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UT recycling program to expand with awareness

By Audrey White, Daily Texan Staff
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The University is working to fight a student perception that UT doesn't care about waste and recycling, sustainability director Jim Walker said.

"Within operations, we are very aware of recycling and the notion that it's not as easy as it should be," Walker said. "We're looking to streamline and expand."

Students only see about 10 percent of the recycling that actually takes place on campus, since much of it comes from large construction projects and offices, said Rachel Aitkens, government junior and co-director of the Campus Environmental Center. In the Hearst Student Media construction project in 2009, staff were able to divert 90 percent of the debris from landfills through reuse and recycling. This means that some students don't realize the scope of recycling efforts and are simply confronted with what they may feel is a lack of adequate public recycling bins for paper, plastic and aluminum.

This is changing as the resources and infrastructure of the center improve, Aitkens said. In the past, the center operated as an agency of Student Government, but it is now in the process of transferring its management and programming to the Campus Planning & Facilities Management Department, she said. This has made it possible to organize more recycling locations and expand services in direct alignment with the needs of different parts of campus where recycling takes place, she said.

In the 2008-09 school year, UT recycled 1,259 tons of paper. The paper and cardboard recycled by the University is taken to a third-party company, which pays the University by the pound or ton of paper at a rate that varies slightly, depending on quantity and quality. The University earns about \$200,000 each year from paper recycling. Those numbers will increase as students become more proactive about recycling, Aitkens said.

"We've done a lot of education programs this year and are labeling bins, but students still ignore the available information," she said. "Contamination rates go up, and it turns all of it into trash."

Aitkens said recycling is contaminated when people put the wrong materials in bins, such as when aluminum cans are placed with paper recycling or when unclean items are recycled, such as a paper plate with food still on it. Often, people will put non-recyclable items in bins because they do not realize it is not a regular trash can or do not know what items can be recycled, she said.

To increase student awareness, the University is conducting several programs throughout the spring. The Campus Environmental Center and facilities management are participating in a national program called RecycleMania, in which universities across the country compete based on poundage of recycled materials. For the week of March 8-13, UT was ranked 66th out of 266 schools in the "grand champion" category, according to the RecycleMania Web site. The contest ends Saturday.

The Recycling Task Force, a division of the center, is also hosting a series of "recycle swaps," in which students can trade five difficult-to-recycle items — such as batteries and cell phones — in exchange for a reusable aluminum water bottle. Samantha Darnell, a task force member and business honors freshman, said the team has distributed about half of the 500 water bottles it ordered so far. The next swap will take place Wednesday.

"We are also asking people to sign a pledge to promise they won't buy plastic water bottles and use reusable water bottles instead," Darnell said. "We're promoting the use of tap water instead of bottled water because five out of six plastic bottles are thrown away instead of recycled. Tap water is more regulated than bottled water."

She said when it comes to recycling, student awareness and education are the biggest obstacles to overcome. But, through the efforts of the center and the task force, it is possible to show students the benefits and ease of recycling on campus, especially recycling paper and plastic.

"If a student doesn't feel there are recycling facilities available, that will decrease their chances of trying to recycle," Darnell said. "That is why we are doing these events like the recycling swap — to get the word out so students will realize what their recycling options are."

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