simple green lifestyle changes.

Because so much more emphasis is put on recycling than the other 'R's of reducing and reusing, it was expected that highlighting the lesser known 'R's would result in a heightened awareness of the significance of reducing and reusing by the viewer. Because recycling is emphasized by society, it is not surprising that there was no noticeable change in response



**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

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between the control group and test group regarding perception of recycling. Even those who did not view the film were likely to have the opinion that recycling is important.

There was no identifiable increase in knowledge of understanding of reducing, reusing, and recycling. All three statements to these questions were answered similarly by both groups. Because of the lack of discrepancy between the control group and the test group, the second hypothesis:

H2: The film will increase the viewer's knowledge of how to partake in environmentally-friendly practices.

could not be proven correct. The similar answers between the groups could be due to the fact that the respondents understood what the words themselves meant and they assumed they then understood how to apply them. For future studies, having open-ended questions in which the respondents must list ways to apply those terms to live more of an environmentally-friendly lifestyle would be telling. Perhaps then there may be a noticeable difference between those who viewed the film and those who did not because viewers of it would have specific, applied habits.

The fourth hypothesis:

H4: The film will decrease the viewer's belief that adopting green habits is difficult.

was confirmed with a 40% increase by respondents who viewed the film and believed the statement was inaccurate (responding with a 1, 2, or 3). 80% of viewers believed that the statement was inaccurate, establishing that the film decreased the opinion that recycling on campus is difficult. Because of the action evoking strategies discussed earlier, lessening the stereotype that recycling is difficult is imperative in inspiring action.

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

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Overall, the film achieved several of its goals and positively altered viewers' perceptions of going green. Although through the survey it cannot be gauged whether or not any of the audience members actually partook in increased green habits after viewing, it can be said their intentions to do so were augmented. The feedback and analysis of the survey results provides positive assessment as well as areas for improvement. After viewing the film, an impromptu discussion broke out during which several students in the class expressed their support of my cause. Numerous students asked to receive more information and suggested I take further action to get students more involved in green practices, specifically, recycling. This discussion was very rewarding as I was not anticipating a lively dialogue regarding the positive impact my film could have.

Limitations

Several limitations were present throughout my research. To begin, only 44 students were surveyed. For the control group and the test group, only 20 and 24 students were used as respondents, respectively. The statistical results of the surveys could have been more credible and significant had more viewings and control groups been selected. Due to lack of time and willing professors, this was not accomplished. Secondly, the control group was a Communication Seminar class while the test group was an Ecology class. Because the science class likely discussed environmental concerns throughout the semester, it is possible that they already had an increased knowledge of green habits and were more inclined to be receptive to the messages of the film. Lastly, some of the survey questions may have been too broad. Those that asked about personal understanding of the three 'R's may not have actually gauged a respondent's knowledge of the lifestyle changes. It would be appropriate in the future to alter these questions to better measure a respondent's comprehension of how to apply the green practices, not just what the word itself implies.



**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

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12. I believe that water does not need to be conserved.	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Very Accurate							Very Inaccurate
13. I would like to learn 'green' habits and adopt them into my lifestyle.	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Very Accurate							Very Inaccurate
14. I believe that adopting 'green habits' is difficult.	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Very Accurate							Very Inaccurate

**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark*

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**We Owe it to the Earth: The Importance of Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle Changes during the Transitional College Years**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Jessica Clark***

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