



Environmental Center

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News 9.07.07

For Immediate Release

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University of Colorado Releases Study on Sustainable Solutions for Grab and Go Packaging

The University of Colorado releases “Sustainable Solutions for Grab-n-Go Packaging at the University of Colorado at Boulder”, a study on packaging options for Grab and Go venues. The comprehensive report is a valuable resource for university and college campuses across the country.

Dining Services on campuses are incorporating Grab and Go meal venues to accommodate today’s student lifestyle. As these venues have increased in availability and in popularity, so has a new waste stream of food packaging. At the University of Colorado - Boulder, the Grab and Go food packaging waste stream has become large enough to reverse previously decreasing landfill rates.

The study was requested by the University of Colorado Housing & Dining Services Department and carried out by students in ENV5 3001, Campus and the Biosphere: an Environmental Service Learning Course, under the direction of Dr. Lisa Barlow, Environmental Studies, Geological Sciences, and Baker Residential Academic Program.

The report was triggered by the great success of a single Grab-n-Go, Piazanos, which is a natural and organic food venue for 5000-plus student residents on the campus meal plan. Piazanos opened in January, 2006 with the expectation of 500 meals per day. By the spring of 2007, Piazanos was serving an average of 2500 meals per day. Each meal contains one to three conventional clear plastic containers, a drink container, and a plastic carrying bag. The amount of non-divertible trash is estimated to be approximately 60 tons per year says CU Recycling Development Director Jack DeBell.

The report contains five papers covering the following topics. 1) Lifecycle analyses of conventional plastic, aluminum, corrugated and single-layer cardboard, and PLA plastic. 2) Biodegradable plastics, the true meaning of the terms “biodegradable” and “compostable”, and ASTM biodegradable and compostable standards. 3) Peer-to-peer education and outreach strategy development using social marketing techniques that promote sustainable behavior. 4) Current efforts on other campuses that reduce grab and



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go packaging. 5) Short term and long term recommendations for waste reduction and sustainable packaging. Although the report is tailored to respond to the needs of Dining Services at the University of Colorado, many college and university groups will find valuable information to aid in their future strategies.

Based on the research of the class, along with other independent initiatives within the department, Housing & Dining Services has instituted several changes for fall 2007. Plastic “clamshell” containers have been replaced with recyclable aluminum bottoms while retaining clear plastic lids. The pizza box is recyclable paperboard. Additional changes include addition of bulk condiment stations, conversion from prepackaged utensil kits to individual utensils and napkins, and strong encouragement to only take a carry-out bag if needed. Dining Services has also committed to outreach and education geared toward increasing awareness to reduce waste and recycle more.

ENVS 3001 is designed as a consulting firm whose clients are campus operations departments that are actively seeking more sustainable or greener strategies. Emergent needs are proposed to an advisory committee that includes the Instructor and representatives from the CU Environmental Center, Housing & Dining Services, CU Recycling, and Facilities Management. After discussions with stakeholders, a memorandum of understanding is formed for student projects to be completed in the following semester. The class allows students to work directly with CU staff to forge solutions for real-life campus issues. Students give professional level oral and written presentations to stakeholders at the end of the course.

The full report is posted at http://envs.colorado.edu/undergrad_program/C106/ENVS-3001