

Recycling at Kennesaw State University: What Does “Going Green” Mean?

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades recycling has steadily become more readily available to residential, commercial, and industrial properties throughout North America. The concept of “going green” has been introduced to American culture to try and promote recycling behavior and awareness. This project was designed to identify and understand current recycling policies and practices by students, faculty, and staff on the campus of Kennesaw State University in Georgia. Mini-Recycling Centers (MRC’s) located throughout campus were directly observed to better understand disposal and recycling behaviors and students, faculty, and staff were interviewed about KSU’s current policy and collection methods. MRC’s are receptacles located throughout campus and give the depositor options on how to discard their waste. Because this decision is up to the depositor, the research finds that people more often than not are discarding all of their waste as trash instead of separating it into the recyclables, unless their discard is a single recyclable item such as a plastic bottle, aluminum can, or a piece of paper. This behavior seems to be tied to education on what is and is not recyclable, convenience, and a policy that has not kept up with the technologies available by the waste collection facilities. Keeping up with these technologies is important not only on campus but in everyday waste disposal habits in order to conserve resources for ourselves and future generations.

METHODS

The concept of “going green” is relatively new in American culture. The slogan was developed to try and make people think more about the environment and how much their personal decisions in day to day operations can affect their surroundings. This study was centered around actual behavior instead of reported behavior because previous research has shown that a third to a half of everything people report about their behavior is not true (Bernard 2006:90). The study took place at Kennesaw State University during the spring semester of 2011. The decision was made that the best two places to observe people disposing of waste on campus was at the ground level of the social sciences building and in the student center. These are the two busiest areas for students to sit and consume products that would create an atmosphere to observe and record waste disposal behavior. Observations were made on four separate occasions at one hour intervals from 9:00 – 10:00 am and 12:00 – 1:00 pm. These time frames cover two 15 minute breaks between classes from 9:15 – 9:30 am and 12:15 – 12:30 pm that made for a high traffic flow and resulted in difficulty recording exact counts of people and their discard choices during these time. Because of this potential bias on my part as the observer, the decision was made to directly observe the content of the MRC’s. To directly observe and record quantifiable data on MRC’s and their use on campus, I randomly selected buildings to observe around campus and drew samples from randomly selected floors from each building. Data was collected on the contents of each receptacle by recording the labeling and contents of each MRC. Multiple interviews were also conducted which included two semi-structured interviews with staff members that directly contribute to environmental and recycling policy on campus, as well as two unstructured interviews with members of the custodial staff. Ten additional interviews were administered to students on campus using the street-intercept method.

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Figure 1- Student Center



Figure 2 – Mini-Recycling Center



Figure 3 – Contents of 2 Receptacles: Aluminum on Left, Plastic on Right

	Paper	Aluminum	Plastic	Trash	Total
Properly Marked	13	15	15	14	57
Not Properly Marked	2	0	0	1	3
Contaminated	1	7	9	13	30
Uncontaminated	10	8	6	2	30

Figure 4 – Table of MRC Observations

RESULTS

Analyzing the data collected from the MRC’s began with the initial visual observations made of them. I found that they were designed to separate waste into four categories: paper, aluminum, plastic, and trash. The trash receptacles were marked by dark brown or grey bins and featured black or dark brown trash bags. The recycling receptacles were marked by blue bins and featured clear trash bags. After a brief discussion with a member of the janitorial staff she explained to me that this was done so that during collection all bags could be tossed in one cart and then separated again later. The clear bags also allowed for a quick glimpse into the contents of the bags to see if they were contaminated. If the bag was too contaminated, it would then be discarded as regular waste that would be sent to the landfill. I also found that the collection services contracted by KSU at this time do not require recyclable materials to be separated. They have the capability of single source recycling which allows for the collection of mixed recyclables. The Department of Environmental Health Safety and Risk Management (EHS & RM) current recycling policy states that even though the current collector “does not require the separation of recyclable materials, separation is a best management practice in the event that KSU uses a different company in future that requires separation.” After observing the contents of 60 receptacles half of the receptacles were considered contaminated. Most of the contamination was from mixed recyclables and recyclables deposited as trash. This shows that students, faculty, and staff recognized that the material was recyclable, but was negligent in paying attention to dispose of it in its properly marked receptacle. During the participant observation sessions in the student center and social science building no separation of recyclables was observed unless the depositor had only one item to dispose of. When disposing of a single item that was recyclable no effort was observed to try and deposit the recyclable in a recycling receptacle if it were not near by. It was then discarded as trash.

CONCLUSIONS

Most recycling centers now have the technology for single source recycling collection and processing. I have found that most of the recycling contamination on campus occurs because of a mixing of recyclables in one receptacle, and recyclables being disposed of as trash. To improve recycling behavior and reduce the amount of waste sent to landfills a new method of collection encompassing a single source collection method must be instituted. Currently the EHS & RM is in negotiations with a recycling service that could meet these needs. The service would allow for single source collection in one big can designed to collect paper, plastic, and aluminum all together in one receptacle. I believe this research also demonstrates that the problems facing campus currently can be attributed to a lack of education on what is and is not recyclable. No signs were observed in or around any of the MRC’s describing the materials that could be deposited other than the four basic categories. Every person interviewed during this study agreed that recycling was an important issue facing not only campus but the world today with one stating, “other than my plastic water bottle or a can of coke, I’m not sure what else is recyclable except goodwill.”

REFERENCES

Will provide upon request.