John Adams, Executive in Residence and Chairman Emeritus at The Martin Agency

What are some key aspects students should know about behavior change in relation to this composting initiative?

The primary part of the challenge is simplification of the problem to the point where it is easy to understand why composting is a good idea. The key to behavior change from a marketing perspective is having a simple and easy answer to “what is it exactly that you want me to do that is different from what I am doing now?”

Having the answer be simple and easy to understand overlaps because if it is absolutely clear, then most of the time that makes it easier. We’ll need to get over this situation in which students are sitting and looking at their trays and figuring out what they may need to do differently, without having that face-to-face interaction and guidance from compost coordinators.

One of the main impediments that may block success with this composting program would be simply that students don’t care enough to make the extra effort to compost and deviate from their current food and packaging disposal habits. Therefore, that extra effort needs to seem as minimal as possible. One of the difficulties we had while doing work with recycling at the Martin Agency was how many people believed that their actions would not make a difference. One statistic is all you need to show it’s a good idea, but now you have to get them over the hurdle that they are too lazy to do it even if they understand it. It’s too easy to conclude that my behavior change isn’t going to make much of a difference. That’s why voting numbers are typically so low, because they think their vote won’t make a difference.

While the topic of composting is complex and there may be value in long-form communication like in the student newspaper where you can explain the complexity of the composting issue, that is not the fundamental part of the challenge. The fundamental part is to simplify it as much as possible so that people get it’s a good idea and they know exactly what to do differently than what they did yesterday so that you don’t get bound in the complexity and try and explain too much at once. Part of the evaluation can be the innovative use of different channels of communication. There is the obvious use of newspaper and social media, but we are looking for some creativity. This behavior is going to need to be articulated broadly across campus but particularly on-site at each dining location. The behavior change needed to compost properly must be made absolutely clear at the moment of decision when students are throwing away their food and packaging.