Stakeholder Interviews

University of Richmond Custodial and Environmental Services

Scott Lincoln, Manager of Custodial and Environmental Services

Scott Lincoln oversees Custodial and Environmental Services on campus, and thus comes into contact with SPB and other recyclables at the end of their useful life. Lincoln describes his team’s role in the consumption lifecycle as being “transporters” who collect landfill waste, recycling waste, and (in the future) compost waste and direct the material to the appropriate location. For recycling on campus, this process involves a custodian performing a visual inspection of the blue bag holding the recyclable material to ensure that there are low levels of contamination. Lincoln says that if contaminating items (such as food waste) comprise 10% or more of the volume of the bag, the entire bag will be diverted to landfill. This visual inspection rate has been imposed, Lincoln explains, out of a desire to preventatively address contamination rates that would make UR’s recycling too undesirable for recycling partners to accept.

Food waste is currently the largest contaminant in recycling, whether it is food itself or food residue lingering on containers which have not been washed or wiped out. Though even dumping or scraping the food remainders at the bottom of containers into the landfill bin before recycling the container can help alleviate this problem, not all consumers know what is or is not recyclable. Lincoln described the concept of “wishful recycling” as a setback in accurately recycling items on campus. On a national scale, wishful and negligent recycling can result in nearly a quarter of single-stream recycling being redirected to the landfill.¹ On campus, an example of wishful recycling would be placing a plastic straw in the recycling bin rather than the landfill. Unfortunately, Lincoln says, understanding what is and isn’t recyclable can be further complicated by different municipalities or recycling companies accepting different items.

Lincoln identified a few initiatives within Custodial and Environmental Services that are aimed at reducing single-use plastic waste. First, as UR moves towards

¹ [https://www.npr.org/2015/03/31/396319000/with-single-stream-recycling-convenience-comes-at-a-cost](https://www.npr.org/2015/03/31/396319000/with-single-stream-recycling-convenience-comes-at-a-cost)
composting, there is an opportunity for a consumer to dispose of the entirety of their lunch—from the food residue to a compostable container—in a single compost bin. Additionally, Custodial and Environmental Services is working on centralizing waste and recycling bins in an effort to discourage consumers from relying on single-use items. By making frequent disposal of single-use items less convenient for consumers, Custodial and Environmental Services can help campus members reduce waste. Methods like these, Lincoln continues, “encourage individuals to go ahead and think outside the box, and maybe not use single-use [plastic] bottles as much.” By making these decisions collaboratively, alongside the organizations they’re affecting, Lincoln believes UR can reduce how much waste it is producing as a whole.

However, changes like these, Lincoln admits, aren’t going to happen overnight. Even with all the information available, as at the Rethink Waste Football game where volunteers direct patrons towards the correct bin, consumers must still have a desire to place items in the correct bins. “There has to be a cultural change,” Lincoln comments. “Like with the ‘wishful recycling’ concept, I believe that there is a large part of our campus community, faculty, staff and students that have the best intentions. Changing that intention into action is probably our largest opportunity.”