

WASTE WATCHERS - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Climate change is a monumental issue threatening life as we know it on this planet; yet it is created by the small day to day actions of human individuals. There is a constant stream of food waste created by students in the UCLA dining halls. That waste required energy and materials to produce and transport it to UCLA, and it will require energy and materials to ship it away. Food waste adds up quickly, and so do its impacts on the environment. Waste Watchers was a program created to measure the average amount of food wasted per person per meal in the UCLA dining halls in order to educate the masses and to make effective change within the dining halls to reduce that amount. As an Action Research Team, Waste Watchers was composed of seven students dedicated to this effort.

During Waste Watchers, students located in the back of the dining hall worked to separate and measure the food waste, liquid waste, and soup/cereal waste that was discarded by eaters. At the end of the meal period the measurement of waste would be divided by the total number of people who ate during that time, resulting in the average quantity of waste per person. Waste Watchers has quantified that the average student wastes approximately 0.18 lbs of food per meal in the UCLA Dining Halls, equating to about 3,500 lbs of food waste produced in the dining halls every day.

The Waste Watchers Action Research Team underwent many educational efforts in order to inspire less food waste. These included surveys, table-tents, LCD screen “tips on wasting less”, and enacting the Zero Food Waste Challenge. The team also worked closely with dining administration in order to create systematic change within the dining halls. These included offering some entrees without side dishes, labeling the desserts so

that students can avoid food they dislike, switching from virgin paper napkins to recycled napkins within the dining halls, and adding a “Customize Your Order!” segment to the bottom of each menu to remind students to customize their dishes in order to reduce food waste.

It is recommended that in the future Waste Watchers focuses less on calculation research and becomes more integrated as a team within dining administration. Over the course of nine weeks, Waste Watchers individuals observed that the majority of people waste little food while a few people waste large quantities - despite educational efforts urging more sustainable eating habits. Therefore, there are always going to be those who lack the motivation to change their eating habits and thus there is always going to be a base-line amount of food waste. In the future, Waste Watchers should work with dining administration to purchase more sustainably-grown food - such as organic, local, and seasonal food- for the dining halls at UCLA. Since there is always going to be food waste, Waste Watchers should make it priority to ensure that that waste has the lowest negative impact on the environment possible.