

Applied Sustainability: Giving a Scrap!

Implementing Composting at SUNY Potsdam - ENVR 470 Applied Sustainability

Department of Environmental Studies

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Background:

This project is SUNY Potsdam's next step towards sustainability to comply with the NY State Food Scraps and Food Waste Recycling Law that was set into place in 2021 based on how much waste institutions produce. All institutions that produce more than 2 tons of food waste per week are required to compost. The food audit done in Spring 2023 determined our campus is, on average, above that number. Students measured all pre-consumer, post-consumer, and overproduction food waste to reach our total.

Working with PACES, our pre-consumer food waste has been composted at the Whitten Family Farm since Spring 2024. We wanted to make sure all over-production and post-consumer (plate scraping) was composted. Dr. Jess Pearson & Dr. Page Quinton applied for and received a grant from the Arconic Foundation that helped purchase 6 new waste management bins that included space for composting.

ENVR 470 – Applied Sustainability is the capstone for all sustainability minors and our project this semester was to implement this new system.



“SUNY Potsdam has the cleanest compost that we collect.” –Whitten Family Farm, Winthrop, NY

Methods:

First, we installed the bins and made posters announcing the new change in the BSU. Four bins were installed initially. We also tabled at the Union lunch and dinner for 4 weeks to talk to students, faculty and staff about the new process. Our initial posters didn't provide enough information, so new posters were designed.

Next, once methods were established in the Union, we installed a new compost/waste bin in the PAC, and set up a table there, adding new posters and added stickers to incentivize participation. We found out the process of managing waste was different between the 2 facilities. We created multiple social media campaigns including instructional videos about what can and cannot be composted. Based on this video, we worked with PACES to discuss changing the products that are not compostable. They're working on changing utensils, investigating compostable plates and bowls where possible.

Finally, we installed and tabled with informational posters in the BearCave to facilitate the student transition to the new compost systems in all locations by observing student behavior and sorting through compost to remove non-compostable materials. After noting common confusions, we made informational materials directed towards the issues we were seeing.

During Earth Week, our group partnered with the Environmental Club to collect and measure one day of compost from students who ate at BSU. We used a bucket to collect compostable waste from each person and measured the approximate weight in ounces per person, which came out to 3.2oz. We collected 14.3lbs of waste from 61 people.

When we visited the Whitten Family Farm on March 8th. They walked us through the whole process from when it leaves our campus to the heat and gases it produces to fertilize plants on their farm. Implementing composting gives them the ability to use sustainable heating for their greenhouses via a water heater powered by compost.



Goals for the Semester

- Comply with the NY State Food Scraps and Food Waste Recycling Law
- Expand new waste receptacles with composting sections across campus dining facilities
- Divert post-consumer waste on campus from landfill receptacles
- Educate students and faculty on the benefits and methods of composting
- Reduce the cost of campus waste disposal through Pick & Go
- Support a local farm's composting initiative and reduce our environmental impact

Conclusion & Next Steps:

- We are fully compliant with NYS Law!
- SUNY Potsdam is paying 25% less to compost compared to landfill
- Intervention does work – but needs to be personalized (chatting directly with people, incentives, and reassuring behavior).
- This is a slow process of changing the culture of food waste, so people want to participate
- It was always an iterative process – improving and changing what works and what doesn't over time.
- **CHANGE IS POSSIBLE!**

Next Steps:

- Reduce single use plasticware and switch to compostable utensils (30,000 thrown out monthly!)
- Integrate composting education into first-year orientation
- Expand composting into campus living (townhouses and dorms)

