

# Building a Sustainable Model for Recycling and Compost: Student-Centered Work at Luther College

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## Overview

Luther College's waste management systems are unique, efficient, and effective. All of the recycling and compost generated on campus is collected by a group of student workers. All recyclables collected on campus are processed at the Winneshiek County Recycling Center. Luther College and Winneshiek County have highly effective separate stream collection systems which leads to lower levels of contamination. Luther College student workers also collect campus compost and transform it into fertilizer that is used on Luther's gardens and landscapes. This poster explains how Luther College leverages student work study to create streamlined waste management processes.



## Summary of Recycling and Compost Process

Bins with compartments for compost, metal/plastic, paper, and landfill are placed in every academic building on campus. Recycling is collected by student recycling workers and taken to on-campus roll-offs. Once the roll-offs are full, recycling workers contact the Winneshiek County Recycling Center to have them emptied. All recycling materials from Luther and the greater Decorah area are processed and used to make new products at the Winneshiek County facility.

Compost is also collected at our dining hall and on-campus restaurants. Cooking waste that accumulates during food prep and post-consumption scraps are collected. Dining hall food scraps are placed into a machine called the "pulper" by dining services workers. The machine grinds up food scraps into little pellets, making it easier for the food to decompose. All food waste is taken to our on-campus compost pile, which is used for fertilizer for crops at the farm, as well as in the on-campus gardens.



## Accessibility of our Compost Infrastructure

Over the course of two years, Luther's Center for Sustainable Communities has expanded compost infrastructure to all academic buildings and residence halls. Our strategy for ensuring maximum waste diverted from the landfill is consistency. Through the installation of our four-compartment waste bins, we attempt to have every trash can accompanied by recycling bins and a compost bin. For this reason, no single trash cans are kept inside classrooms. Many people don't take the extra two steps to put their pop can into the recycling, or their banana peel into the compost. By making them take those extra two steps no matter what, we encourage them to make sure their waste ends up in the proper receptacle.

Students are also encouraged to compost in their residence halls. The Center for Sustainable Communities offers small, reusable bins that students can keep in their dorm room to collect compost, which they can then dump into a larger receptacle in each residence hall's kitchen.

**“Working on the recycling and compost crew is an education in itself. I think it's important for us as students to have agency in reducing waste.”**

**- Luther College Recycling Crew Member**

## Students Managing Students

Although the student recycling and compost crew is overseen by a Luther staff member, the responsibility is given to the students. The crew is run by a student manager who creates schedules, organizes pick up routes, communicates with student workers and Luther staff, runs meetings, and ensures the process is going smoothly. The workers don't just complete their shifts, but they also provide important feedback for improving the pick-up process. Being a part of the recycling crew can also be an opportunity to move up to other leadership positions on campus. Former recycling crew members have become recycling crew managers, garden crew managers, and sustainability educators.

## Students Across Campus Working Together

While the student recycling crew takes most of the credit for our recycling and composting, the process takes a village. To complete our work, it takes cooperation from staff in Residence Life, Facilities, Sustainability, and the dining halls; our work also involves help from various student workers from custodial services, sustainability, gardens crew, in the cafeteria, and in the grounds crew. The involvement of these parties allows students to take control of their campus. It gives student workers a perspective on what happens to your waste after it is put into the bin, and how many different parties are needed to dispose of something.

## Composting Statistics:

### 2017-2018 Academic Year

- Luther diverted 62,909 pounds of food waste from the landfill in the Union building alone
- 1,764 pounds of compost were collected in residence halls
- 1,878 pounds of compost collected in academic buildings

### 2019-2020 Academic Year

- 190 pounds collected in residence hall/academic buildings
- 2,314 pounds collected in Union
- Just under half of Union compost is pulped material

## Conclusion

Based on the success of our program, we believe that our model of student run recycling and compost can be used at other colleges of a similar size. Because students care about the sustainability of their campus, it should be students who are in charge of the management of their waste. We have found that having students who prioritize sustainability in charge of recycling collection leads to more waste diverted from the landfill overall.