

College Recycling: what can we do to improve TCU?

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Applied Sociology
Spring 2010
4/1/10

I. Introduction and Research

TCU has received a C grade in the category of Food and Recycling according to the website [The College Sustainability Report Card](#). One thing that TCU is already doing with regard to recycling is that the physical plant takes and recycles yard waste, scrap metal and construction debris as well as recycle paper. We have 11 major recycling bins provided by Waste Management that recycles paper. Any leftover newspapers such as the daily skiff are put into these bins and the reclamation rate is around 70-80% when it all finally gets recycled. We currently do not collect glass bottles for recycling purposes however we can dispose of paper and plastics in various tan bins around campus. Another thing that helps this is that TCU has moved from a dining area that had a lot of take out meals to one with very few. Taking out food in boxes has been prohibited by the mandatory meal plans and the requirement to eat inside the main dining facility. Though this category is a C, we have done a lot here at TCU that has prevented waste from even coming into the campus. Prevention works a lot better when it comes to sustainability than recycling, however TCU does need to work on their recycling program. I believe that to start improving, small steps need to be made. We need to look to some other universities and see what they are improving and engaging in to see how we can improve our own. At this time I will only focus on exemplar universities, those who have received an "A" in this particular category.

Hamilton College has an interesting and unique program called "Cram and Scram." Volunteers come together at the end of the school year and go to the different residents halls, collecting up recyclable and reusable materials. They then sorted out

the material, recycling what was unusable. They were able to store the rest for a time over the summer and during a weekend in August, presumably moving in weekend, they brought it all out and had a two day sale to incoming students. This allowed items that would normally be thrown away to be sold at a cheap price to freshmen who would need the items. Overall they collected some 8.83 tons of books, 7.84 tons of paper group recycling, 2181 pounds of clothing and 642 pounds of food. We have a similar program here called "TCU Trash to Treasure" which collected a large amount of material as well¹. At Hamilton, not only do they prevent a large amount of material being thrown into garbage dumps, but incoming students can get a good deal on things that they may need at a cheaper price than buying it brand new. Much of what could not be resold was able to be recycled in local recycling plants. In fact, many colleges are doing something similar to this. At the end of the year, a group goes around and collects unwanted items and then sells them or donates them to local charities. Also one interesting thing they do is if students use a reusable cup 20 times, they are given \$5 into their food account.

The College of the Atlantic has a unique solution to recycling, not even bringing bottled water onto the campus. Along with that it is doing what many other schools are doing, having a place to drop off ink cartridges so that they can be sent as a whole to be recycled. Many colleges have this kind of a program, they simply arrange with a cartridge recycler or third party such as the Funding Factory and send in their ink cartridges to prevent them going into landfills.

Another thing that many colleges seem to be doing, such as Boston University, is composting their materials. Composting is basically taking organic matter such as food

¹ Avila-Linn, Cathy "Horned Frogs Give" TCU Office of Communications 23 March. 2010 < <http://www.newsevents.tcu.edu/578.asp>>

and keeping it in a certain closed space and then adding heat to allow the material to biodegrade quicker. It can also be done passively by just letting some material sit outside but the biggest problem is the odor which it emits. Princeton University actually sends their postconsumer food scraps to a local pig farm which is another way the food can easily biodegrade.

The University of British Columbia purposefully buys from suppliers who minimize packaging and some schools such as UCLA have made one student dining area or cafe, “zero-waste,” meaning that that specific place produces no trash. Various other universities such as the University of California at San Diego place an emphasis on using reusable cups instead of disposable ones and UCSD actually charges for the disposable containers.

The California Institute of Technology has a comprehensive website dedicated to how to recycle everything from shoes to hazardous material. It directs people to various local services. For example, this website directed me to the Nike Reuse-a-Shoe Program which has a shoe drop-off location in Coppel, not a far distance from Fort Worth. Not every school that has an A in the Food and Recycling category of the Green Report Card has a website dedicated to recycling and green resources, however the California Institute of Technology is one of those that does. Oberlin college also has a fact sheet on what we use and what we can do to prevent unnecessary waste.

The College of Wooster in Ohio gives discounts on coffee to those who bring them own reusable containers, thus promoting that it is good to not waste paper cups. They also seem to have made an arrangement with Waste Management to go to single stream recycling. According to their website this is “a system that allows customers to

mix a variety of recyclable items such as paper, plastic, and glass all in one bin. At the recycling plant, mechanized sorting devices are used to sort the various recycling materials so that you don't have to...as long as you put your recyclables into a recycling container you do not have to sort them²."

Colorado State University has a unique program in which students can be given reusable take out containers. This serves the purpose of keeping the take out option available to students who need it and yet saves waste by allowing them to bring it back and reuse it for whenever they take out food. Rather than using styrofoam containers each time, a student can bring one of these back and put their food in it.

The Georgia Institute of Technology donates excess food to the local food bank. This is something a little bit different. Rather than tossing any extra food, it is all donated and given to people who really need it.

New York University in 2009 had a program called the Green Apple Move out. This was just like any other yearly move out program that a university would have except for its impact. Students donated 73 tons of reusable items compared to the last year's 8 tons. This represented a 2% reduction in NYU's waste stream for the year and saved the school some \$10,000 in waste-hauling costs³. So we can see by looking at this program, that these move out programs can really make a difference in the amount of waste that goes into our landfills as well as costs of transporting it all.

The University of Tulsa has an online forum set up where students can sell, trade or give away used items to other students, kind of like a campus freecycle. Tufts

² "Frequently Asked Questions" College of Wooster 18 March. 2010 <<http://www.wooster.edu/Offices-Directories/Campus-Sustainability/recycling/faq>>

³ "New York University" The College Sustainability Report Card 18 March. 2010 <<http://www.greenreportcard.org/report-card-2010/schools/new-york-university>>

University has a very similar program, a listing of textbooks which students desire to sell to others who may need it. At Virginia Commonwealth University, all napkins provided at dining locations are 100% recyclable, and for the most part are composted.

So for these A universities, we can see a common thread throughout all of them and a few common recycling programs. For the most part, these universities utilize composting in one way or another, specifically for food waste and building material. Unused food is usually given to local food banks where they are served to those less fortunate. Discounts are given to students who use reusable cups or mugs for things such as coffee and tea. Most of these schools recycle something, mostly traditional materials including paper, glass and plastics, however some have programs in which they recycle computers, cell phones, and batteries. Most of the schools also have a sort of donation drive at the end of the year where students give their unused and unwanted stuff which is then either recycled or resold to the community, incoming students the next year, or second hand shops. Surprisingly, not every university has a website that is dedicated to recycling. They are relatively easy and cheap to make and can possibly prevent a lot of waste going into garbage dumps and put them into recycling plants.

These programs vary in scope, sometimes it is very localized such as Tufts university book swap program, but other times it includes the whole community with regard to food banks, off-location storage and extremely specialized recycling. However it is interesting that this Green Report Card rarely mentions what is done to prevent waste from even coming into the university. Plus a lot of what can be considered “reusing” is done on a very micro-scale. Individuals often reuse things without even

knowing it, and even more could be done if more knew how they could reduce, reuse and recycle without even really making an effort.

I believe that one specific recycling initiative that can be implemented here at Texas Christian University without very much startup cost is to put a “shelf” of sorts where students and staff could leave any unwanted materials and where others could pick them up. The best place that this could be implemented is in the little cubby area in the library where newspapers and magazines often are. I have noticed that recently there has been a clearing of space in that area and it would be the perfect place to leave unwanted materials due to the amount of traffic through there as well as the fact that it is not in anyone’s way.

There does not appear to be any such program like this in too many universities. Though many desire to go green, they are often not willing to sacrifice some aesthetic value for the cause of helping the environment. I have not found any university that has a designated place for something like this to be in. Many have end of the year drives where students can donate various goods, but it is a problem because a lot of times students will want to get rid of things throughout the school year. Students have for the most part only a few options for getting rid of usable materials. First is they can drive to the nearest thrift store or Goodwill and donate them however that takes time and can be out of the way and many will see throwing them away as just a valid an option. Another option is the website Freecycle. However many people do not know about it or are willing to take the time to post the item, and then actually travel around the area to drop it off. It is just too long to wait until the end of the year to get rid of the item so because

of convenience, students will just throw it away and not find someone who would want it.

Setting off a section in the entrance of the library would help this because that is a central location and most students go there often. They could simply bring their items from home or from the dorm with them and drop them off as they enter or leave the library. Others would be able to see it as they exit the library and if they found something interesting, they could pick it up.

I see the need for this program at TCU because of the excessive amount of unnecessary things we throw away, even at the end of the year. Throughout last semester I saw teachers in Reed hall cleaning out their offices and leaving on tables books for students or any other passer-by to pick up. I myself found some good books and I'm sure others did as well. This served as an alternative to trashing them. I'm sure the school saved a good amount of money on hauling them because students picked up books they liked that would have otherwise went into the trash can. So my vision is to see this as not just occurring when teachers need to move from their offices, but as an all year opportunity to provide someone something they need and would not have otherwise received.

This program will benefit TCU in three ways. It will help the university to become more green and have a better public image. It will increasing the general happiness of teachers by giving them an ethical option to get rid of textbooks they are sent but are not wanted. And working students who are struggling to get by may be able to find something for free that they would have had to spend hard earned money on.

If implemented, this would be something that would help increase the public image of TCU around the community. Many have a certain image about TCU and the students who go here. Implementing this would make the community aware that students and staff at TCU are generous people and that we are willing to share the excesses we might have with others who may find a need for it. TCU can show others that there is a real community here and we believe in helping each other. Also it would improve our grade in the Sustainability Report Card which some students might look at when deciding which school to go to, as sustainability is growing in importance. We want to show others that we care about both our community and our world.

Teachers are often sent a large variety of textbooks by publishers, each publisher hoping that the professor will choose their textbook. Though some publishers will take the books back, it is an inconvenience to do so. Most teachers here understand the ethical problem with actually selling these free copies. But throwing them away or even recycling them is often not an option since they are still good books. An area such as I propose would be a great place for teachers to drop off unwanted textbooks they are sent, as well as anything else they may have. It is an ethical solution to a major problem that exists in the teaching profession. That way, they not only get rid of things they don't need, but their office can be a more pleasant space to work in since they are not surrounded by unnecessary material.

Many students in college are working at one place or another, sometimes to pay for school, other times for personal expenses. Either way, everyone can agree that financially, times can get rough. Sometimes students will also have to buy supplies for one class that they may never use again. With an area such as I propose, students who

have bought something for only one class, can leave it for another who might have a use for it, such as a ruler or construction paper. Often times for a project we buy a lot more than is necessary, well instead of simply recycling or throwing away the excess, we can leave it in this area and someone else who could use it would simply be able to take it, not having to go to the store, they could save time and money.

I believe that this is a project that requires minimal resources and only a few steps to put together. The only thing you really need to buy is a shelving or cabinet unit. These can be purchased for as little as \$20 depending on the style that is approved by the university. I feel that something such as a two drawer holding chest would be appropriate to start out, this could be purchased from Walmart if there is a cost problem, or you could go with good quality material at office depot. The next step would be to notify the library and the appropriate administrative persons to confirm the space. Right now there is not much there and so nothing really needs to be moved.

The space I am looking at is the small entryway in between the library and the outside where many of the newspapers and the campus map is located. This is the perfect place for it because nothing really needs to be moved and it is a high traffic area for most students on campus. Faculty might have a bit of a difficulty putting unwanted things there, however they could easily ask a student who is going over that way to simply drop it off. That way, the program gets a lot of exposure as well as serve its primary purpose.

The next step is for several students who are willing, to dedicate their time to make sure that the items placed in this dresser drawer are appropriate and they would

work with the administration to determine that. Ideally there would not be that much controversial material that would show up at the dresser and if it did, that it would be removed quite quickly.

Then the same administrative group should be able to post an email in the TCU Announce about it, as well as put up signs over the campus to tell others about it. Ideally, the group would be allowed to send one mass email to the whole campus about the program to start out. Finally, there should be some material that is put in there initially to start off the program. Maybe flashcards, printer paper, pencils or pens, rulers and so on. I believe that once students know there will always be something in there, that the program would self-perpetuate and accomplish the goals of reducing the amount of trash in the landfills, show others that we care about the community, and please both students and teachers who either need something, or wish to donate something but who do not have the time on their own to go off campus.

As simple as this may be, I understand that there may be a few problems that could arise that would prevent this recycling initiative from being implemented by the end of this semester. One of the problems is that people may question its effectiveness. Some may feel that students or teachers do not really care about getting rid of their stuff until they have to actually move out of their space. I would disagree with that and say that that is simply because there is no way to get rid of it throughout the year. We have can food drives but food is not generally a problem to get rid of here at TCU, its the clothes, books, and so on that are usually trashed. The program at the end of the semester where boxes are put into dorm rooms and much is given at that time is a good

start, but I feel that a good portion of things are discarded because students cannot wait until the end of the year. Teachers don't even really get that option except for rare times such as last semester when they moved out of their building.

Another problem that could occur is that instead of useful things such as markers, rulers, paper, books and so on, people just put trash in there instead. I understand that this is a real problem but I feel that we will never know what students and staff want to get rid of or take until we actually try to implement this. I think at least a trial run should be given and a student or two should be allowed to take on the responsibility of keeping track of how much is used and what is put in there compared to what is taken out.

Along the same lines as the trash, there could possibly be a problem with controversial materials and a discussion of what should and should not be there. This will have to be a problem solved by the box administrators and a staff member of TCU, ideally a head librarian. Since it is in the library area, it might be well to have the library rules of censorship and banned material apply to the dresser of unwanted and drop off materials as well.

Another problem that may prevent this from being implemented at the end of this semester is the fact that by the time this information is out there, it will be close to the end of the semester and the higher ups could postpone it until next year and then forget about it. I think that though it is close to the end of the year and students will probably be donating things through their dorms anyway, there is still the summer. Summer could be a time in which it is given a very light trial run and see how it works out. It is

something also that visiting students could see might be happening on campus if they choose to come here.

One other problem is that a student or someone outside the TCU community who might come into the library may decide to take all the items and sell what they can to people who are willing to buy it. This problem will have to be solved as time goes on and as persons are put in charge of maintaining and looking into this TCU free goods program. I do not think that much of what students will want to get rid of will have very much resale value at all though. I feel that anything valuable will be taken quickly by someone who likes it and someone who wants to take all of the goods will find it not worth the hassle unless they really like it all.

One final problem that this program may encounter is how the administration feels something like this would have an effect on the school's reputation. Rather than see it as an opportunity to show that us frogs really care about not wasting anything, the administration could see this as being tacky and the start of TCU becoming a welfare-poor school. It may have a bad image because in general, students who come here are rather rich. But then again, we may have the image of being stuck up and this might show to critics that we care about the world around us. If this is a particularly big obstacle, we can always have the appointed monitors of the dresser take the "junk" items and donate them to the Goodwill every three weeks or so. If this area has too much traffic for this kind of a program, I would also suggest the secondary exit of Market Square, heading out to the Campus Commons

This recycling initiative should not cost a lot of time nor effort nor money to put into place. I suggest that in the library entrance area we should have a dresser drawer

that anyone can put unneeded but still usable items in for anyone to take. All that is required is a dresser drawer and that would solve problems from student's worries about if they can afford to buy a specified item at retail price, to teachers who want to get rid of books they are sent but have no ethical way of doing so. There should be appointed or chosen a group of people who, at least in the beginning, make sure that the program is working right and that only appropriate things are placed into the drawers. I believe that this program, by keeping non-waste materials from landfills, can show others that horned frogs really care about our community and our world.

Bibliography

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