

Green Living Project Waste Team – Executive Summary

Over the last twenty weeks, the waste team of the Green Living Project has succeeded in proposing a composting program throughout all on-campus residences, and supported that proposal with conclusive evidence. Originally formed to assess the extent and nature of students' waste habits, and determine how to better incentivize students to compost and recycle, the waste team shifted broadened its focus midway through the winter quarter. Rather than look to merely student incentivization, the team sought to collect enough evidence to institutionalize a full, school-wide compost program that could hopefully also inspire students to recycle better. The team also wanted to provide the Office of Residential Life, the Housing Administration Office, the on-campus housing department of Facilities and Maintenance, and other offices (together known as Housing) with a breakdown of what students throw away, and what other steps Housing could take to minimize the amount of trash in the waste stream.

The primary means of collecting this information was through “waste audits”: weeklong periods when the waste team would seal off the trash chute of a particular floor in one on-campus residence; install surrogate trash bins in a common area for compost, trash, and recycling; post flyers, create Facebook events, and otherwise outreach to students; and collect, sort, weigh, quantify, and analyze all the trash thrown away by students during the period. The team performed these waste audits three times, twice in Sproul Hall (floors 2 North and 2 South), a Residence Hall, and once in Rieber Terrace (floor 3), a Residential Plaza. Our initial audit, Sproul 2 North (the sustainability-themed floor) yielded promising results. Functioning as a trial run for our further programs, the team did not sort the trash for this first week, but weighed and assessed it to see what effect the team's educational outreach and custom bins had on student waste habits. The team sealed off the trash chute, installed a number of bins in the lounge for the three categories of trash, added one bin to each bathroom for trash waste after appropriating the existing bin for compost, and put a sign in the laundry room to make it a compostable trash site. Despite the team's lack of prior experience, the initial effort proved fruitful: students on 2 North diverted nearly 50% of their waste to compost, and over 30% to recycling. Just from this first week alone, the team could see the potential of a composting program to allow UCLA to meet its 2012 requirements of 75% waste diversion.

The subsequent Sproul 2 South and Rieber Terrace 3 audits both improved upon and expanded the group's first effort. The Sproul 2 South audit was conducted with a much higher degree of outreach, including a Facebook event, pictorial signage in the lounge, and informational notices posted inside each bathroom stall. The team also added a new item to the audit: “Side Saddle” mini-trash bins that clip onto normal plastic waste bins. The group used these tools to promote education and facilitate the sorting of waste by participating students. Given the extended outreach, however, the group's results were a little surprising. Sproul 2 North and Sproul 2 South in fact performed nearly identically. The great difference lay in the fact that the team now sorted Sproul 2 South's waste. Post-sort, diversion rates soared: total compost jumped from just over 50% to 60%, recycling increased by a small margin, and the group nearly halved the total weight of trash. Similarly great differences were found in the Rieber Terrace 3 audit, although the initial

results were distinctly lackluster. Compost rates were by far the lowest out of any audit, with much of the waste just dropped into the trash despite the group's passing around mini-bins prior to the event. Given the close proximity between the Sproul 2 South and the Rieber Terrace 3 audits, however, the group had very little time to do educational outreach prior to its final audit. It appears, then, that although students appear to have the same waste patterns uniformly, education is absolutely critical to the success of any future program.

The group also conducted a number of side projects. One member explored electrolyzed water as an alternative cleaning solution, for example. Two others examined the residential student store and made recommendations on light bulb purchase choices, positioning of sustainable notebooks, and others that were promptly implemented. Lastly, the team examined the trash data collected from the audits, determining that the majority of trash (which could not be diverted to other sources) consisted largely of chip bags, candy wrappers, and other items available at the student store. The team then sought to examine what "best practices" this store – and on-campus housing in general – could adopt to mitigate these trash items.

All together, the group made some startling discoveries. Were a compost program implemented and achieved ideal results, UCLA could divert over 500,000 pounds of trash to compost every school year. Even given student disinterest or any other number of factors, the total likely amount of diversion would still surpass 400,000 pounds – a huge step toward UCLA's Climate Action Plan goals. In addition, the group found that students overwhelmingly support the institution of such a plan, both through one-on-one interactions and floor surveys taken after each audit. Therefore, the group recommends that existing trash chutes in each residence be designated "compost chutes", and that in each new residential building created, one of the two chutes be designated likewise.