Food & Waste

EEP

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UTA

Initiative

Increase waste diversion and improve food access

LEAD: University Center and Office of Facilities Management
with support from the Office of Sustainability

Definition

This strategy aims to advance UTA's urban agriculture movement, expand food access, and promote responsible consumption. Efforts are made to establish a campus greenhouse for research and partnerships with local businesses. Managing waste focuses on promoting a culture of reuse, enhancing recycling and composting processes, and increasing waste diversion. This includes streamlining waste management, making it easier to recycle and compost, and instilling a culture of reuse and repair.

Resilience Co-benefits

- Shrinks Carbon Footprint
- Grows Green Jobs & Opportunities
- Builds Community Connections
- Supports Community Health
- Fosters a Culture of Sustainability
- Establishes UTA as a Regional Leader

Food Access & Organic Waste

Campus Crops

UTA's Community Garden initiative began in 2011 in collaboration with the City of Arlington to provide students and residents a place to learn about organic gardening, grow food, and interact with others who are interested in urban agriculture. UTA does not currently host a plot in the garden, though students are encouraged to participate as community members. The University maintains regular upkeep of the property around the garden plots. Today, the half-acre garden's 78 plots are in high demand and quickly outgrowing their current home.

The garden is set behind the Military and Veteran Services building at Summit Avenue & UTA Boulevard, however the UTA website campus map and wayfinding signage along the road do not indicate where the garden is located.

Source: Google Maps

Food Donation & Composting

UTA has an award-winning composting program that processes over 30 tons of food waste annually;[12] this compost is used as mulch and soil amendment for the campus grounds and community garden. The University has received leadership recognition from the US EPA[13] for campus initiatives and programming for waste diversion and reduction.

Notable efforts across campus include:

- Seminars covering waste education, sustainable dining, and food security
- Donation through Maverick Food Pantry
- Student-led research for operations relating to food entering and exiting Maverick dining halls
- Pre- and post-consumer food waste collection and composting from on- and off-campus dining services, coffee shops, hospitals, and yard waste
- Use of Waste Not to measure, track, and reduce back of house waste in residential dining, kitchen scraps are composted

12 Office of Sustainability - Composting | UTA

13 US EPA Food Recovery Challenge National Award Winners

Remaining Waste

There are 22 recycling bins and 18 e-waste recycling locations serving over 100 buildings across UTA's campus.[14] While 10-20%[15] of waste is successfully diverted annually via reduction programming, all remaining waste is sent to landfill. Since UTA's Office of Sustainability began tracking recycling volumes in 2012, the most consistently recycled material by weight has been corrugated containers, while plastic is found to be the least recycled material. The average recycling contamination rate is 14%,[16] with most contamination incident tickets originating from The Commons and Vandergriff Hall.

14 Waste Management - The University of Texas at Arlington

15 UTA Office of Sustainability, 2024

16 UTA 2022 Sustainability Report

Recycling bins across campus are inconsistent in color coding and signage is not prominent. Bins are not often located in high traffic areas

Source: UBuffalo

Enhancing Effortlessness

Increasing the availability and visibility of recycling, e-waste, and organics bins along with information about how to use each bin at the point a decision is made can help to improve efficacy rates while at the same time reduce contamination rates.[17] This can be done by providing recycling and compost stations in a common or prominent location on all floors of each building on campus as well as in UTA's dining halls, residence halls, and apartment community spaces. Additionally, having consistency in color-coding of bins and providing clear procedural signage can provide a sense of familiarity and help to reduce uncertainty of desired behaviors. This can also help to streamline processes across all buildings on campus, ensuring students, faculty, staff, and visitors are all participating in a unified goal of successful recycling.

As mentioned previously, further improvements can be made by enhancing internal and external wayfinding across campus for destinations that enhance sustainability, which may include signage noting the location of recycling centers and other points of interest such as the Community Garden and the Maverick Pantry.

17 Effects of bin proximity and informational prompts on recycling and contamination | Sonny Rosenthal, Noah Linder

Innovation through Urban Agriculture

The Community Garden and Maverick Pantry have already demonstrated success through integrated coursework related to food availability and access to healthy fruits and vegetables, creating a strong foundation for the expansion of UTA's urban agriculture movement. The Master Plan allows space for this expansion through a community garden placed along the creek corridor, near the east campus proposed housing. Encouraging collaboration between colleges to work toward the implementation of more gardens across campus and within the City of Arlington can give students real-world experience working on multi-disciplinary teams, seeking and attaining funding, and engaging with University leadership and local stakeholders. Through the collaboration of students studying landscape architecture, business management, health and nutrition, communications, planning, and political science, the Community Garden and Maverick Pantry have the opportunity to grow into a community resource, providing fresh, locally sourced produce to students and residents.

In addition to growing food on UTA's campus to provide healthier options, there is an opportunity to use Texas-based distributors through The Common Market to expand the availability of high-quality herbs, fruits, and vegetables on dining service's menu while also supporting local farmers. The TASTE Project, a pay-what-you-can restaurant movement, has recently opened a location near the UTA campus and could be also be an opportunity for collaboration in expanding food access.

Further, expanding the university's composting program can complement UTA's urban agriculture effort by not only providing nutrient-dense compost to amend soil in community garden spaces, but it can also give students the material needed for researching and finding innovative practices for rapid decomposition and alternative uses of organic materials.

This integrated approach transforms classroom theory into hands-on experience for students, equipping them with marketable skills, all while expanding food access and promoting environmental and economic resilience. This initiative positions UTA as a leader in sustainability research, innovation, implementation, and communication while at the same time creating improvements in food security.

MASTER PLAN ALIGNMENT
Opportunity for the proposed garden along the creek near South Mitchell

Closing the Loop

Typical product waste streams follow a linear process, beginning with extraction of raw materials and ending at a landfill after use. Introducing the practices of reuse, repair, and recycling helps to close the loop on this process, creating a more circular economy of things. UTA can participate in this practice by inspiring a cultural shift in its student body that encourages sharing, donating, and restoring.

Incoming students tend to purchase new items for their dorm rooms,[18] which may include furniture, lighting, office supplies, electronics, and other items to make them feel at home. Outgoing students often discard many of these items before the end of the school year. This cycle introduces a demand for virgin resources while also creating a massive increase of landfill waste. Institutions like UT Austin and Bowling Green State University are combating this issue by operating secondhand stores, open year-round, that provide a place for students to donate unwanted items and purchase used items. Another way to encourage this practice is to host an annual move out event where donation stations are placed around campus to encourage students to offload unwanted items before going home for the summer.

Source: UT - Austin

18 NRF | Back to School

UTA Libraries already offers technology, tools, books, and media to borrow, reducing the need for students to buy new items when they are only needed for a short time. This practice can be expanded upon by offering long-term rentals for small appliances, seasonal clothing, travel gear, and other items that might be needed for longer intervals than typical library loan periods.

As the Library rental program grows, maintenance of UTA's inventory will become increasingly important. The establishment of a Repair Café naturally complements this need while also providing a space for students to bring their torn, broken, or malfunctioning items. Universities across the nation have adopted this model, using a mix of students and staff volunteers. This creates an opportunity for students in engineering, design, and other programs to practice problem-solving, gain familiarity with electronics, machinery, and clothing disassembly and reassembly, and acquire valuable experience to bring into their future careers.

Construction & Demolition Waste

As the UTA campus continues to evolve, managing construction and demolition (C&D) waste will require a robust approach for handling discarded metals, concrete and asphalt, wood, brick and masonry, glass, plastics, roofing, and insulation, among other materials. A comprehensive sustainable materials management policy can help to reduce the reuseable materials sent to landfill by establishing a set of guidelines as well as specific waste diversion targets. This policy should create clear protocols for materials sorting and prioritize reuse on site whenever feasible.

Opportunities for material recovery extend beyond easy to remove fixtures like doors, windows, and hardware. Other valuable materials such as concrete and brick can be recycled on-site to be used as aggregate for roads and pathways, and wood that is no longer structurally useful can be chipped on-site and used as groundcover, mulch, and erosion control. Other materials can find new life in future projects or benefit organizations like Habitat for Humanity.

There are substantial economic advantages in adopting sustainable C&D waste management practices. Beyond reduced disposal costs, UTA can realize additional savings through better planning and use of materials and decreased raw resources purchases. Digital tracking can help streamline material management flows and make it easier for contractors to comply with University-specified requirements. This can also help to satisfy LEED credits by providing documentation for percentage of waste diversion.

STRATEGIES

PRIORITIZATION KEY
NEAR LONG

Increase awareness and participation in on-campus community garden program

ACTION ITEMS 5

- Add garden location to wayfinding signage
- Create a student-led awareness campaign and events to learn about urban agriculture and composting
- Explore ways to increase garden bed capacity to respond to increase in demand for space
- Have Landscape Architecture students design garden spaces for multi-purpose community areas
- Add community garden to online Campus Map

Provide education on responsible food consumption

ACTION ITEMS 3

- Emphasize the importance of minimizing food waste
- Provide clear signage about where to get and how to use to-go containers
- Have varied and balanced vegan meal options available at every meal

Enhance visibility, accessibility, and knowledge about recycling, composting, and landfill waste

ACTION ITEMS 5

- Standardize and color code bins and locate them in prominent, high traffic locations
- Increase quantity of recycling bins across campus, include at least one bin per building level
- Provide simple, large signage with educational graphics that explain what goes in each bin
- Increase visibility/improve accessibility of waste and recycling assets using Tactile WasteFinder floor mats
- Expand donations and composting in catering services

Seek local sourcing for campus dining

ACTION ITEMS 2

- Partner with local farmers through The Common Market - Texas to establish a preferred supplier program for UTA dining services (prioritize fresh produce, dairy, and proteins)
- Create a farm-to-table dining services practice through the expansion of UTA's growing capacity. This may include the establishment of a campus greenhouse and UTA-owned garden plots
- Partner with local restaurants and campus dining

Promote a culture of repair and reuse

ACTION ITEMS 2

Start a Repair Café, which specializes in teaching consumers the skills necessary to repair their own goods, rather than replacing them

Expand upon the existing collection of discarded items by creating a campus surplus/reuse store where used items can be donated and found by students. Hold monthly in-person events that offer items for free to students, faculty, and staff

Develop an Integrated Waste Management Plan to increase waste diversion

ACTION ITEMS 5

Create a centralized recycling center on campus

Research and improve methods and logistics for campus composting and recycling operations

Streamline waste management process by partnering with a service for evaluation and customized programming

Reduce single use plastics in dining halls and eliminate all remaining Styrofoam from dining operations

Create an educational program for reducing recycling contamination

Expand campus gardens for research and collaboration

ACTION ITEMS 4

Utilize as a living laboratory for relevant academic programs, incorporate caretaking into curriculum

Recruit volunteers to help with garden operations

Explore implementing vertical farming practices

Explore collaboration opportunities with TASTE Project

Implement construction and demolition waste management practices on campus

ACTION ITEMS 4

Incorporate campus-wide policy for construction waste diversion into Office of Facilities Management standards and specifications

Track construction and demolition waste on all campus construction projects

Create/update contractor's application for qualification to include agreement to abide by UTA policy for construction waste diversion

Incorporate the practice of salvage and reuse of building materials whenever possible prior to demolition