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At a Glance:

- UMASS Amherst started composting in 1996.
- New Post-Consumer composting further reduced waste by over 1200 lbs/day
- Post-consumer composting is a high visibility activity demonstrating the university's commitment to sustainability.

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Post-Consumer Food Waste Diversion Case Study University of Massachusetts, Amherst MA

Summary: The University of Massachusetts at Amherst has been diverting food waste from campus dining areas for over a decade. The Amherst campus piloted adding a post-consumer food waste diversion program at The Blue Wall eatery in the Campus Center in 2012. The pilot program resulted in a significant decrease in trash and successfully resolved issues with contamination and consumer education.

Institution Profile: The Amherst campus is the flagship campus in the University of Massachusetts system with approximately 25,000 students and 8,000 faculty and staff. The Blue Wall is a high-traffic eatery that serves up to 7,000 individual meals per day. Food is often packaged “to-go”, resulting in significant amounts of disposable dining waste.

Baseline Program: The Amherst campus began large-scale pre consumer and post consumer composting in four large dining halls in the mid-1990s. The success of these programs led to rapid expansion throughout several other dining facilities, including composting of pre-consumer waste at The Blue Wall. Despite interest from student groups and support from Dining Services, a post-consumer composting program had not been effectively implemented. However, Blue Wall had transitioned the majority of their dining serving materials to compostable products in advance of the pilot. Having compostable products already in place eased the transition to post-consumer composting.

Pilot Program Planning: The University explored new options for a front of the house composting system at The Blue Wall as a pilot program. Facilities staff sought technical assistance from Envirozone, a recycling and waste disposal products and solutions company. Envirozone worked closely with University personnel to redesign the waste collection systems to incorporate post-consumer food waste collection. New custom collection bins outfitted with biodegradable green bags and accompanying signage that displayed pictures of acceptable materials helped



Composting signage in the Blue Wall Cafe, UMASS Amherst



Blue wall recycling station: (Compost, Trash, Cans and Bottles, and Paper)

to ensure a streamlined transition. Facilities management also encouraged each individual vendor within the commons to transition to compostable dining materials for the new system.

Implementation: Contamination was quickly seen as the biggest obstacle to post-consumer composting by The Blue Wall staff. Despite signage on and above waste bins, contamination rates ran high. Common contaminants like chip bags were found in the compost bins and compostable food wrappers were found in the paper recycling bins. In response, food service staff stand by the bins during peak operations

in order to streamline disposal and educate customers. Cashier personnel also educate freshman students with the different disposal needs of each dining item. Communication between the Blue Wall, UMASS Office of Waste Management and the compost processor highlighted a different obstacle: utensils from the dining commons took too long to break down at the farm. Management alleviated this problem by reexamining their compostables supplier, and ultimately changed vendors in favor of a product that composted more quickly.

Evaluation: Cost analysis performed by the University's Office of Waste Management consistently demonstrates that on a per-ton basis, composting is among the most cost effective materials management strategies employed. The cost of composting one ton of organic material averages about 35% less than the cost to disposing of one ton of trash. These results have supported incremental expansion of organics diversion opportunities like the one at the Blue Wall.

Before diverting post-consumer food waste and compostables, The Blue Wall's trash disposal rate was approximately 3000 pounds per day. This figure dropped almost by half to 1,750 pounds per day after implementing the front of the house program. University officials have recognized the beneficial public image gains from this program. Post-consumer composting is a highly visible reflection of the University's waste diversion efforts and it functions as an active message to student groups, demonstrating the University's commitment to sustainability.



Food waste receptacle, Blue Wall Cafe, UMASS Amherst