



The Decomposers

SUNY Potsdam's Viewpoints on Composting

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Abstract

This study investigates SUNY Potsdam students' viewpoints on campus composting. Getting students' opinions will ensure that composting efforts on campus are successful. To gather responses, we developed an online survey. The survey was distributed in classes and spaces students frequent. It asked demographic questions such as what their rank in school was and whether they lived on or off campus. It then asked questions about whether and why students use composting in various campus dining facilities. We hope our findings will help us keep food waste from going into the landfill and save our campus money.

Introduction

People create tons of food waste every year. Composting is a great way to make use of such food waste. However, many students are still throwing their food scraps into the garbage bins instead of the composting bins. We reviewed the literature and found that other colleges sent out surveys with questions that we took inspiration from. They looked to find out why students were not composting (Beben 2025). Did it depend on where they lived, their class year, major, and was there any correlation amongst these responses? (Norton, 2018). One of the main issues we saw across our research that all these composting programs saw was breaking the students' habits. Even if they want to compost it is routine to throw all your items into one bin instead of sorting it, muscle memory. Another main issue other campuses including ours was the overall confusion on the how and what to and not to compost (Figure 2 and 4).

At SUNY Potsdam students have created a composting system. Yet, the students have not seemed to fully adopt it. Our research aims to delve deeper into SUNY Potsdam students' opinions on on-campus policies. We identified several factors that we hypothesize affect students' willingness to compost.

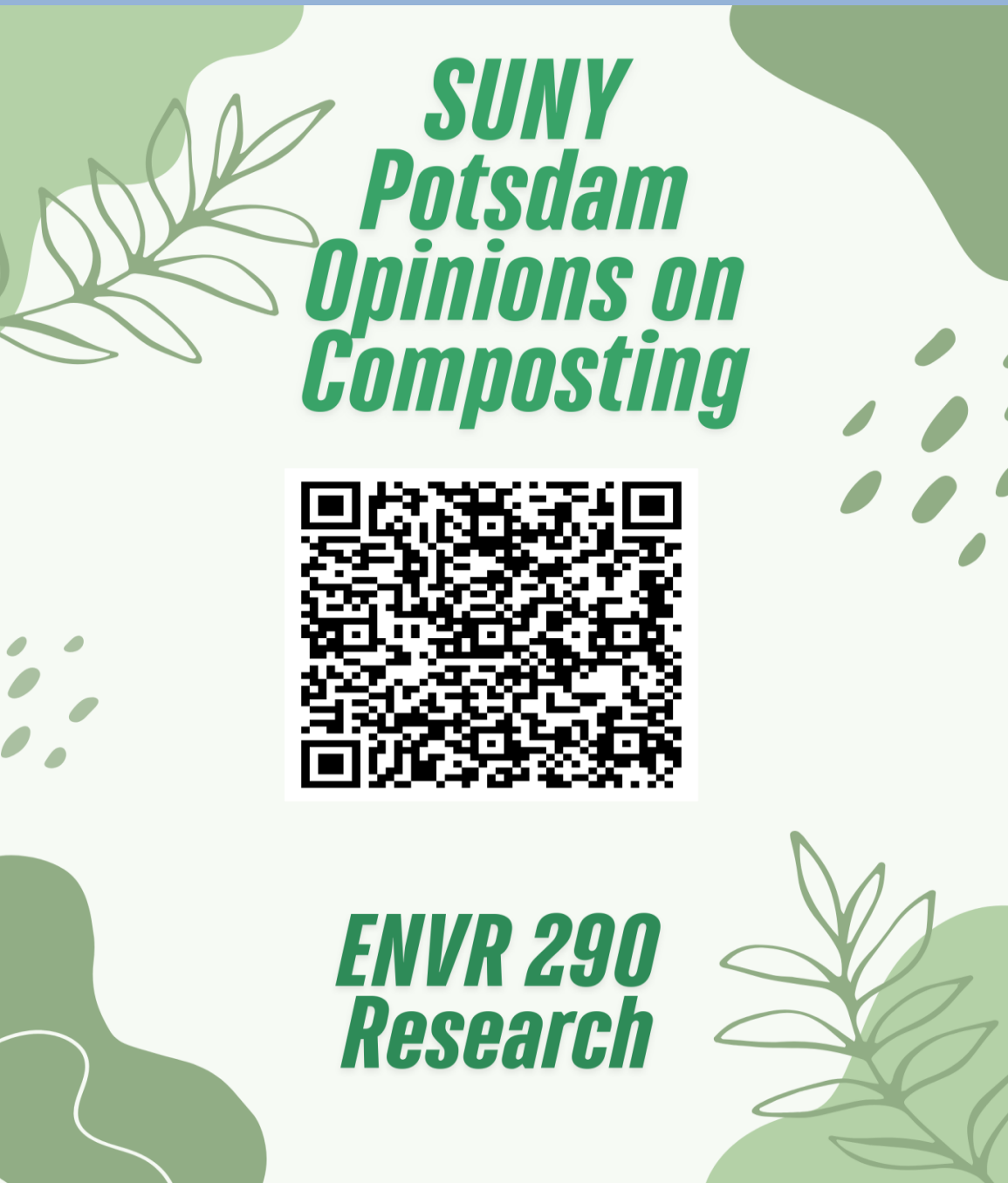
- Our predictor factors included the following:
- Does a student's housing affect their likelihood to compost?
 - Does a student's year in school affect their likelihood to compost?
 - Does a student's major affect their likelihood to compost?



Methodology

- We developed a survey with 13 questions, both quantitative and qualitative
- We submitted our survey to IRB and was approved to be sent out to the school
- Over 2 weeks, data from 110 SUNY Potsdam students were collected
- QR codes with the title of our survey were distributed via social media, in classrooms, by word of mouth, as well as paper printouts with the QR code that were placed in various heavily trafficked on-campus locations
- Students were questioned about their views of on-campus composting
- We used a series of ANOVAs to test for significance between a subset of the predictor and response variables (Figure 1 and 3).
- We compiled a series of relevant quotes from survey takers.

Garrett, Kadi and Ryan emptying the compost cans for their townhouses.



This is an image of what we sent out to classes and around campus to advertise our survey.

Results and Discussion

General Quotes from students surveyed ->

We received a total of **110 responses**.

Majors included: 7 Business, 30 Education, 16 Environmental, 9 Exercise Science, 18 Humanities, 6 Sociology, 14 STEM students.

Grades included: 16 freshmen, 36 sophomores, 32 juniors, and 18 seniors

Housing Type Included: 39 Dorms, 5 Lehman Apartments, 32 Off-campus, 30 Townhouses

- We tested a student's likelihood to compost if their friends composted. Our results showed that there was no significant link between these factors, as the final p-value was 0.61. This shows that if a student's grade does not make them more likely to compost, if their friends' compost as well.
- We conducted an ANOVA test to understand if class year affected how important composting was to survey takers. Our p-value came out to be 0.19, which shows that there is so significant relation between a student's grade and their likelihood to compost. However, juniors found compost to be f more importance to them when compared to other grades.
- After asking students why they do not compost **50%** said they do, **28%** said it is too hard or confusing and others listed...
- "I think it is unsanitary", "I don't make enough food waste to bother", "I live off campus and it would be too hard", "Not really pragmatic for me living in the dorms", "I don't think there is a benefit", "Time". These are all the reasons SUNY Potsdam students stated they do not compost.

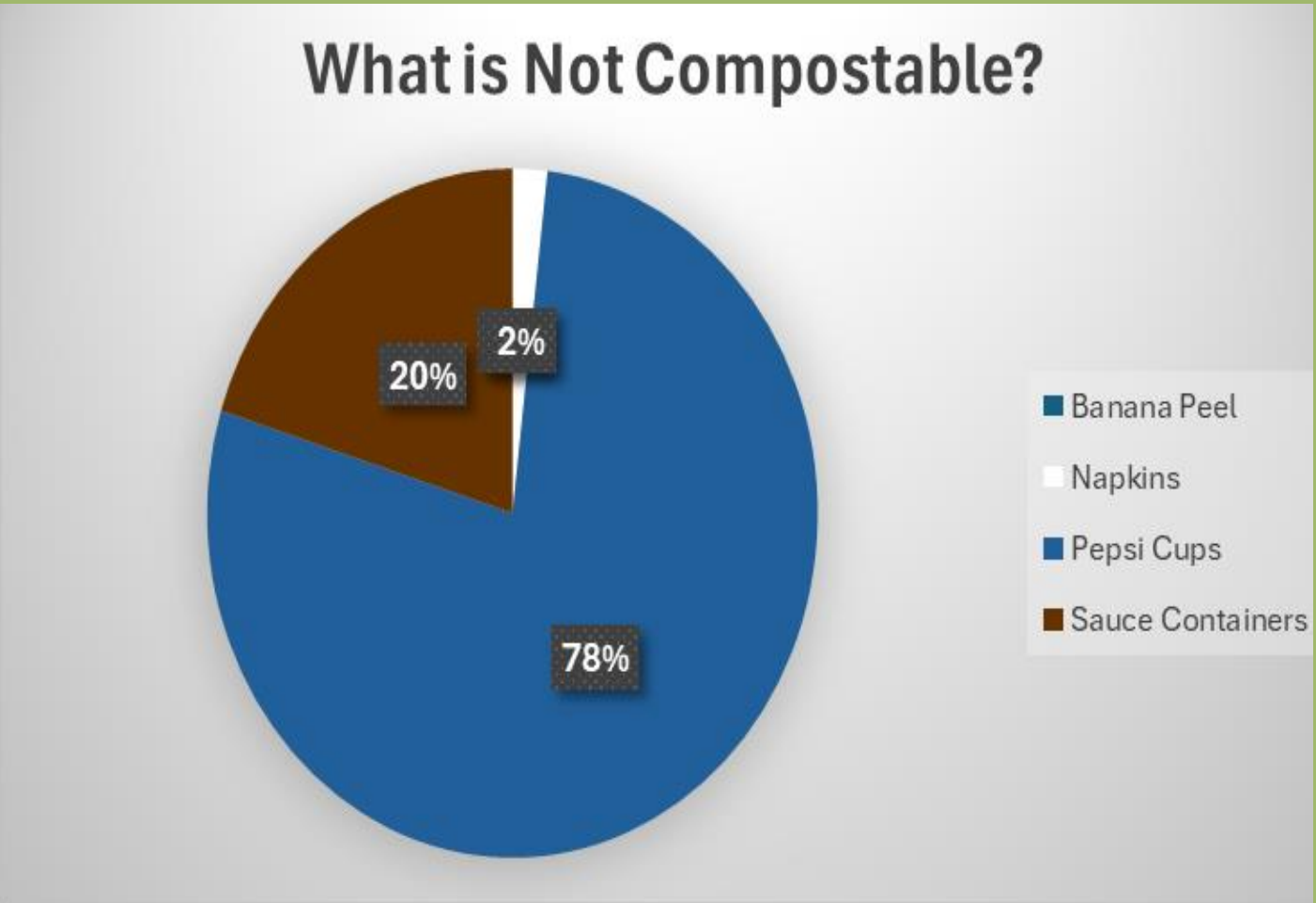


Figure 2. This is a representation of what students said is compostable in the dining facilities. Pepsi sups were the correct choice. 78% of students answered correctly.

SUMMARY						
Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance		
Freshman	18	52	2.888889	1.045752		
Sophomor	37	92	2.486486	1.256757		
Junior	33	108	3.272727	1.454545		
Senior	18	51	2.833333	1.558824		
ANOVA						
Source of Vari	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between C	10.81088	3	3.603628	2.7014	0.049522	2.693721
Within Gr	136.0665	102	1.333985			
Total	146.8774	105				

Figure 3. Our results showed a significant P-value which in turn means that juniors find composting to be significantly more difficult to compost.

Conclusion

There are many different viewpoints on composting at SUNY Potsdam. Some are negative and some are positive. There seems to be confusion about what is compostable and what is not (Figure 2 and 4). Based on the responses received more than half of students were incorrect about whether the current cutlery is compostable on campus. There are reasons people do not compost and that is mainly because of time, or they do not think that there is a benefit. Some items are advertised as compostable but are not compostable at Potsdam which causes confusion about what is and is not compostable (Figure 1 and 2).

- "Composting felt a lot easier when it was a part of the combined trash cans and had the picture of compostable items next to it, compared to the bins where you have to open the lid with your hands full"
- "I think composting is a great way to make use of food waste!"
- "I am always running late to places and it's just one of those things that's a low priority for me "

Anova: Single Factor						
SUMMARY						
Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance		
Freshman	12	46	3.833333	0.69697		
Sophomor	37	131	3.540541	1.088589		
Junior	33	130	3.939394	0.933712		
Senior	19	63	3.315789	2.116959		
ANOVA						
Source of Varia	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between G	5.714549	3	1.90485	1.608939	0.192291	2.698398
Within Grr	114.8399	97	1.183917			
Total	120.5545	100				

Figure 1. This ANOVA test looked to find out if a student's grade affected how important they feel composting is to them. The results showed an insignificant correlation.

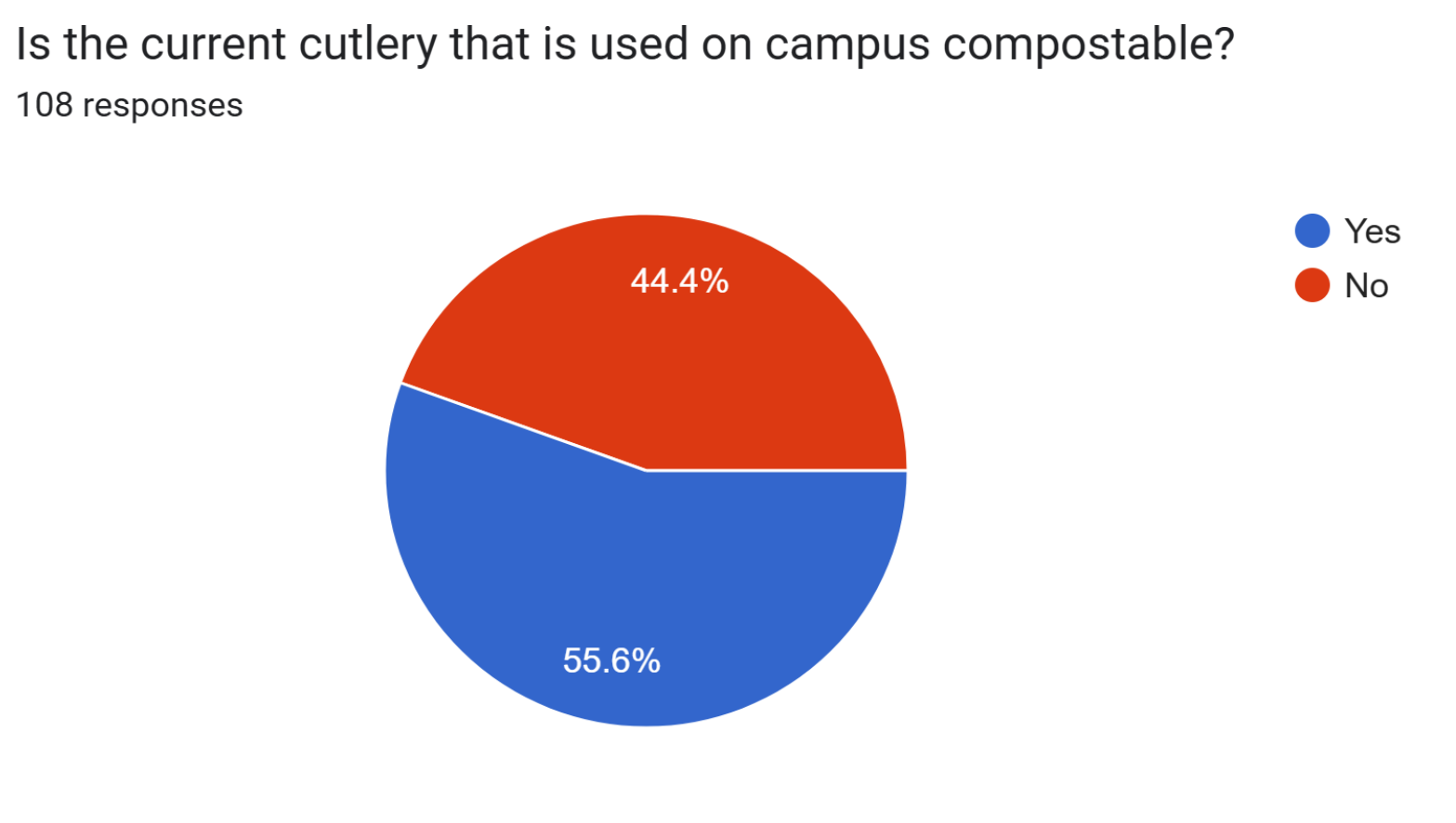


Figure 4. The current cutlery used on campus cannot go into the school's compost bins. This graph shows that 44.4% of SUNY Potsdam students are not aware of this.

References

- Beben, Ashleigh, "An investigation of on-campus composting among undergraduate college students" (2015). Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current. 14.
- Norton, Jennie, "Developing, Piloting, and Factor Analysis of a Brief Survey Tool for Evaluating Food and Composting Behaviors: the Short Composting Survey" (2018). All Master's Theses. 953.
- Dr. Jess Pearson – Associate Professor, Environmental Studies
- Raymond Bowdish – Wiser Center Coordinator, Biology