CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT OF WASTE REDUCTION AT U-M

This effort supports U-M's sustainability goal of reducing waste sent to landfills by 40%.

The Office of Campus Sustainability Waste Reduction and Engagement team continuously refines waste programs to reduce landfill waste and avoid contamination of recycling and compost waste streams. Two new operational efforts launched in winter 2022.

SMALL-SCALE WASTE SORTS

Though OCS periodically contracts out to do large waste sorts, small-scale DIY waste sorts can provide valuable data on a more frequent basis.

Annual small-scale waste sorts form a more comprehensive, data-driven view of waste generation and disposal behaviors. By sampling major building types – classroom, lab, residence hall, etc. – we can identify waste diversion opportunities for each type. We also note where we could target additional efforts for reduction, diversion or correct placement of waste, and potential opportunities to replicate efforts across buildings within the same category.

WHAT IS A WASTE SORT?

An assessment of a building's recycle, compost, and landfill streams. Waste is examined visually or by sorting and weighing to determine what proportion of waste is going into each stream and what items are common contaminants (misplaced items). This provides a snapshot of a building's overall waste composition and occupant waste disposal behavior.

OCS STAFF WORK WITH CUSTODIAL SERVICES TO COLLECT SAMPLES FOR THE WASTE SORTS.

OCS TEAM MEMBERS SORT, MEASURE, AND LOG WASTE TYPES.

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OFFICE OF CAMPUS SUSTAINABILITY

SMALL-SCALE WASTE SORT RESULTS

The initial sorts conducted in the winter of 2022 resulted in a substantial amount of useful information, including:

- Entryways and atriums tend to have the highest contamination rates.
- Staff areas such as kitchens, lounges and offices tend to have the least contamination, though initial sorts suggest that proper sorting is less likely with deskside bins.
- Commonly misplaced items: coffee cups (sometimes compostable, never recyclable!), paper towels (NOT recyclable), and food packaging items.
- In lab spaces nearly ⅓ of landfill waste was ice packs.

Some planned follow-up interventions:

- Material-specific messaging for commonly misplaced items like coffee cups and paper towels.
- Lab-building specific signage to aid proper sorting of packaging materials such as polystyrene, packaging plastic, pipette tip boxes, boxboard, cardboard, etc.
- Less emphasis on piloting compost bins in atriums/hallways and more in staff areas and lounges.
- Continued support for ice pack reuse program.
- Pilot various waste station configurations in high-traffic atriums.

VISUAL WASTE AUDITS

Visual audits during building walk-throughs help identify trends in the type and location of contamination in recycling and composting bins, as well as missed opportunities in landfill bins. In some cases, we partner with departmental staff to pilot waste reduction initiatives specific to their unit.

VISUAL CHECKS OF BINS HELP IDENTIFY COMMON CONTAMINANTS.

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CONTRIBUTE TO OUR DATA

You are invited to contribute by filling out the waste bin check form when you notice contamination issues in your area. This will help us track and tackle contamination at its source, strengthening our recycling and compost programs.