

Youth Corner

Reflections on a Sustainability Internship

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I applied for the sustainability internship through Aramark on campus at Stephen F Austin State University in the fall of 2019. Throughout this internship, I have worked with SFA students one-on-one, created educational sustainability programs, developed student incentive programs to gain action from the student body, and conducted surveys and collected feedback.

One of my interactive programs of the internship was creating two tabling events a week to communicate with the students. These events were themed and had prizes for the students to get positive responses. I gained survey information and educated the students on fun trivia facts on how to be more sustainable. My goal through this tabling was to have students see how small steps can make the switch to sustainability easy. I would research products and websites to give students accessible resources for when they are ready to join the sustainable community.

A few of the most memorable interactions for me were about recycling, personal product switch, and food waste. There was a peanut butter event table involving trivia games that students would participate in to win a prize. These games showed me the base knowledge of the student and what information to give them following the game. This offered an easy interaction for the students to feel included in sustainability and not overwhelmed with information at one time.

I have learned a lot myself from researching for these events. One fact that caught my attention was that Americans eat enough peanut butter to coat the Grand Canyon! When I told the students this, they were surprised. For recycling, we held an event at basketball and football games called. The Halftime Hustle. This event involved student organizations filling large bags with all plastic bottles from the stadium so they could be recycled afterward rather than thrown in the trash by guests or left behind as litter. I communicated with multiple organizations to attend this event and compete for the first-place prize. I continued to research more to help with the recycling initiative in Nacogdoches, Texas. When it came to the personal product switch event, I brought all my sustainable products to show students what they might look like. I had a laptop with websites open for them to shop at and then prizes for our trivia games. The trivia games

involved questions surrounding how much water is used to create hair products and how much longer soap bars last compared to soap bottles. I offered my personal experience with soap bar switches and how, in the long run, it lasts longer and saves on production water to create it. I feel my personal life is what grasped the student's attention. I have students to this day contacting me on social media to ask sustainable questions. This means progress to me.

I applied my marketing skills to the social media page of SFA Dining to have students receive notifications when I would be doing sustainable events. I worked with a team to post about when we do waste audits in the dining hall and how much food people waste. The first time I did a waste audit I was genuinely surprised by the poundage of food wasted. I would calculate food waste and then paper/plastic products separately. This gave me a more accurate number of what is wasted. I use these audits to communicate with the SFA dining hall supervisors about what needs to be changed. I write email reports on how to alter the dishware so there is less paper waste, such as grill liners and dessert cups. In these emails, I also report how much food per person we are wasting during my two-hour time slot. I have a clicker for the number of students to be exact for my calculations. I use clear tubs to show students the amount of food wasted, so they have a visualization. I would attend food committee meetings to gain an insight into the students' needs for food, diet restrictions, and additions they saw fit for the dining hall. I handled and tracked the use of the dining hall reusable to-go boxes to continue the efficiency of our dining hall's sustainable initiative.



Throughout my internship, the numbers for the waste audits have lowered significantly and the dining hall supervisors worked with me on figuring out why certain foods are wasted compared to others. We have altered portion sizes and types of food to help combat the waste issue. We also compost twice a week using Appleby Farms for the food scraps we won't be using. The compost is around a thousand pounds a week. Since I have this internship until I graduate, my goal for the fall is to make an educational video

on how much we compost, what we compost, and where it goes. A lot of students on campus are unaware of the compost project and throughout my table events I explain it, but I would like it to be more well known. I would also communicate with the local churches to pick up food products that would go bad over breaks such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and spring break. Working with the chefs at each dining hall we would weigh, calculate, and track the food to be given away for those times. This way no food was wasted because students would not be on-site to consume at the dining hall.

The largest project I have worked on for this program is developing the Pineywoods Paper Conservation competition. I had a vision in the fall to recycle paper throughout campus because I kept seeing students throw away their paper at the end of the semester. The idea originated from seeing compostable journals to purchase online and then journals made from repurposed paper. Over winter break, I thought if we used student papers, there would be a way for them to be involved. I used the funds from my fall competition to pay for the incentive prizes for this semester's challenge. The first-place winners would receive a four-hundred-dollar check, the second-place winners would receive a two-hundred-dollar check, and the third-place winners would receive a hundred dollars in dining dollars.



The goal of this project was to use the student organizations that are competing to drop off the most paper to re-purpose into little notebooks for the fall. These notebooks would be free and have the competing student organizations listed on the back cover. Having students compete for incentive prizes meant having more paper dropped off. We were only able to do one paper drop-off before campus shut down for the pandemic, but we received over fifty pounds of paper. I went through the paper to make sure each organization had followed our guidelines.

The guidelines involved needing to be a printer paper, one side clean, no confidential information, no dark colored paper, no tears or staple rips, and no blacked-out sections. The program had over 17 organizations competing because I attended the involvement fair in January with a survey for students to sign up. I was pleasantly surprised to see how happy students reacted to the news of the competition and how it will continue throughout the following semesters.

My time management and communication abilities have grown through this internship from having to email and inform students and supervisors of the sustainable projects I have been working on. At first, I was hesitant with the internship, thinking the students would not be willing to hear what I had to say, but more students than I

expected were open to new information. I have learned how to introduce sustainability slowly, to not overwhelm the students and make them feel a sustainable life is not possible. This was my hardest part to overcome. I get very excited showing all the alternative products and how to cut down on waste and plastic use, which can be too much for someone to absorb in a sitting. My events help teach one thing at a time.

Last October I hosted a “Dining in the dark” event to teach about the importance of turning off lights when not needed and cutting down on electrical usage in general. This event involved putting solar lights on the roof of the student center two weeks before the dinner. I put the lights up early in case of forecasted rain that might affect the lights' ability to gain energy. The dinner involved Halloween trivia games through Kahoot, involving questions on topics such as pumpkin waste, plastic candy wrapper pollution, costume fast fashion, and repurposing Halloween decorations. The students that got the most correct answers won a t-shirt that I created with the graphic design intern. The event had the students eating in the dark with only solar-powered lights to see. The table decorations were re-purposed glass jars painted into Halloween characters. I partnered with an organization, The Big Event, to help host the dinner to gain more outreach to students.

My sustainability internship will continue until I graduate, which is great news for me because I have many more ideas to implement on campus. In my last semester, I will have someone shadow me so I can train them to take over my job. This way SFA can continue to involve sustainability in its campus lifestyle.

