Recycling and Waste Diversion on Campus

To meet its goal of climate neutrality by 2050, UR is committed to reducing waste through the Rethink Waste campaign. One of the first steps towards this goal is the University's commitment to achieving a 75% waste diversion rate by 2025. This means that we will reuse, reduce, recycle, and compost so that 75% of campus waste does not go to a landfill.¹ Minimizing campus waste reduces emissions beyond the campus, and because our recycling efforts are often highly visible, they are a large contributor to environmental awareness throughout campus. In 2018, UR's waste diversion rate was 36.1%; 25.5% of our waste was recycled, 9.2% was composted, and 1.4% was donated. More information on the Rethink Waste program and UR's current recycling efforts can be found at https://facilities.richmond.edu/about-us/environment-ops/rethinkwaste.html.

In 2019, UR transitioned to County Waste as its official waste and recycling collection company. Under County Waste’s policies, all plastics 1-7 are recyclable including disposable cups, shampoo bottles, water bottles, takeout containers, peanut butter jars and yogurt containers—provided that these containers are rid of contamination. For more on County Waste and its partnership with UR, see the interview with John Childress, Sales Representative for the University of Richmond.

2019 Rethink Waste Diversion Statistics

The largest-scale waste diversion statistics on UR’s campus are drawn from the Rethink Waste Football games. In 2017, the Rethink Waste game attained 67% waste diversion from a total amount of 2,540 pounds of waste. In 2018, the diversion rate was 55% of 4,786 pounds of waste and in October 2019, waste diversion again registered at 67% out of 1,970 pounds of waste with 44% (870 lbs.) of this waste redirected to recycling.

¹ https://facilities.richmond.edu/about-us/environment-ops/rethinkwaste.html
and 23% (448 lbs.) to compost. The remaining 652 pounds of waste was sent to the landfill, including 267 pounds of contaminated recyclable and compostable items. If the contaminated waste was directed towards recycling and composting, diversion could have been up to 80%--thus meeting (for a single event) the Office for Sustainability’s goal of 75% waste diversion.

In addition to actively diverting waste towards the appropriate containers during efforts, like Rethink Waste football games, the Office for Sustainability partners with interested groups to perform waste audits on academic buildings. A waste audit is an effort to capture the current-state waste diversion statistics and calculate ideal-state waste diversion statistics. Thus, each waste audit produces waste diversion and contamination metrics for the pre-sort and post-sort volumes.

Three waste audits were conducted on academic buildings in November 2019, and yielded very similar pre-sort diversion rates. In Gottwald Center for the Sciences (GCS) on November 6, there was a waste diversion rate of 44.6%, in the Robins School of Business (RSB) on November 6, there was a waste diversion rate of 46.2%, and in Boatwright Memorial Library (BML) on November 15, there was a waste diversion rate of 41%. After proper sorting, all three locations were shown to have improperly sorted recycling that had been placed in the landfill. In GCS, this comprised 5.9% of the landfill volume, in RSB, 11.5% of the landfill volume, and in BML, 17% of landfill volume.

All three locations also saw a higher pre-sort waste diversion rate than post-sort waste diversion rate, indicating a pattern of “wishful recycling” among campus members that led to the improper placement of landfill-bound waste in recycling containers.2 In GCS, the percentage of landfill waste in recycling (including composting) was 17.8%; in RSB, it was 15.4%; and in BML, it was 26%. See Appendix C for greater detail on the Rethink Waste Football Game and three Waste Audits mentioned.

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2 https://smea.uw.edu/currents/wishful-recycling-more-harm-than-good/