

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

## **Master of Arts**

**Laurel Kruke**

Will defend her thesis

### **Young People and Climate Change: Beliefs and Behavioral Choices among High School Students from Phoenix, AZ and Plainfield, IL**

#### **Abstract**

As climate change becomes a greater challenge in today's society, it is critical to understand young people's perceptions of the phenomenon because they will become the next generation of decision-makers. This study examines knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors among high school students. The subjects of this study include students from high school science classes in Phoenix, Arizona and Plainfield, Illinois. Using surveys and small group discussions to engage students in two climatically different locations, three questions were answered:

- 1) What do American students know and believe about climate change? Is knowledge related to beliefs?
- 2) What types of behaviors are students exhibiting that may affect climate change? How do beliefs relate to behavioral choices?
- 3) Do climate change knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors vary between geographic locations in the United States?

The results of this study begin to highlight the differences between knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors around the United States. First, results showed that students have heard of climate change but often confused aspects of the problem, and they tended to focus on causes and impacts, as opposed to solutions. Related to beliefs, students tended to believe that climate change is caused by both humans and natural trends, and would affect plant and animal species more than themselves and their families. Second, students were more likely to participate in individual behaviors such as turning off lights and electronics, and least likely to take public transportation and eat

a vegetarian meal. Individual behaviors seem to be most relevant to this age group, in contrast to policy solutions. Third, students in Illinois felt they would be more likely to experience colder temperatures and more precipitation than those in Arizona, where students were more concerned about rising temperatures.

Understanding behaviors, motivations behind beliefs and choices, and barriers to actions can support pro-environmental behavior change. Educational strategies can be employed to more effectively account for the influences on a young person's belief formation and behavior choices. Providing engagement opportunities with location-specific solutions that are more feasible for youth to participate in on their own could also support efforts for behavior change.

Wednesday, April 8, 2015  
3:30pm  
Wrigley Hall, Room 323

Faculty, students, and the general public are invited.

Supervisory Committee:  
Dr. Kelli Larson, Chair  
Dr. Dave White, Member  
Dr. Sonja Klinsky, Member