A Study of Undergraduate Perception and Behavior Toward On-Campus Composting

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Purpose
Composting among college students can promote a healthy and sustainable environment and encourage the appropriate management method for generated organic wastes. According to Maine DEP less than 10% of organics are diverted from the waste stream costing Maine municipalities millions of dollars to dispose of these organic materials in landfills each year. This study observed composting behaviors and attitudes among students and fostered an increase in knowledge of suitable composting behavior in on-campus apartments.

Methods
In order to implement the composting program and observe student behaviors and attitudes several steps were necessary:

Organization of on-campus apartment composting program
• Met with facilities Resource Recovery Employees
• Created a plan for the program
• Developed messaging and resources to employ with collection bins
• Met weekly with collectors to assess safety and performance of materials collected

Participant Recruitment
• Attended complex meetings
• Went door to door to ask students to participate
• Emailed students interested in participating
• Handed out flyers to each apartment about the program

Data Collection
• Weighed material from each apartment complex weekly
• Created pre and post-composting surveys using Qualtrics
• Analyzed surveys to understand student interest, understanding, and experience composting
• Data was looked at in ordinal form by responses of the Likert scale. A common method of analysis for this is known as “Top-Box” grouping which looks for what percentage are on the positive side or the negative side to the question

Compost Results

Average Materials Collected Per Day over the Fall Semester

Graph 1: Average daily organic waste collected from UMaine on-campus apartments (fall semester)

Survey Results

Gender Differences

Impact of Previous Exposure to Composting

Graph 2: Impact of gender on responses
Graph 3: Impact of previous exposure to composting on responses

Impact of Where Participants Were Raised

Graph 4: Impact of where participants were raised on responses

Conclusion
Based on this study of UMaine undergraduate students living in the on-campus apartments:
• UMaine would benefit from offering more programs that enable students to practice environmentally conscious behaviors.
• Undergraduate students surveyed have positive feelings and attitudes towards composting and sustained interest in practicing environmentally conscious behaviors.
• Expanding composting to post-consumer waste within university dining halls to involve all individuals on campus would encourage environmentally sustainable practices.

Recommendations
After completing this study several recommendations can be made:
• Coordinate with Housing Services and the RAs to include training for this program in the orientation for the RAs at Patch and DTAV.
• Start promoting the program on move-in day with flyers and outreach.
• Spend additional time attempting to connect with more residents early in the semester one-on-one to discuss the composting program and recruit more participants.
• Have workshops throughout the semester to have a forum for students to discuss their experiences and crowd source solutions to common problems.
• Offer students containers with lids to collect compost in and to reduce odors.

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