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The World We Make

Auburn University is described as “The Loveliest Village on the Plains,” a place not only defined by academics but by the daily practices of people within it. Auburn University is more than an Academic institution. It is a community that encourages students to value their environment and prioritize sustainability. Therefore, to be a part of the Auburn family means each person must uphold these shared values every day. Throughout campus, students move quickly between classes, meals, and meetings, often carrying items such as coffee cups or loose paper. These everyday moments create constant decisions about waste and recycling. While Auburn University promotes sustainable living as one of its core values, these moments reveal a gap between institutional goals and student behavior. Ultimately, this narrative explores how Auburn University's recycling policies work in practice and how students engage with them.

Auburn’s Office of Sustainability intends to implement policies that both educate and motivate students to recycle. While the university does provide materials, such as the sustainability website that outlines different recyclable materials, these efforts do not reach students in their everyday routines. This creates a problem because students will not go out of their way to search for this information, meaning the message is not being communicated effectively. I believe this is where the problem starts. Auburn does not lack information or effort, but it fails to deliver information in a way that reaches students in their everyday routine.

Technology continues to shape how students move through their day on Auburn's campus. As students move, I have noticed that I fall into the same pattern. Like many others, I



often look down at my phone or laptop and even check my watch throughout the day. Our constant interaction with technology shapes how we pay attention to our surroundings.

For students to fully participate in sustainability practices, Auburn's communication methods should reflect the platforms students already use. From my perspective, relying on a website is not effective when students are more likely to engage with something like their student email, an Instagram post, or large flyers around campus. Students are actively using these platforms throughout the day, making the message more likely to reach them in real time. Therefore, it is important to recognize that technology usage shapes how students interact with recycling practices. While the university aims to make the process simple, the current system often feels more complicated than convenient for students.

Auburn currently uses a source-separated recycling system, meaning that different types of materials must be placed into specific bins; bottles and cans are separated from mixed paper, and each bin is shaped to accept certain items. From a visual standpoint, this system seems organized and effective, but it creates challenges in practice. As students move quickly across campus, they are often unwilling to stop and decide where each item of trash belongs. It can be argued that a source-separated system on campus discourages recycling rather than supports it.

One of Auburn's sustainability goals states that it aims to "conduct our campus operations so that we use resources conservatively, efficiently, and sustainably." This approach is

not an efficient method for college students in practice. Yes, efficiency can require a more detailed system; however, the current policy has the opposite effect. Instead of encouraging students to participate in recycling, it pushes them away from it. In addition to my observations, I spoke with two Auburn students about their recycling practices on campus. One student explained, “I do not want to stop and think about whether or not my trash can be recycled.” Another shared, “Recycling is too much work, and I never notice the bins.” Hearing these responses made it clear that recycling is not an individual issue, and their statements prove a consistent pattern in how students interact with the current recycling system.

Students are typically in a rush between classes and do not have time to stop and sort their trash in multiple bins. In many cases, students choose the most convenient option by throwing everything into the landfill. For example, after finishing a meal, a student may gather their items into one bag and dispose of it without separating each material. Rather than viewing this process as recycling, students experience it as separating trash, which requires more effort



than they are willing to put in fast-paced situations. An alternative, and more effective, system is single-stream recycling; a process that allows all recyclable materials to be placed into one bin. Single-stream recycling simplifies the recycling process and aligns with how students behave on Auburn’s campus. By reducing the effort required at the point of disposal, single-stream recycling could increase participation and support Auburn’s sustainability goals.

Most students grow up with a basic understanding of what recycling is, but not everyone

understands the benefits from an ecological perspective. Alongside implementing sustainability goals on campus, Auburn has a responsibility to educate students on why these goals exist. Furthermore, Auburn's Sustainability states that it aims to "provide students, faculty, and staff with learning, development, and engagement opportunities to understand the ethics, principles, and practices of sustainability" (Auburn University Sustainability Policy). While it may seem easy to educate students on recycling, this perspective is limited. Students may know something is recyclable, but may not consider how improper sorting affects the item from being reused. The Office of Sustainability should help students understand the larger environmental impact of their actions. Without this deeper understanding, recycling becomes a chore rather than a meaningful practice connected to the environment.

Students must understand that they are ultimately the ones affected by environmental decisions. Chris Ingraham says in *Ecological Rhetoric*, "The very word *environmentalism* is evidence of wishful thinking. Society would be so involved in taking care of 'it' that it would no longer be a case of some 'thing' that surrounds us, that environs us and differs from us" (Ingraham 5). He argues that people often view the environment as something separate from themselves, something that surrounds us rather than something we are a part of. This way of thinking reflects how students approach recycling. Their focus is often on the immediate task rather than the larger impact.

Furthermore, recycling is not solely a logistical issue, but a rhetorical one. If students lack an understanding of how they are connected to the environment, then sustainability practices become optional rather than necessary. The Office of Sustainability must go beyond simply providing instructions and instead work to reshape how students understand their role within

the environment. While this may not immediately change their perspective, combining this approach with multimedia communication methods can shift how recycling is understood on campus.

Auburn University continues to make efforts to create “The Loveliest Village on the Plains,” but sustainability requires more than sincere policies. The Office of Sustainability plays a key role in shaping how students engage with recycling, but their current systems lack an understanding of student tendencies. Ultimately, creating a sustainable campus requires both practical changes and a shift in how students view their relationship to the environment. Meaningful change does not come from a single person, but it is a collective effort shaped by shared responsibility. Recycling directly impacts the community we are a part of every day, and once students recognize this, they will be motivated to engage in sustainable practices. Through this shift in perspective, Auburn can continue to live up to its identity.

Works Cited

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