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University of Washington big on biobased for composting

A sustainable cup with that skinny latte is standard fare at the University of Washington in Seattle, a caffeine lover's paradise. The 21 espresso bars on campus serve their brew—and cold beverages too—in biobased and biodegradable containers. Fast forward two-and-a-half months and these cups have become something far more valuable than fodder for the landfill.

"We have the ability to turn our waste into nutrient-rich soil instead of it being trash forever," said Micheal Meyering, Housing and Food Services project manager.

The changeover to compostable cups occurred in March and July of 2007. In fact, this urban university of 40,000-plus students composts an array of biobased and biodegradable items, everything from straws to trash bags that line the composting bins where students toss their empties.

The university purchases the following biobased products from its distributor, Food Services of America (FSA), www.fsafood.com: ecotainer™ hot cups, Greenware® cold drink cups and lids, Cereplast cutlery and straws, Bridge-Gate hinged containers, Eco-Products soufflé cups and lids, NaturesPLAstic™ deli and clamshell containers, and Biobags trash liners.

Except for the Bridge-Gate containers, made from sugarcane and wheat fibers, all other biobased products contain corn-based plastic from polylactic acid or PLA. And all end up as compost, along with food waste and paper products.

"Early in the process, we met with FSA and explained our vision to carry a complete compostable service ware package for all our food services," Meyering said. "Our account was big enough to provide the kinds of usage that made it feasible to carry the new lines and allow other users to tap into these lines as well." Two vendors at the university—Tully's Coffee and Pagliacci Pizza—also were involved.

The only non-compostable cups at the university hold Coke, which has a university vending contract. Coke requires its logo on the cups and doesn't want them to sweat, and that's not possible with the existing compostable cups. But the vendor is trying to locate an appropriate biodegradable container, Meyering said.

Micheal Meyering, Housing and Food Services project manager, holds an ecotainer™ hot cup, which contains corn-based plastic and can be composted.

In the residence halls, the students use the Bridge-Gate hinged containers and Cereplast cutlery for take out items. "The containers are the spitting image of the classic Styrofoam container," Meyering said.

The University of Washington is none the poorer for pooh-poohing plastic. Even though the cost of some products are higher—for example, BioBags are double in cost —it's the composting that makes the difference in having a positive bottom line. The university paid $142 a ton to haul solid waste to a landfill from July 1 to Dec. 31, 2007, while the cost of bringing biodegradable trash to the off-site composting company, Cedar Grove Composting, was $116 a ton. Recycling cost $107 a ton to process.

The amount of biobased materials ending up in the composting bins is substantial. For example, the university purchases 172,000 of the 12-ounce cups during a five-month period—the equivalent of 34,400 cups a month.

There have been a few glitches in getting the biodegradable materials off the ground. For one, certain products are not available in biobased form, including miniature containers for condiments like ketchup, and lids for hot drinks and soups. "The demand isn't quite there yet and they're not going to make it for one player," said Meyering about the manufacturers.

Durability is another thorny issue. The corn spoons, which are smaller and thinner than conventional disposables, tend to melt when exposed to hot temperatures for more than a few minutes. That didn't go over well with students, even though the spoons regain their rigidity when removed from high heat.

"The freshman class didn't like it at all," Meyering said. "After a while, they were changing their eating behavior. They were no longer walking and carrying a bowl of soup with a spoon in it. There have been simple little changes here and there, but it hasn't been a real challenge. But we consistently strive for better performing service ware." Cereplast is working on developing longer and thicker utensils, he noted.

It makes no sense for a university to adopt biodegradable products without collecting the trash for composting, Meyering maintained, but he admitted the University of Washington has been fortunate to have Cedar Grove Composting nearby. That's not typically the case in other places of the country where institutions have to invest in their own operations or hope their cities build them.

Students line up at the University of Washington in Seattle to toss their trash into bins. The poster reminds them where to deposit items that can be composted.

The sorting of biodegradable trash has been a struggle sometimes, with biodegradable items ending up in the wrong garbage bin, but that doesn't happen as often these days, thanks to posters and other awareness efforts. "A major focus with our staff and students is educating them that they have to sort," Meyering said. "Before it was a no brainer and

now they have to stop and sort, but hopefully they'll take this knowledge with them and be environmental stewards."

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