Food waste: An evaluation and solution focused assessment
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(The following is an excerpt from a larger project.)

Issue

Food waste is a multifaceted, intensifying issue that has social, environmental, and economic implications. Globally, about 1.3 billion tons of food and $750 billion are wasted each year (Dahiya, et al., 2017). In the United States, up to 40% of food grown for consumption is wasted, which translates to $165 billion, while 15% of US households are considered “food insecure” (Gerdeman, 2016). Food waste in landfills, in aggregate, is the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases (behind the United States and China), at an astounding 3.3 billion gallons annually.

This intersection of inefficiency, poor distribution of resources, and negative environmental externalities is particularly challenging at universities since the often outdated waste management systems that are in place hinder individual behavioral shifts toward sustainability. Northeastern University, which is a privileged institution located in an inner-city, lower-income community that lacks access to affordable, healthy food, has a greater responsibility to reduce its food waste and subsequent negative social and environmental externalities. With the technology available to properly prevent, share, or convert food waste, as well as the student voice in favor of increasing the university’s sustainability, what are the barriers for Northeastern to adopt a more extensive food waste reduction initiative?

The purpose of this paper is to examine and create awareness about food waste produced by the Northeastern University Dining Services, which not only represents a major inefficiency with regard to the university’s sustainability initiative, but I would argue is also social justice issue when examined in the context of its surrounding environment. By articulating the issue of food waste in relevant terms, I hope to engage my target audience of Northeastern University students, share innovative local solutions, and inspire them to demand a more committed, genuine approach to food waste reduction from their university.

Recommendations

After examining the various components of the food waste issue in depth, studying the interests of all stakeholders, and researching organizations working to combat this issue locally, I argue that the best solution to reducing Northeastern’s food waste is to forge a partnership between students, the university, and local organizations in Boston. A multilevel partnership of this sort would still need to be driven by students (perhaps the Husky Environmental Action Team and/or Slow Food NU), but would be more sustainable because even with inevitable student turnover, the local organizations would be able to hold the university accountable. Also, by having local organizations involved, Northeastern is not only supporting local businesses, but can offload significant operational costs onto this third party that has a bigger commitment to the issue and better infrastructure, while still getting credit for making a sustainable impact.

One of the organizations that I have in mind is called Bootstrap Compost, a local social enterprise based in Jamaica Plain, just outside of Boston that offers residential, commercial, and restaurant composting services. They provide stainless steel bins, twice per week pick up, and quarterly waste diversion reports while empowering local farms with the finished product. Several students at Northeastern already use Bootstrap Compost, which the university should be offering to all students in residence halls as a cheaper, more sustainable form of waste removal (“Bootstrap Compost,” 2017). By focusing on residence halls in addition to dining halls, Northeastern can dramatically increase its impact without a damaging its budget for composting.

Additionally, Northeastern should partner with Daily Table, a non-profit grocery store based in Dorchester founded by the former president of Trader Joe’s to bring affordable, healthy food into low income communities (“Daily Table,” 2017). Northeastern is actively gentrifying surrounding communities by expanding its campus, which is creating a lot of hostility towards the university amongst these communities. Rather than throwing out unserved food that could be repurposed, Northeastern could package that food into containers (like it does for Outtakes) and donate it to Daily Table. This would not require too much additional logistical effort, since NU Dining already repackages food for Outtakes, but could greatly benefit the university’s reputation within surrounding communities as long as the partnership is carried out in a sustainable and dignified way.