

Why won't they use the compost?

An analysis of Flynntown residents' perceived barriers to using a compost system

Introduction

Globally, one third of edible food destined for human consumption is lost or wasted each year along the food system process, leading to increased greenhouse gas emissions, virtual water waste, and almost \$200 billion lost in the US. Public awareness about the scope and magnitude of the issue is lacking, impairing more comprehensive measures to combat it. Using a household compost food-waste system returns nutrients to the soil and sequesters carbon while requiring consumers to consider their own food waste, hopefully leading to greater contemplation of the food waste issue. Examples of successful compost systems in large cities and small colleges have diverted food waste from the landfill and educated the participants about the issues of food waste. Yet, there are those who choose not to use the compost system despite its numerous ecological, economic, and social benefits. Using surveys and interviews, an investigation into the perceived barriers to composting in the Flynntown population revealed a negative social norm against composting in the community. Most respondents indicated they would use the compost regardless of whether they used it at their parents' house, indicating acknowledgment that composting is a beneficial practice despite not having many facts or confidence about the effects.

Below: the compost collection site placed near the New Flynntown dumpsters.

Right: compost pail distributed to each Flynntown residence.

Bottom right: a map of residences in Flynntown with their corresponding dumpster site as the matching colored dot.



ENVR 395: Research Seminar

Created by Cormac Quinn | Advised by Dr. Jean Lavigne

Methods

A compost system was created and installed into the Flynntown community. Wooden compost collection sites were placed near the dumpsters and compost pails were distributed to every Flynntown residence. Food waste was collected, placed into compost tumblers, and eventually into a static pile.

A survey evaluated Flynntown residents' knowledge and attitudes towards composting. Survey results allowed for quantitative generalizations backed by qualitative data from interviews to understand the social construction of the Flynntown identity.

Interviews with survey respondents (n=79) elaborated on the population's preconceptions about food waste and evaluated the significance of composting in the community. The interview questions ranged from personal history with food waste and compost, what benefits and consequences they think arise from them, and perception of other residents' usage of the compost system.

Educational lectures on composting hosted by the principal investigator were held over two consecutive nights with a reciprocal Q&A afterwards, allowing the attendees to ask the investigator questions and the investigator to run a group interview.

"I wouldn't have used it had you not brought it right to me." -Interviewee

Interview trends

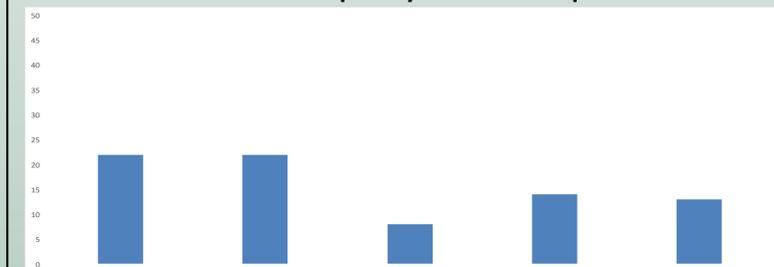
- Interviewees unanimously believed fewer than 50 percent of Flynntown residents used the compost system, indicating a perceived social barrier to using compost due to perceived lack of community engagement
- Three-fourths of survey respondents indicated they would use the compost system
- Most acknowledged they would not have used the compost system had the necessary equipment not been delivered to their residence
- Interviewees recognized food waste as an urgent environmental issue but were less certain that it contributed to global climate change
- Starvation and landfill availability were the most commonly mentioned negative consequences of food waste by interviewees
- Respondents understood that reducing food waste through composting was environmentally beneficial without having a clear understanding of what processes are occurring that create the positive change
- Willingness to use compost system without understanding underlying beneficial processes indicates that the idea of composting has already been positively reinforced through societal and familial education

Survey results

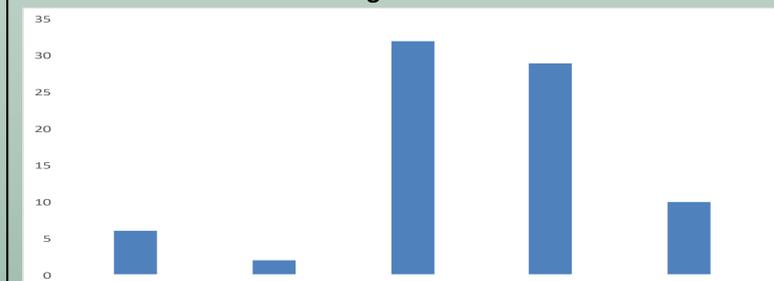
We collected compost at my parent's house



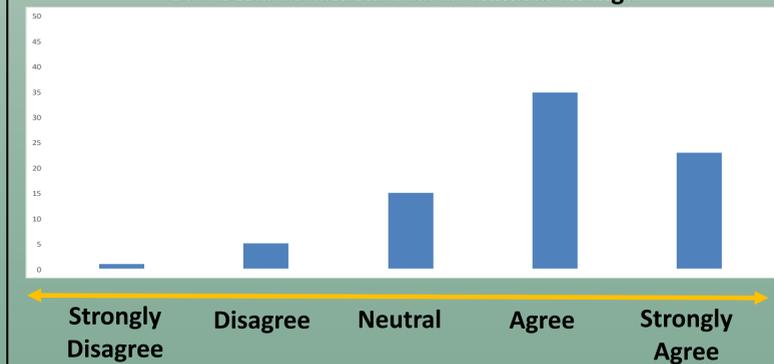
I would use a compost system if it was provided



Food waste is an urgent environmental issue



Food waste contributes to climate change



Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without support from the following people and organizations: Dick Adamson, VP of Finance at SJU; Gary Jorgenson, director of SJU Physical Plant; Kenneth Cartwright, production director at the CSB/SJU Theater; Br. Dan Morgan, head of SJU Residential Life and Housing; Gorecki Culinary Services; the CSB/SJU Environmental Studies Department; the SJU EcoHouse community; the Edlebrock Greenhouse; and the Flynntown Faculty Residents and Resident Assistants.