May 2016

Taking Out the Trash

Jacquelyn Bell
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2016/iss4/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ethos by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
TAKING OUT THE TRASH

BY JACQUELYN BELL    DESIGN MACKENZIE GEARY    PHOTO KYLE KEPHART

Lake Laverne’s not the only thing going green at ISU

Have you ever wondered what happens to that Pizza Pit box that you thoughtlessly tossed into the dumpster after a night of drinks and pizza? What about the huge stack of old papers you threw away at the end of the semester because you were too lazy to look for a recycling bin?

The increasing deterioration of our planet’s natural resources has made being environmentally friendly and living green especially important to many in our generation. Many people want to leave our planet healthier than we found it, but sometimes it’s easy to overlook the little things we could be doing, including recycling.

Luckily for us, Iowa State makes it easy to properly dispose of recyclable materials.

This fall, the school implemented single-stream recycling, so all recyclables can be put in a single bin, eliminating the need to sort different materials. This new system will widen the variety of material we can put in the recycling bins — only cardboard, paper and newspaper have been consistently recycled since programs were implemented on campus in 1992. “This is exciting for me...it opens up so many opportunities for more things to be recycled,” says Merry Rankin, Iowa State’s Sustainability Director.

Rankin described being sustainable as an intersection of three different components: environment, economics and society.

Rankin says the environmental piece is what most people think of, like recycling, but the other branches are equally important in the path to sustainability. The economic aspect is about being efficient with financial resources and investing in technologies that allow us to be more efficient, and society refers to volunteering and connecting with the community.

The university uses the waste disposal hierarchy, set by the Environmental Protection Agency, to be as sustainable as possible with every material used. The university aims to responsibly recycle or reuse all of its electronics, glass, paper, light bulbs, chemicals from labs and even materials used in construction and renovations.

“We approach recycling a little differently here at Iowa State. We try to be very cognizant of what the most beneficial use is for every item,” said Rankin.

The primary step is to reduce waste. The university strives to accomplish this by producing only what is necessary and encourages students to reduce their use of non-sustainable products. For example, water bottle refill stations can be found all over campus as well as in all residence halls, and students are given discounts at the cafes if they bring their own reusable mug.

Several years ago, trays were eliminated from the dining halls, resulting in a 40 percent decrease in food waste. The food that is thrown out is composted and mixed with leaves, grass clippings and waste from the veterinary school. The compost is used back on campus and given to the student Ag 450 farm where they grow produce — the food that is used on campus.

“It’s a pretty cool, closed-loop system,” says Rankin.

The next step is to determine if manufactured products can be reused. ISU reuses furniture, materials and electronics by distributing them to other departments instead of throwing them away. The items that are not redistributed are sold to the public at the ISU Surplus Sale every Wednesday. Items sold there range from carpets to picture frames. It’s also common for some items, like furniture, to be donated to those in need with the help of donation outlets.

Rankin says the Department of Residence once worked with nonprofits to donate 50 dressers to families in need.

“It was a situation where they had lost their homes and were starting again. For them, that banged-up dresser that no one wanted was a place that they could start gathering their life again,” she says.

Even if the item can’t be used again, materials can usually be recycled.
Good news for college students: this includes your Starbucks cup.

Recycling bins are widely accessible on campus and in all residence halls. The recyclables from the bins on campus are taken to a waste management facility in Des Moines or Minneapolis, where the items are separated and redistributed to plants where the materials can be made into something new.

“We are very diligent in ensuring that all of our materials go to a recycler that handles them responsibly,” says Rankin. Caroline Arkesteyn, junior in environmental science and communications, thinks that students should take full advantage of the school’s recycling opportunities.

“I absolutely think it’s important that students make the effort to recycle, especially those in the dorms. The recycling program in the residence halls makes it so simple, so it’s easy for students to take small actions to make a difference,” she says.

According to Iowa State’s recycling program website, the university currently recycles over eight tons of white paper per month, saving around 1,632 trees and 288 cubic yards of landfill space a year.

But at ISU, recycling doesn’t stop here. For example, the marching band got new uniforms but couldn’t sell the old ones due to trademarking issues, so the uniforms were made into bags and laptop sleeves, which were sold as band fundraiser items.

“We have some pretty unique projects related to recycling...I commend the creativity of our campus and community,” added Rankin.

Sixty-five percent of the items that end up in the trash go to the Ames waste-to-energy plant (Ames Resource Recovery Center), where they are mixed with coal to create electricity for the City of Ames and the Vet Med school. After waste has been converted to energy, recycled, reused or composted, the remaining garbage — between 25 and 30 percent each year — is taken to the landfill.

Rankin says Iowa State will continue to strive to be one of the nation’s leaders in sustainable efforts.

“I certainly think that we have room to continue to improve and to be more efficient, and add more green things around campus, but I also am very proud of the commitment and accomplishments that we have made,” she says.

According to Rankin, the key to improving ISU’s sustainability is education and awareness.

“There are a number of things that you can learn and be involved in sustainability wise while you’re here, that most definitely will lead to a more sustainable future,” she says.

Arkesteyn agrees, “Recycling of any kind is important and makes such a difference, more than most people assume. So the more students know about recycling, hopefully the more they will be motivated to recycle.”

Rankin believes that even if your actions seem insignificant, they can quickly add up. Everybody doesn’t have to do the same thing to make a difference.

“There are many different pathways that lead to the same vision,” she says. “I encourage everyone to find something that resonates with you and make a habit. There is no action too small.”

---

**Tips to be a more sustainable student**

- Take Cyrild (they are “CyBrids”) or walk instead of driving to class
- Use a reusable water bottle and coffee mug
- Unplug phone chargers when they are not in use
- Turn off electronics at night
- Choose low energy settings on electronics
- Shop with reusable bags at the grocery store
- Turn off water while brushing your teeth
- Pack your lunch in reusable tupperware
- Recycle your lunch containers from the cafes
- Recycle old papers and homework