

Benefits of campus composting programs

Students with access to campus composting more environmentally aware

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Composting programs were shown to have a positive impact on students' environmental attitudes. Here, a student unloads cafeteria waste at the Texas State University Bobcat Blend site. (Photo courtesy of John Montoya)

SAN MARCOS, Texas — As food waste becomes a growing concern on college campuses, colleges and universities across the US are introducing integrated composting programs to collect food waste while educating students about environmental stewardship. A new study shows that campus composting programs can be effective in raising students' awareness of composting and environmental issues.

“College campus cafeterias generate a large amount of food waste and some universities are making efforts to capture and compost food waste,” said corresponding author Tina Waliczek. “Creating an atmosphere where students are able to actively engage in the maintenance of their campus community and environment is one way to begin educating and introducing the concept of separating food waste and its environmental impacts on university and college campuses.”

Waliczek and coauthors Amy McFarland and Megan Holmes surveyed undergraduate and graduate students at two public state universities to determine students' environmental attitudes, environmental locus of control, composting habits, and knowledge of the composting process. Surveys were administered at Texas State University (San Marcos), a campus with an active composting program, and Farmingdale State College State University of New York (Farmingdale), where there is no composting program on campus.

Analyses showed a statistically significant difference between the school with a composting program and the school without a composting program on students' environmental attitudes, environmental locus of control, and composting knowledge. "Mean scores were higher for the school with a composting program (14.69) when compared with mean scores for the school without a composting program (13.67), Waliczek noted. "This finding was expected since students at the school with the composting program had more exposure to educational materials regarding compost."

An increase in knowledge about compost was associated with a more internal locus of control, an indicator that an individual believes their actions will have a direct influence on outcomes. The authors noted that understanding environmental locus of control in college students is important because today's students will ultimately be affected by and challenged to provide solutions to future environmental problems.

Results of the study showed that "passive" education efforts such as the use of signage, booths, and bins, appeared to be effective in relaying messages about composting to university students. "The hope is that by increasing educational efforts, students will develop more positive attitudes, which will lead to more positive environmental actions," the researchers said.

—American Society for Horticultural Science