

“Composting Is Hot” Composting Campaign Case Study

Fall 2017 | By Nate Steers

Project Overview

At the University of Vermont (UVM), the Recycling and Waste Management program and the UVM Eco-Reps have identified a lack of understanding of composting within on-campus residential halls. Although composting efforts remain high within dining halls, the composting program is not as widely utilized or understood on a campus wide level. As the process of personal composting is met with misconceptions and reservations, the perspectives from students and front desk staff hinder the ability of the composting program to be more widespread. To make the case to improve and increase the breadth of the residential composting program, the UVM Eco-Reps carried out a composting campaign in during the 2017 fall semester. Not only is this an important aspect of the university’s sustainability progress, but it is also a means of promoting good habits for students who eventually move off-campus into the greater Burlington area, a city in which residential composting is promoted.

Background

The UVM Recycling & Waste Management program has been collecting compost from its dining facilities since 1997 and has been collecting compost from residential halls since the the 2014 fall semester. On average, UVM diverts over 10 tons of pre-and post-consumer food waste for composting. The majority of this weight is allocated from food and compostable package waste from dining locations, which is collected by Casella, a contracted waste hauler. Additional compost is collected from residential halls by a group of student employees. Compost bins are located in the lobbies of residential halls and compostable bags are provided to students to use within their rooms. Each week, on Monday and Friday, residential hall compost is collected by a group of work-study students who weigh and record the weights before combining the materials with the rest of the on-campus compost. Once combined, all organic materials from UVM are sent across seven miles to the Green Mountain Compost facility, located in Williston, Vermont. Additionally, under Vermont’s Act 148, a universal recycling and composting law, Vermont residences and business will be required to divert all food scraps from their waste streams. With regulations set to be in place in 2018, participation rates will require support from various institutions, including UVM.

Goals

Through means of increased outreach, education, and promotion, the campaign goal was to increase composting efforts within residential halls. This includes increasing awareness of the UVM composting program, promotion of the bins and personal bags, educating students about how to compost and the benefits of doing so, and tracking

data such as compost weights, bags issued at events, and responses from a brief composting survey.

Implementation

The UVM Eco-Reps consists of 20 students that are divided up into five community teams of Change Agents, with each team assigned to a specified residential area on campus. Each team was responsible for creating and implementing a customized outreach approach that included educating residential front desk staff, tabling, and partnering to include composting education at existing food-related events within their residential location over a 4-week period.

Residential Employee Outreach

Personal compost bags are available to residents at each front desk location but the staff there were not consistently trained on the composting program and their role. Eco-Reps connected with front desk managers to close the knowledge gap and encourage their staff to promote the use of the bags. Each front desk was provided with a reference sheet detailing composting in residential halls to help staff answer questions from residents and referring them to the manager of the composting program if needed.

Tabling and Events

The Eco-Reps also hosted a variety of tabling sessions and events throughout the campaign. Tabling and events were used as a means of educating students about composting and providing additional resources such as composting bags and informational guides. As this time of the academic year involves a lot of events around holidays such as Halloween and Thanksgiving, many of the composting events were partnered with existing events that involving food and activities. Through partnerships with residential advisors and other groups on campus, composting outreach and education could be spread to a larger audience.

Green Mountain Compost Facility Tour

In an effort to conduct campus wide outreach and education, the Eco-Reps also facilitated a tour to the Green Mountain Compost facility towards the end of the campaign. The purpose of this tour was to educate students about where their organics are sent and processed after leaving the university. The Eco-Reps promoted the tour through outreach with in various related courses, offering the opportunity to over 1000. Additionally, extra credit for specific courses was offered to over 700 students if they participated in the tour.

Timeline

The UVM Eco-Reps carried out this campaign throughout the second half of October and the month of November.

Weekly Schedule

10/23/17 - 10/27/17

- Tabling in residential halls

10/30/17 - 11/3/17

- Tabling in residential halls
- Partnership with Open Mic event

11/6/17 - 11/10/17

- Tabling in residential halls
- Make Your Own Trail Mix event
- Partnership with Wellness Bake Off event
- Promotion of compost tour in the student center

11/13/17 - 11/17/17

- Tabling in residential halls
- Make Your Own Smoothie event
- Succulent Planting event
- Partnership with Friendsgiving event
- Partnership with Wellness cooking event
- Partnership with Wellness Mindfulness event
- Composting outreach at Pie-Palooza event
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11/20/17 - 11/24/17

- Thanksgiving break

11/26/17 - 12/1/17

- Snapchat takeover to promote composting on campus
- Green Mountain Compost Facility tour

Financing

The majority of resources for the Compost Campaign were financed through the UVM Eco-Reps budget. This includes costs for events and promotional resources, such as stickers and printed material. Personal compost bags were provided by the composting program manager and promoted and distributed by the Eco-Rep Change Agents. Additional printed resources detailing composting information were donated by Green Mountain Compost. Below is the breakdown of the cost of resources.

Composting stickers: \$128.40

Snapchat Geofilters: \$9.49

Event Food Items: \$242.74

Bus to Green Mountain Compost: \$180.00

Printed resources: \$90.50
Grand Total: \$651.13

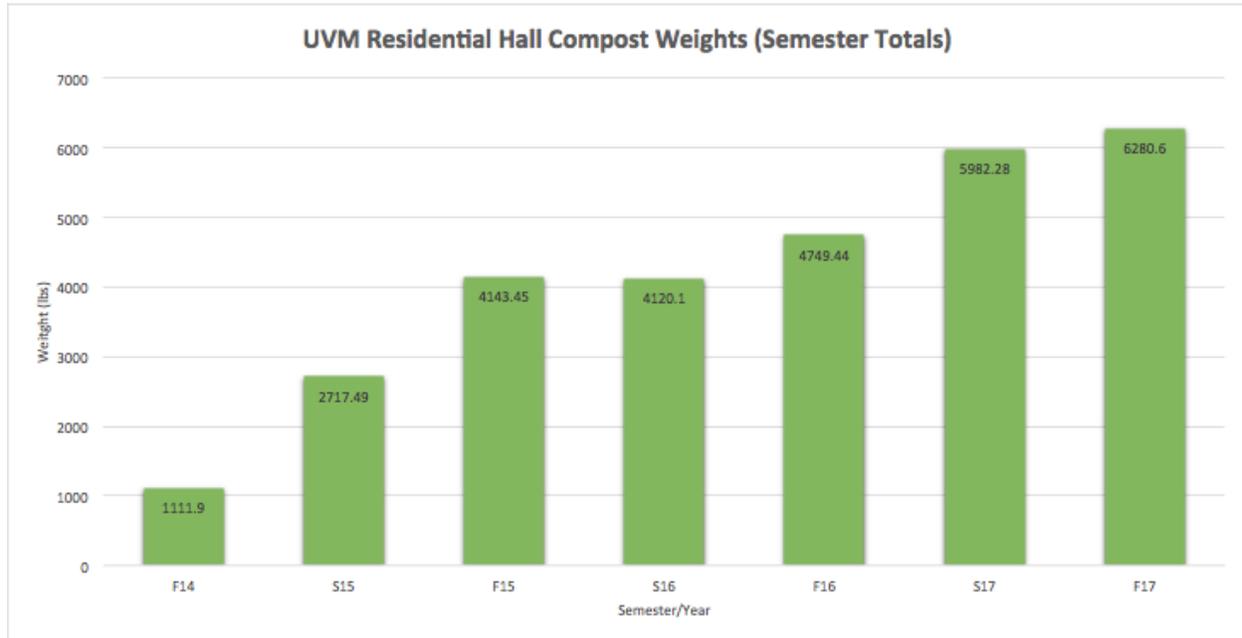
Results

Attached to this case study, a table and graph can be found detailing the end-of-semester compost totals for UVM's residential halls. As shown in the graph, the total weight of composted organics has increased each year since the beginning of the program in Fall '14. While the Fall '17 semester only saw a 5% increase in compost weight from the previous semester, the increase was 32.2% higher than the Fall '16 semester.

Although the impact of provided information isn't entirely measurable, the 623 attendees at the various events all received information about composting and the impact of organics on waste streams. These events also provided an opportunity for students to learn about how to compost in the residential halls and what resources are available for doing so. A total of 218 personal compost bags were distributed across the events while many more students were made aware of how to receive a bag and where to properly dispose of compost.

End-of-Semester Residential Hall Compost Totals

Semester/Year	Total Compost Weight (lbs)
Fall 2014	1,111.90
Spring 2015	2,717.49
Fall 2015	4,131.45
Spring 2016	4,120.10
Fall 2016	4,749.44
Spring 2017	5,982.28
Fall 2017	6,280.60
Total	29,105.26



Event attendance: 623

Personal compost bags Distributed: 218

Surveys distributed: 45

Green Mountain Facility tour attendance: 30

Composting Survey Responses (n=45)

- 86.4% of respondents stated they were aware of compost bins in Res-hall lobbies
- 36.4% of respondents stated they were not aware that brown compost bags were available at front desks of Res-halls
- 42% of respondents stated that they never use the brown compost bags in their room.
- Majority of responses to “select all statements that you agree with” were “I am concerned that composting in my room will cause my room to smell bad” and “I am concerned that composting in my room will attract bugs.”
- Several respondents suggested adding additional composting bins within buildings

Lessons Learned

It is not implied that our efforts are the direct reason for the increase in compost weights for the Fall 2017 semester. As the graph shows, composting efforts in residential locations have increased each year, following a general trend. However, it is

hoped that the outreach conducted over the duration of the campaign was informative for students seeking to learn more about composting. Additionally, it is apparent that students are expressing concerns over composting in residential halls. The surveys issued at various events also sought to establish reservations towards composting within residential rooms. Given a list of options, the majority of respondents expressed concerns that composting in their room would smell bad. Additional responses included concerns about bugs, inconvenience, and a lack of knowledge about what and how to compost. These issues could be improved upon through increased communication and outreach towards composting in residential halls.

Students also mentioned they would like to see more compost bins located within each floor of residential halls, rather than just the lobbies. At the moment, collection of residential compost is limited by the number of students working under UVM Recycling and Waste Management. Although students have requested additional composting bins, the proneness of Recycling and Waste Management to hire additional workers will require the continual increase of composting efforts within the residential halls.