



## 2023 Campus Race to Zero Waste Case Study Competition

### *Composting in Evans Dining Hall at Agnes Scott College*

#### **Contact info:**

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#### **Focus of case study:**

Increase campus awareness about best composting practices, promote positive behavior change, and increase composting in our dining hall by diverting compostable waste from the landfill.

#### **Detailed description of campaign or effort:**

This campaign was created to raise awareness of Agnes Scott's composting service and promote the use of reusable/compostable materials in the dining hall. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the campus had a diversion rate of 40.15%<sup>1</sup> and most guests had a pretty good understanding of how to sort their food waste and trash in the dining hall. During this case study, we discovered that the pandemic has greatly impacted the retention of our campus's institutional knowledge surrounding composting in our dining hall. This coupled with the fact that once we came back to campus in the Fall semester of 2021, a significant portion of our campus community would start eating in Evans for the first time (new students, new faculty and staff members). This has resulted in a lack of understanding of how our campus community should properly dispose of their waste.

Pre-pandemic operations in Evans Dining Hall had guests pick up dishes and utensils in and around the food lines. At this time, Evans had more emphasis on reusable dining materials, such as silverware and mugs. During the pandemic, we had to move towards single use items for public health requirements. Because of this our post-

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that our diversion rate does not include other methods of diverting waste such as our IT department recycling electronics, Agnes Scott using CHaRM (Center for Hard to Recycle Materials) for materials such as Styrofoam and glass, and Agnes Scott reusing or donating materials from move out.

pandemic set up in the dining hall has a wide selection of serving ware (metal silverware, ceramic plates and bowls, reusable plastic cups, single-use compostable cups and bowls, single-use cups, and single-use plastic utensils), all of which are available for the guests to choose from, causing inconsistent messaging of best practices and preference to reusable serving ware. The dish-return is a window with revolving shelves for guests to place their dishes on, and usually has two large trash cans on either side of it. Guests are asked to take trash (like the plasticware, food packages, and single-use cups) off of their plates and put them in the trash cans, before placing their dishes and all compostable materials on the return shelves.

Current day operations have nearly all guests thinking that they were supposed to scrape their plates into the trash cans and place their cleared dishes on the return. This meant that most of the compostable materials were going into the trash, and not the compost.

This miscommunication and change from pre-pandemic best practices are the foundational focus of this case study. The following sections show the overview of the awareness campaign, communications with dining staff, and changes in physical infrastructure.

#### **Planning steps & timeline to implement:**

- **Fall 2022:** Identified the lack of efficient composting and high use of non-renewable/compostable utensils and dishes in the dining hall
- **Fall 2022:** Brain-stormed solutions on how to address this problem and how members of our college's Green Team can help with raising awareness for composting
- **Fall 2022:** Started working with Facilities and Dining to get a better understanding of composting and how our campus community uses single-use utensils/dishes in Evans, as well as learn how our campus community typically disposed of their waste
- **Fall 2022:** Continued to observe how people interact with renewables in our dining hall; we notice that while people tended to use materials like our compostable single use materials, these materials would still end up in the trash; noted that people were the most confused about what was compostable/how to compost
- **Fall | December 2022:** Developed infographics and a guide to composting to put by the dish return in Evans
- **Spring | February 2023:** Put up posters by the dish return in the dining hall that tell people how to sort their waste
- **Spring | March 2023:** Met with Green Team to plan on how to address people's confusion about how to compost and assess the impact of the poster
- **Spring | April 12th - April 20th 2023:** Held several tabling events in Evans Dining hall to answer questions about composting and to encourage people in the dining hall to compost
- **Spring | May 1st 2023:** Last meeting with our student researcher to recap our case study
- **Spring | May 4th 2023:** Last Green Team meeting to recap our case study and discuss next steps for composting in Evans Dining Hall; discussion of creating a campus-wide zero waste plan, including composting in Evans Dining Hall

#### **Resources and stakeholders involved:**

It was communicated and decided with dining staff leadership that our dining staff would support this effort by completing all composting back of house and would provide the space and pictures for our signage. The Center for Sustainability and the Green Team, Dr. Molly Embree, Belle Ewing, and Martha Ille, tabled at the dining hall to raise awareness about composting.

We had the help of our two staff members in the Center for Sustainability (Director for the Center for Sustainability, Kimberly Reeves and Sustainability Fellow, Fayola Waithe), work study student Grace Payne, student researcher Belle Ewing, Assistant Director of Facilities Dewanda Henderson, ASC staff members Wynetta Reid and Gail Lofton, Dining Director Juan Tamayo, and members of our Green Team.

**Describe the results of this campaign component:**

- **General results:** From our campaign, we were able to raise awareness of how to properly compost in our dining hall. Many people who stopped by our table told their friends about composting and were able to introduce their friends to composting. We felt like overall, this increased our campus' general knowledge about composting. Information about composting in the dining hall was spread by word of mouth, we observed that students, faculty, and staff were equally engaged in the topic.
- **Specific measurable impact:** Facilities Services and Dining Services contracts with an industrial composting company to pick up compost, so there was no additional charge for increased composting. We were also able to observe that during the timeframe of this project, there was an increased cost due to overage in trash, not composting; this was also a datapoint we used in communicating the need to increase composting since it was impacting our overall waste hauling budget.

Our data shows an incremental increase of composting between February and March. During this two month time range, we saw a decrease in the amount we sent to landfill, from 27.86 tons in February to 23.01 tons sent to landfill in March. Specifically, the amount we composted increased from 3.48 tons in February to 3.92 tons in March. However, we would like to acknowledge that Agnes Scott College has a two week Spring break in March. The decrease in the amount sent to landfill was most likely due to the decrease in the number of students on campus in that time frame.

While we also saw a decrease in the amount we sent to landfill in April, we did not see a significant increase in the amount we composted in April due to miscommunication between our office and our dining staff. As a result, our campus community was confused on how they should properly dispose of their waste in Evans. We were informed that dining hall staff had told people to scrape their plates into the trash, even though our signs stated that people should not scrape their plates. About 3.48 tons of compost was sent to landfill in April, this mirrors our composting rate from earlier in the 2023 Spring semester. For the 2023 Spring semester (January - April) we had an overall diversion rate of 45% (this includes composting and recycling, but is still missing e-waste, CHaRM and other waste streams).

**What would you do differently in the future?**

Working on how to reduce waste and become more sustainable can be a complicated and multi-layered task. This proved true for our Campus Race to Zero Waste Case Study. While Agnes Scott has the infrastructure for composting in our dining hall, the culture of composting has been forgotten due to the pandemic. Many people had to readjust to being on campus, especially incoming first-years who look to their classmates to better understand the campus culture. Along with our students, faculty and staff who eat in the dining hall, the college has off-campus guests who frequently eat lunch, including the Global Village Project middle schoolers, County staff and other community members. All of these target audiences need different forms of communication and a reintroduction to how to engage with materials in the dining hall. Because of these changes made to navigate the pandemic, the culture we have surrounding composting in our dining hall has been lost. Along with this culture shift, our dining hall had to rely more on single use items during the pandemic. This habit was strengthened when the dishwasher in our dining hall was broken for about a semester. This normalized the use and expectation that serving ware in the dining hall will go to the landfill. This belief was influenced by the fact that our campus did not procure compostable serving ware and does not have composting infrastructure outside the dining hall. During this case study, we hypothesized that these changes contributed to the confusion on our sustainability practices in the dining hall. If our students are used to throwing away their items, then they will assume all items from the dining hall are trash. The fact that we had several waste bins in front of the dish return did not help with that fact. By talking to other students in the dining hall our student researcher, Belle Ewing, discovered that many students were confused about which bin to use. At the time of the case study, the bins in our dining hall appeared to be the same and the size of the top made it easy for people to scrape everything in the trash. One of the main roadblocks to composting in Evans is the fact that we need to reinstate and maintain a culture of composting on campus.

Another thing that we would do differently is change the location of our Composting Q&A table. When our Green Team was tabling during April, our table was located directly by the dish return. While this meant that we could catch people right before they returned their dish, we felt like we would have been able to reach more people if our table was located near the front of the dining hall. This way we would be able to catch people as they came inside. We also discussed making table tents with composting information to put the tables in Evans. This would allow for people to get a reminder about composting while they had lunch. The table tents would also allow us to spread the information at breakfast and dinner, since they would remain there all day.

In the future, we hope that we would be able to explore if we would be able to compost front of house. We think that giving people the opportunity to see how to compost/where their waste goes would improve people's understanding of composting and would be the foundational work needed to expand composting to other buildings on campus along with providing our campus community members the transferable skills to compost correctly in other communities. Front of house composting would also help our dining staff, as they would not have to worry about composting back of house. We would also alter our bin infrastructure, focusing on standard colors, signage and lids that visually guide proper sorting. We will invest in labeling the compostable materials in our dining hall so that people can quickly identify them and use them at Evans, along with continuing conversations to increase reusable serving ware options and reducing single-use of all materials.

When we continue making composting at our dining hall more efficient. We would focus on trying to build a culture of composting in our dining hall. As we stated earlier in this section, focusing on changing the culture of

waste in our dining hall would be beneficial as it would allow the collective memory of Agnes Scott to maintain the information about composting and waste reduction.

**What advice would you give to another college that wanted to do a similar effort?**

For other schools who want to start a project like this it is important to remember that trying to create significant behavioral changes takes time and this is an ongoing project. So at first, it will seem overwhelming, but don't get discouraged. We had four overarching themes we'd like to emphasize as best practices.

**1) Engage Campus Partners + Champions:** Collaborate with multiple groups on campus, such as dining and facilities. By doing this you will be able to not only have multiple perspectives on composting and campus life, you will also have more help from people who can participate in the project.

**2) Listen to Your Community:** It is also important to see what your overall campus understanding of the topic that you are trying to change behavior around is. Getting a better understanding of how much people know about a topic can help you specifically target certain areas. Specifically for our campus, a lot of our students knew how to compost or were passionate about reducing waste/sustainability efforts. The problem was that not a lot of students knew that we composted in our dining hall or were confused on how to dispose of their waste because of the multiple bins in front of the dish return. Once we started targeting those specific problems, raising awareness and looking into how to tidy our bins, we were able to focus our communication on proper sorting specific to composting.

**3) Instill Institutional Knowledge:** We would also like other colleges to know that when trying to implement changes on campus, it is important to make sure that the information can easily be passed onto the next generation of students on campus. During our research into this topic, we also found that some common practices on campus were lost when we got a new cohort of students. This case study revealed that our campus community is still adjusting to being on campus after many semesters of remote learning and living, because of this many practices, such as composting in the dining hall, have been forgotten about by our campus community. We would urge other colleges to also consider how their campus community might still be adjusting to being in person after such a long period of being off campus and how that affects their campus practices. Understanding that your campus might still be feeling the different effects of the pandemic might put into perspective some of the things your campus community is tackling.

**4) Be Consistent:** An opportunity for continued communication is with our internal dining hall staff. Collectively, we need to determine our best practices and then be consistent, so communication and awareness campaigns are effective.

Finally composting and waste diversion is an important part of helping our campus become more sustainable and meeting our carbon neutrality goal. We also believe that education is an important part of helping us move towards our goals and retain intergenerational knowledge about composting and reducing waste. We encourage other colleges interested in composting and other methods of waste diversion to work towards building up the institutional knowledge to build a strong foundation. Having a strong foundation will make way for long lasting institutional change in the future.

Photos and Graphics:

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# DONE EATING?

Where does everything go?  
Anything left is either put on the  
**dish return** or in a **garbage bin**.



Figure 1: Signage made by Grace Payne



Figure 2: Signage made by Grace Payne



Figure 3: Belle Ewing (right) explaining which materials are compostable to Agnes Scott students, photo credit Fayola Waithe



Figure 4: Belle Ewing (right) talking with astronomy professor Dr. Amy Lovell (left), photo credit Fayola Waithe



Figure 5: Compost fact sheet shared at our table made by Fayola Waithe