

Recycling on Campus: Student Interest at SUNY Potsdam

Mia Iaccino, Molly Pickering, Marceline Barnes

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Abstract

For this project, our group gathered data documenting the recycling habits of SUNY Potsdam's student body. We also sought to gauge an overall interest in the topic. The goal was to understand specific motivators or de-motivators for recycling, education on the topic, as well as how often and how much people recycle. A survey consisting of twelve IRB-approved questions was designed to gather whether students were informed on what items can and cannot be recycled, and if misconceptions or lack of resources might be reducing participation. Currently, the campus accumulates approximately 120 tons of recyclables per year, but the question is, could there be more? What is stopping us? Identifying patterns of behavior and attitude can help us enhance campus sustainability. In this study, we investigated student interest and knowledge about recycling on the SUNY Potsdam campus.

Introduction:

Recycling helps reduce waste and protect the environment, but many people still don't do it regularly. Our campus currently produces about 10 tons of recycling per month (1). While most people know recycling is important, habits can be hard to change. This raises an important question: will offering an incentive encourage more students to recycle? Increasing accessibility and education? One study found that recycling collection increased as the public was given higher access to recycling bins, installed with green-tech eco-feedback programming dually educating the public, and designed to catch people's attention (2). Another found that by gathering data campus demographics broadened the scope of understanding of how various social and societal pressures on different groups of people to recycle impacts the outcomes. Disparities between groups may indicate a need for education and accountability initiatives of some kind (3). These examples demonstrate simple ways in which we can increase the efficiency and occurrence of individual recycling practices. However, first we must understand the root of the problem at SUNY Potsdam - what is the state of recycling on campus, and why is that?

Methodology

With IRB approval, we conducted a survey to SUNY Potsdam students 18 or older to get an idea of recycling habits, awareness, and if an incentive was something that interested participants. We did this by spreading flyers around campus and directly reached out to students to participate within our classes (Fig. 1). Specifically looking for students from all different majors to avoid any bias.

The survey was intended to gauge the level of interest and investment in recycling habits, from how much an individual recycled and how often. We asked if there were any accessibility issues to recycling (lack of transportation, lack of bins). Additionally, we asked about a general lack of understanding or awareness of on-and-off-campus recycling programs. We also included general demographic questions like family history of involvement with recycling. This understanding of how people from many backgrounds participate in recycling gave us a better idea of how to increase efficient recycling habits on campus. Must we advertise recycling programs better? Should we do more to educate people on the recycling process? Are people unaware of how and what to recycle (cleaning plastic before disposing, checking marked recycle number, making sure not to recycle that totally-recyclable-pizza-box even though it's greasy)? How does one's degree field, upbringing, or other demographic relate to their recycling habits or lack thereof?

Figure 1: The survey we dispersed around SUNY Potsdam Campus.



Figure 7: Waste, recycling and composting bins in the students union, SUNY Potsdam campus.



Figure 2: CJ's Bottle & Can Retrieval Center has 5 locations in the North Country, one specific noted location is on Market Street in Potsdam.



Figure 3: The reverse recycling machines shown in this photo can be found in IGA (Figure 4), Price Chopper (Figure 5) and Walmart (Figure 6)

Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 6

Results:

A total of 53 students participated in our survey. The majority of students do at least minimal recycling according to availability/access to recycling bins. Most the participants said they believe recycling is important either for waste reduction, sustainability, environmental protection, or economic incentives. A small percent said they felt a personal responsibility to recycle, while fewer think large corporations are solely responsible for plastic waste. A handful of people were unsure of the use in trying to, or significance of, recycling. This barrier to efficient community recycling is compounded by a lazy attitude towards it, which was effectively combated with interactive technology attached to bins by a team of researchers in the university setting (2). As the results show, many people have limits due to their living situation and/or level of education on the subject. Yet, there is still a lot of passion for recycling and emphasis on its importance in terms of environmental protection and conservation.

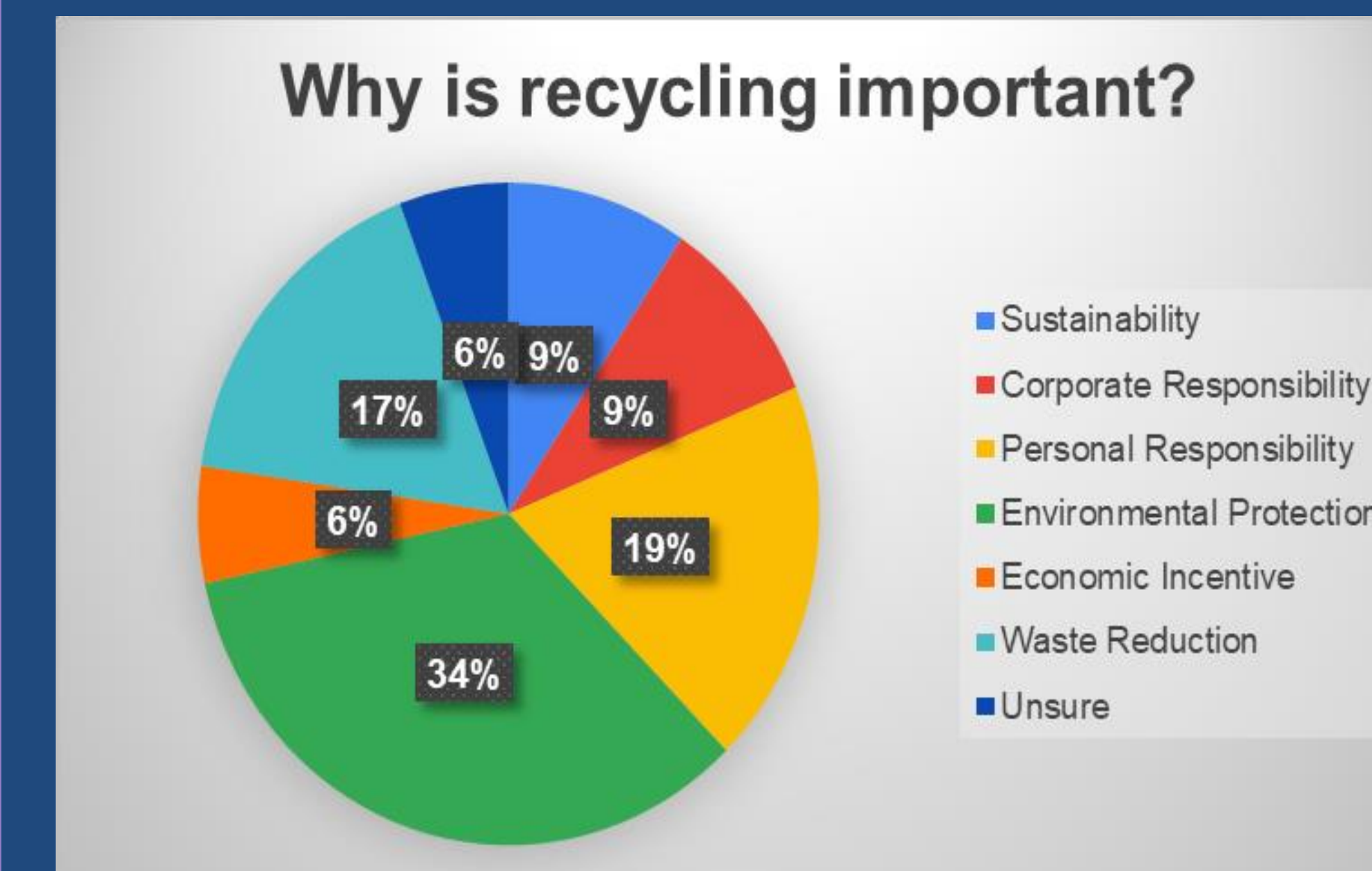
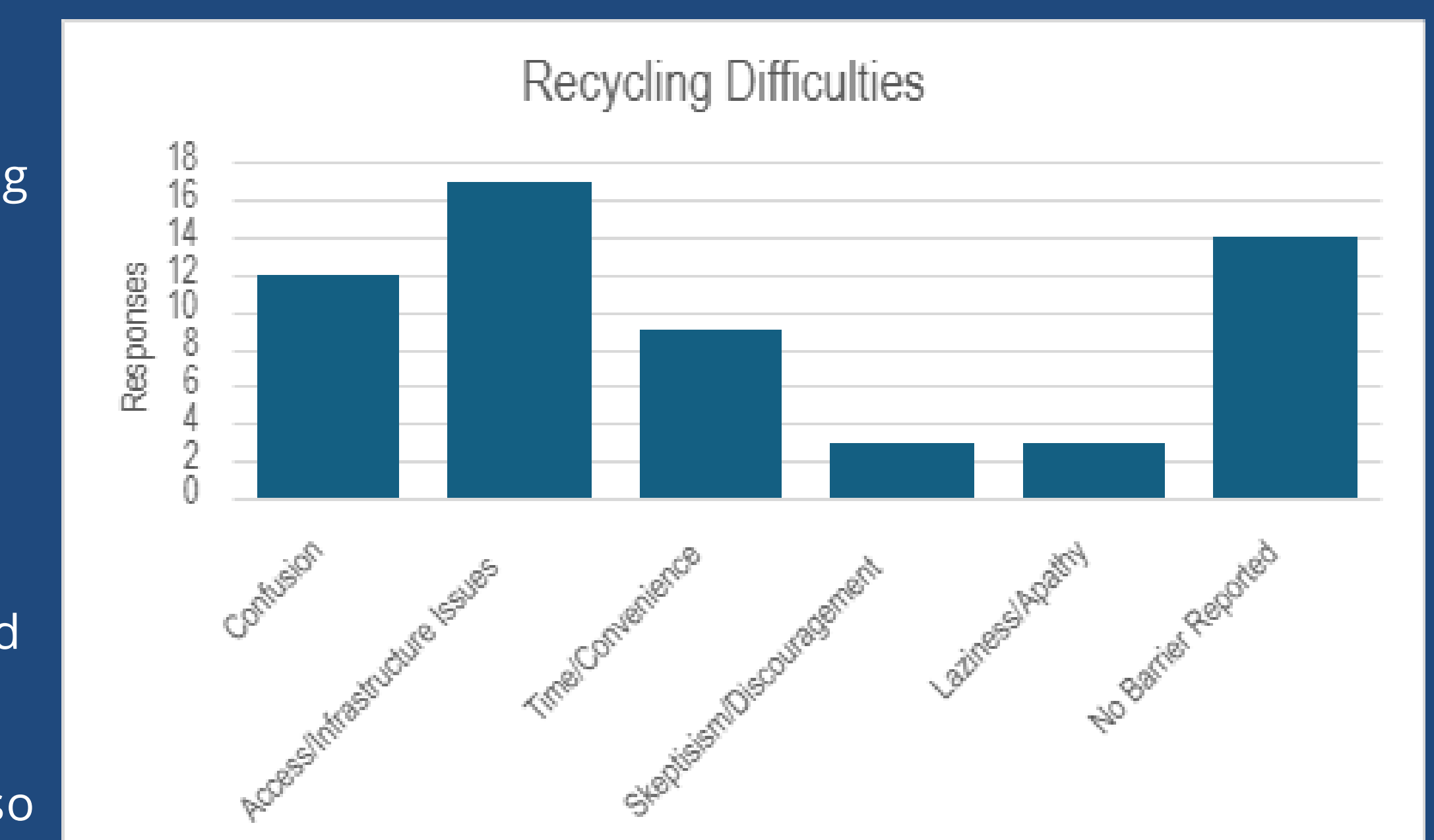


Figure 8: A pie chart of the data collected from the survey responses. The question we had asked was, "Why do you think recycling is important? Or, how important is it to you?". Some of the responses that stood out were, "I think it's important because we only have a limited amount of resources on this planet so we should try to recycle our waste when possible." and "environment and 5¢ returnables, both are important because i'm a person and I care about the world and need money". Many people care about the safety of the environment, but with an incentive like the 5¢ you could receive per returning a bottle at places like Price Chopper, Walmart, or the 7¢ you could get from IGA, makes people more eager to recycle.

Figure 9: The chart to the right displays the results from a survey question asked to assess the difficulties people have when recycling. Most students find that their housing and transportation situation makes it difficult to recycle, either due to the lack of a designated recycling area or a recycling pick up program. Many also seem apathetic and do not push themselves to participate, indicated as laziness or apathy. Alarmingly, a notable amount were confused about recycling, indicating a need for better education of the public on the matter. So even though people care so much about the environment, as perceived in Figure 8, they showed a lack of effort in some of the results in Figure 9. But still, at least 14 out of the 53 presented no barrier that prevents them from recycling, so there is still hope.



Conclusion:

So, what can we do about this lack of education and ignorance around recycling within the student body? Simply starting a conversation about recycling through things like a survey is a good first step. What would be most beneficial is understanding how different people interact with the subject, and create education initiatives directly call on men, who are understood to do it the least (3), to do better. Better advertising on recycling bins and for collection centers, increased accessibility of programs, and possibly providing incentives, would lead to better recycling habits overall. With enough interest, we would love to see how SUNY Potsdam can become a more sustainable campus, where people discuss recycling and waste production more, maybe even encouraging alternatives to consumptive behaviors.

References:

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