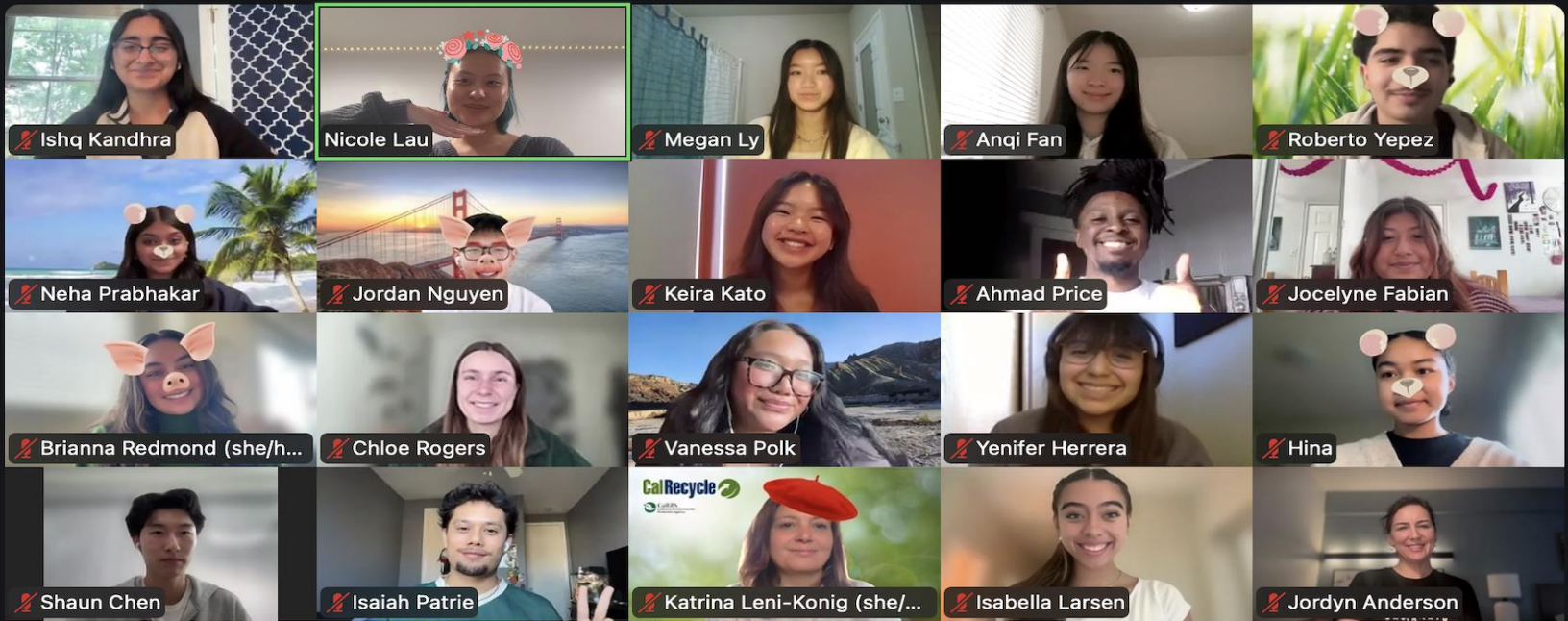




California High School and College Students' Interests in Environmental Messaging through Social Media

Survey results brief | February 2026



Background & Program Design

The Student Social Media Ambassador Program (SSMAP) is a youth internship hosted by Grades of Green (GoG) in partnership with CalRecycle, equipping young people to promote sustainable habits through creative digital engagement in support of CalRecycle's Recycling Reimagined campaign. The program mobilizes diverse students to amplify waste reduction, recycling, and recovery efforts, driving measurable behavior change across California (CA).

The invitation targeted CA high school and college students interested in environmental action, storytelling, and social media, regardless of experience. GoG shared applications through schools, community partners, and social media, and conducted outreach to University of California and California State University faculty and school district leaders to broaden reach, forming six high school groups and three college groups statewide. Ambassadors create monthly content promoting composting, beverage container recycling, and reducing single-use plastics.

Participants complete training modules, attend a virtual kickoff and monthly meetings through May, and collaborate on sustainability lessons and skill-building supported by CalRecycle resources. Requirements include monthly posts, weekly engagement reporting, online participation, and a final showcase, with a \$1,000 stipend awarded upon successful completion.

Methodology

This report is based on qualitative data from the SSMAP application survey, which included multiple choice and multiple select questions on applicant demographics, such as CA region, education level, grade, and minor status. Open-ended questions explored applicants' social media use, comfort and content style; environmental interests and motivations; and ideas for promoting positive environmental behaviors online. Responses were systematically coded using an inductive approach to identify recurring themes and patterns, then quantitized for descriptive analysis, including totals, medians, modes, cross-tabulations by demographic group, and qualitative interpretation.



SSMAP kickoff meeting

Results

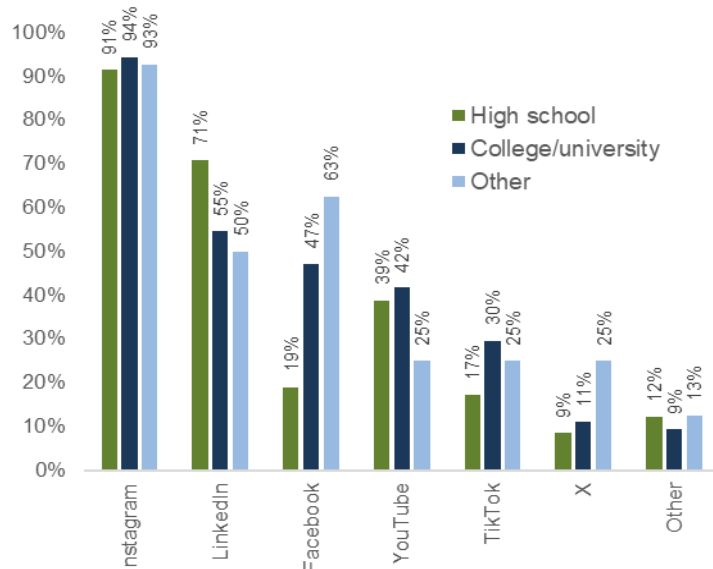
Demographics

CalRecycle received **232 applications** from **100 unique institutions** across CA, with **31% from Northern CA**, **12% from Central CA**, and **57% from Southern CA**. Half (49%) were **minors**. The pool was evenly split between high school students (50%), primarily juniors and seniors, and college students (47%) across all class years, with a small number (3%) identifying as other, such as graduate-level students.

Social media use

Survey results show applicants are active on multiple social media platforms, using an average of **2.75 platforms** (2.62 for high school; 2.89 for college students) and comfortable with using slightly fewer (2.30). **Instagram** was by far the most popular and most comfortable platform across all groups. **LinkedIn** was used more often by high school students, while **Facebook** use was significantly higher among college and other respondents. Engagement levels varied, with most reporting either **minimal** (1–50 interactions) or **emerging** (51–150) engagement, fewer reporting strong engagement (151–500), a small number of high outliers (501+), and nearly one-fifth indicating they do not post at all.

Figure 1. Platforms used most often, by education level



Applicants were also asked about their social media content style. Respondents primarily named **creative** styles (35%), followed by **educational** (24%), and **entertaining** (20%). High school students leaned more toward creative and entertaining styles and college students to creative and educational styles. As a secondary style, inspirational was most common (22.0%), reflecting a **balance of creativity, information-sharing, and motivation** in their social media strategies.

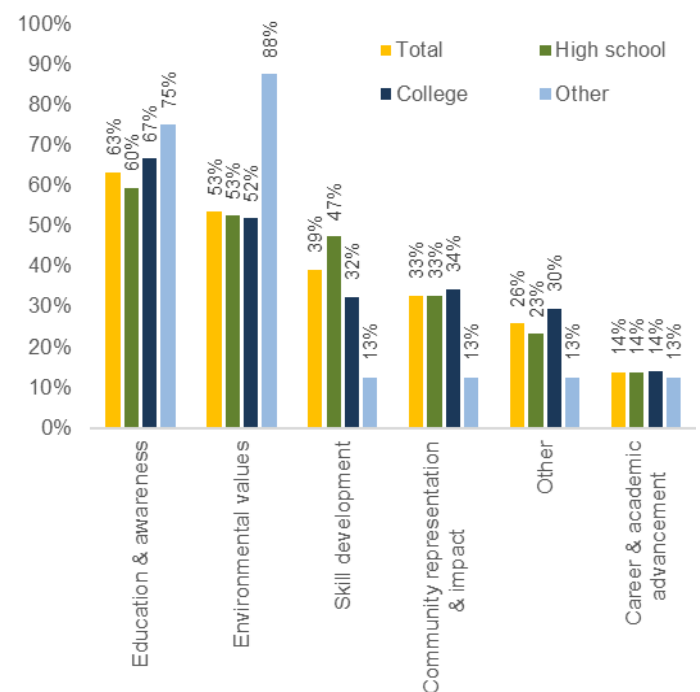
Interests in the environment & the program

Applicants showed strong interest in environmental topics, especially **waste and pollution management** (43%) and **climate change and sustainability** (41%), followed by education and awareness (37%), nature appreciation (31%), and environmental protection themes like conservation and biodiversity (26%).

"I am very interested in climate action and finding solutions to environmental challenges. My work...has deepened my understanding of issues like sustainability, waste reduction, and community engagement. I enjoy collaborating with others to create impactful projects that help protect our planet and promote eco-friendly practices. I also love exploring nature, which inspires me to protect our natural world and share its beauty with others."
– 12th grade student, Central CA

When asked about their motivations for applying for the program, many expressed interest in the program's focus on **education and awareness** (63%) and **environmental values** (53%), while 39% sought **skill development** and 33% **community representation and impact**.

Figure 2. Program interests, overall and by education level



Differences in preferred social media platforms by these motivations were minimal, though Instagram and TikTok were consistently preferred. Facebook and LinkedIn were slightly more popular among those interested in community impact and career or academic advancement, while YouTube was more preferred for skill development, suggesting a **multi-platform approach**.

Their hopes for the program lie in translating skills into meaningful impact.

Respondents hoped the program would help them build practical skills in leadership, communication, storytelling, social media management, and environmental advocacy, enabling them to more confidently educate and influence others. Many expressed urgency around climate change and a desire to inspire peers and communities to take meaningful environmental action, viewing the program as a way to translate concern into real-world impact. They also valued opportunities to connect environmental interests with career goals while supporting creative expression and amplifying diverse voices.

The integration of environmental learning, activism, and hands-on experience sets the program apart.

Respondents noted that the SSMAAP offers a rare combination of environmental education, social media activism, and hands-on professional experience. Their responses suggested that similar opportunities, especially linking environmental values with creative and career skills, are difficult to find. They appreciated that the program amplifies student voices, offers guidance and community building, and enables participation through funding. These factors suggest that the applicants view the program as a unique opportunity for empowerment, as, to the best of GoG's knowledge, no similar program exists.

More information & next steps

Program implementation has begun strongly, with 37 of 40 selected students actively engaged. Participants are organized into regional high school and college cohorts to foster peer collaboration, and the remote model has successfully launched with monthly meetings, content production underway, and clear shared metrics established in partnership with CalRecycle. More than 200 youth-led posts are anticipated. The program is centering youth voice and leadership, equipping students to analyze performance data, refine messaging strategies, and build communication skills through a blend of independent learning and interactive, discussion-based sessions. Insights will also inform the development of a K–8 lesson plan to expand similar opportunities to younger students.

"CalRecycle is thrilled with the content students created through the Social Media Ambassadors Program and grateful for the opportunity to engage the next generation in reshaping how California recycles, composts, and thinks about waste. We are inspired by the young people who brought their creativity and passion to the program and used their voices to encourage environmental stewardship in their communities." - Katrina Leni-Konig, Deputy Director, Office of Environmental Justice, Tribal Relations, Education and Outreach, CalRecycle



Educational session with SSMAAP cohort, February 2026

For more information, contact:
Dr. Kelley Lê
Grades of Green Executive Director
Lek@gradesofgreen.org

