Adopting a Zero-Waste Attitude at USF

As you walk through the USF campus, residence halls, and cafeteria, one thing you are sure to see are the iconic blue and green recycling and compost bins. You might be surprised to learn that over 90% of what USF throws away can be composted or recycled.

Andrea Perez, USF ’18, works in the USF Environmental Safety Office and is training USF Eco-Educators to teach students about waste reduction. She explained, “Recycling and composting can make a difference by reducing our dependence on fossil fuels, eliminating carbon emissions, and transforming food waste into fertile compost.”

In the 2016 RecycleMania Tournament, a national waste-reduction competition among colleges and universities, USF was rated one of the top 13 (up from #20 last year) institutions for material diversion from the landfill. “USF has a great potential to improve recycling and composting. As the year winds down, when it comes time to move out of the dorms, remember to recycle and give away before you throw away. Adopt a zero-waste mindset,” encouraged Richard Hsu, USF’s Sustainability Coordinator.

Here are four ways you can help USF reduce waste:

1. Start by reducing and refusing unnecessary consumption;
2. Reuse when possible;
3. Learn blue-bin behavior and recycle. Glass, metal, plastic, cardboard, and clean paper products can all be recycled; and
4. Educate yourself about composting and compost. Food waste, coffee cups, dirty napkins, paper towels, and cafeteria dining ware can all be composted.

Flex Your Green Muscle: Four Ways You Can Help

#1: Start by Reducing

The easiest way to create less waste is to start by reducing it in the first place. Specifically, avoid using single-use disposable items (i.e., plastic water bottles) whenever possible. Yes, life is busy, but we can all help do our part by carrying our own mug and using a refillable water bottle. Max Wechsler, MBA/MSEM ’16, gives a presentation called “Trash Talk”, which educates USF students on recycling and composting. He is passionate about opening students’ eyes to the journey of the materials that we routinely discard. “It doesn’t just disappear,” Max elaborated. He believes that the first step is to start with reducing waste. “Reducing waste comes before everything else,” he emphasized.
#2: Reuse when Possible

Next comes reuse. Before you toss something into a black bin, think twice. Ask yourself, “Can this item be reused or donated?” Check out Yerdle (https://yerdle.com/), an online platform for trading stuff you don’t want anymore. Or consider donating it to Goodwill or the Salvation Army.

#3: Learn Blue-Bin Behavior and Recycle

The recent USF trash audit revealed that approximately 40% of what USF throws away could have been recycled. Of the recyclable materials thrown away, 20% was mixed paper, 10% cardboard, and 10% bottles/cans/plastic cups, and containers.

If a plastic bottle or newspaper is tossed into the trash, it is sent to “the pit” (see picture to the right), where all San Francisco trash goes before it is transferred to the landfill. When a can, bottle, or paper item is thrown away, precious natural resources are wasted that could have found a new life as recycled-content paper or a new bottle.

Max explained, “Basic bin behavior is easy to learn. It just takes a few moments.” San Francisco has a “single stream” recycling system, which means that all recyclable materials can be comingled (mixed) into the blue bins. Throughout campus there are recycling stations and signs and every residence hall floor has a recycling station.

Benefits of Recycling: Andrea stressed that making the connection between recycling and how it impacts the environment is key for shifting student behavior. She explained, “There is a huge disconnect between throwing something away and its impact on the environment.” Compared to landfilling materials, recycling:

- Reduces the need to mine natural resources for manufacturing. According to Enlightenme, 219 million barrels of oil are used to manufacture plastic in the U.S. each year;
- Protects trees. According to Enlightenme, if just half the paper used in the U.S. were recycled, it would save over 700 million trees annually;
- Saves energy and reduces carbon emissions; and
- Enhances the economy by creating jobs. According to EcoCycle, recycling, reuse, and remanufacturing account for 3.1 million jobs in the U.S.—one out of every three green jobs.

Call-to-Action: Place newspapers, clean paper, cardboard, magazines, and letters in the blue bin, as well as all metals, bottles, cans, and hard plastics. For more information on what can be recycled, go HERE.

Learn More: Other resources to learn more about what can be recycled include whatbin.com and recyclewhere.org. Whatbin.com can help you with tricky questions such as, “What do I do with a pizza box?” Recyclewhere.org will provide you resources and information on how to recycle items that don’t go into the bins, such as batteries and mattresses.
#4: Compost, Compost, Compost!

At USF, about half of what we throw away can be composted. This includes all organic matter, such as food waste and soiled paper products. In San Francisco, compostable material is collected and, through the natural process of decomposition, converted into humus, which is a nutrient-rich, water-retentive soil.

When we forget to compost items, it has an impact. In San Francisco, if you throw a banana peel into the black bin, it goes to the landfill, where it generates methane, a potent greenhouse gas. If you toss that same banana peel into the green bin, it is sent to a commercial composting facility in Vacaville, where over a 60-day period it is transformed into nutrient-rich humus that is sold to local farmers. The farmers use it to fertilize their crops, growing new food and creating a zero-waste, closed-looped system.

**Benefits of Composting:** “Composting is nature’s form of recycling,” explained Max. It has many benefits, including:

- The reduction of carbon emissions. Composting is fundamentally an aerobic process, which does not produce methane. According to the US Composting Council, if everyone in the United States composted all of their food waste, the impact would be equivalent to removing 7.8 million cars from the road;
- Less dependence on fossil fuels by reducing the need for petroleum-based fertilizers; and
- Acceleration of nutrient cycling.

**Call-to-Action:** Of the compostable materials found in the USF trash, 35% was food-soiled paper service ware (cups, plates, etc.) and 10% was napkins and paper towels. Do your part by placing food waste, soiled paper towels and napkins, dirty coffee cups, and soiled pizza boxes into the green bin. In the cafeteria, if you must take out, everything—containers, cups, and utensils—can be put into the green bin. PLA (polylactic acid) materials, the clear plastic-looking cups and food containers, can be composted as long as they have the word “compostable” on them. This is the case for all dining ware at USF.

**Learn More:** For more details on what can be composted, go HERE.

**Go Dons**

Adopt a zero-waste attitude. Remember:

- Start by reducing and refusing unnecessary consumption!
- Reuse when possible.
- Learn blue-bin behavior and recycle.
- Educate yourself about composting and compost.

**Images:** Compost cycle from UCSF.