

# Wastin' No Time!

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Developing a Robust Waste Diversion System  
Within UCLA Graduate Apartments



*Waste Auditing in 720 Hilgard | Image by Diana Nguyen*

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Moldy avocados, bedsheets, and plenty of spoiled dairy products. These are just a few of the myriad waste items that Sustainability Action Research's Graduate Housing Waste Diversion team encounters during our work at UCLA's graduate housing facilities on Hilgard avenue.

In Spring of 2017, a previous SAR team worked to implement a pilot compost program in two residential complexes, tracking waste sorting data and analyzing the rate of organics that were diverted from landfill throughout the process. This waste audit was the first time since June of 2017 that detailed quantitative data has been collected at UCLA's Hilgard apartments, and represents a significant step towards better understanding the residents' understanding of waste sorting at Hilgard. More importantly, this was a crucial step towards helping UCLA meet its Zero Waste by 2020 goals, as it has guided our team's plans for program improvements.

After meeting with our stakeholders Daisy Oliver and Addae Jahdai-Brown of UCLA Residential Life and Erin Fabris of Housing Sustainability, we learned that numerous problems arose after last year's successful pilot was neglected due to staff turnover in the summer, that year's SAR team going their separate ways, and resident turnover in the fall and winter. In this context, no one was able to facilitate a transition of the compost program into the new school year when residents moved back into Hilgard in the fall of 2017. According to one resident who has lived in 720 Hilgard since last year: "To be honest, I think the compost program is [...] kinda stupid." Despite his bluntness, he did have a somewhat justifiable opinion, as the fly infestation problem in the waste room had improved little since the spring of the previous year, with scores of dead fruit flies scattered across the walls of the waste room.

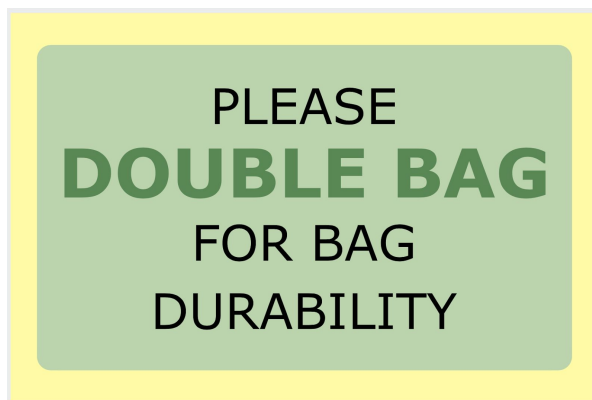
In addition - as many residents were quick to tell us - the compostable liners for their caddies lacked durability, and the dispenser in the waste room for these liners was often empty. Acrid odors - emanating both from the caddies within residents' apartments as well as from the large green bin in the waste room - was an almost complex-wide complaint, even from the few compost-friendly residents we encountered. The visual audit and informal door-knocking session left us aware of how many

residents' opinions of composting and waste diversion had soured and how this might have impacted their waste-sorting performance prior to our actual audit.

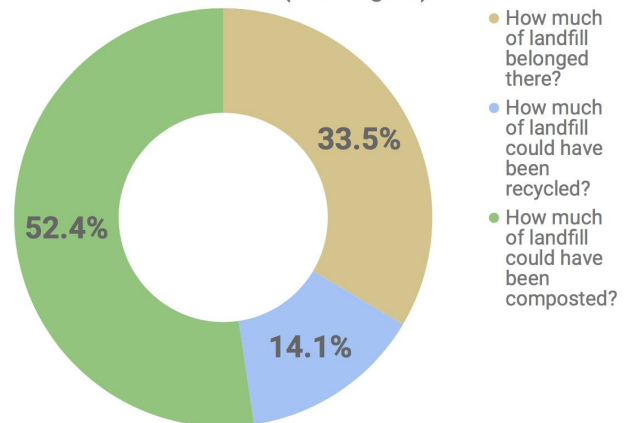
In February 2018, we conducted our first waste audit of the year, continuing where the previous team had left off. Our waste audit revealed that there was certainly room for improvement in resident behavior and a need for more successful initiatives. Within one of the apartments (720 Hilgard), 52.35% of waste placed in the landfill bins could

have been diverted to compost. This significant proportion of possible diverted waste is a prime reason why our team emphasizes the implementation and institutionalization of an efficient composting system in UCLA's graduate and eventually undergraduate housing if UCLA is to meet its [Zero Waste Goal by 2020](#).

Moving into spring quarter, our team had goals to distribute educational materials with hopes of affecting the waste sorting behaviors of the residents in Hilgard. On top of this, we intended to analyze the infrastructure of other UCLA-owned housing complexes to inform recommendations for expansions to administration. Since winter quarter, the fruit fly issue has been resolved and there is little evidence of recurrence



Proportions of Compostables and Recyclables Located in Landfill (720 Hilgard)



within Hilgard's waste rooms. In order to further encourage residents to compost, we offered tips to make composting more convenient. Stickers on compost bag dispensers inform residents to double bag their organic waste, addressing resident concerns of the bags' lack of durability.

## LET'S TALK DIRTY....



### TIPS & TRICKS FOR COMPOSTING

PROBLEM	SOLUTION
 <b>BAGS TOO THIN AND TEARING?</b>	 <b>DOUBLE BAG IT</b> to add an extra layer of protection
 <b>DOES YOUR COMPOST SMELL?</b>	 <b>FREEZE IT</b> in your freezer to keep it out of sight and smell
 <b>DOES YOUR BAG RIP AND DRIP?</b>	 <b>BRING YOUR CADDY</b> when bringing your compost down to the waste room

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Our team has made additional efforts to increase composting convenience by creating and distributing a “Tips & Tricks to Composting” infographic to the residents, with solutions to problems that residents voiced in our online surveys. Acknowledging that effective waste diversion occurs within residents’ apartments first, we distributed waste-sorting magnets to each Hilgard resident, allowing them to have the information within their apartments before bringing their waste to the waste room.

After a week that all these educational materials (stickers, infographics, magnets) were distributed, we organized a focus group with Hilgard residents and a second waste audit to assess any waste diversion behavior changes. The primary goal of the focus group was to gain constructive feedback on our educational initiatives and what could be done better or changed about the current composting system. After this focus group session, one resident revealed that, apart from our efforts to distribute educational materials and encourage waste

**HOW TO SORT YOUR WASTE**

COMPOST	RECYCLE	TRASH TO LANDFILL
<b>FOOD WASTE</b> 	<b>CARD-BOARD</b> 	<b>STYROFOAM</b> 
<b>FOOD SOILED PAPER OR CARDBOARD</b> 	<b>ALUMINUM CANS</b> 	<b>WAX LINED CUPS</b> 
	<b>PAPER</b> 	<b>RECEIPTS</b> 
	<b>PLASTIC</b> 	<b>FOIL-LINED PACKAGING</b> 
	<b>GLASS</b> 	<b>FOOD SOILED RECYCLABLES</b> 

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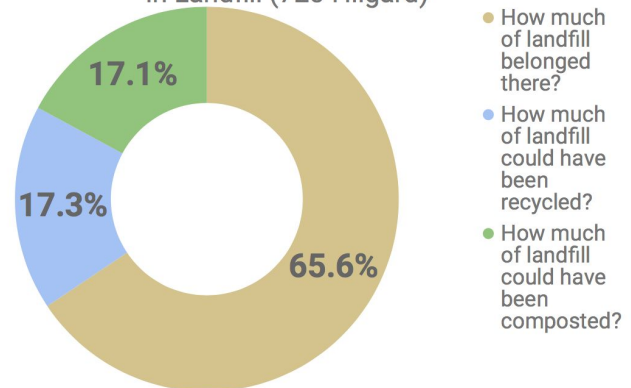
diversion, UCLA’s administration within Housing and Facilities could invest more effort into institutionalizing the program and educating residents of the organics collection program at the beginning of the year (i.e. move-in guides on the composting system).

Later that week, we conducted our waste audit to find some surprising results. The quantitative data collected displayed a positive change in waste diversion behavior in 720 Hilgard. A few months prior, 52.4% of 720 Hilgard’s waste sent to landfill consisted of compost. In the most recent waste audit, that percentage has decreased to 17.1%. At this specific graduate residential complex, we had a stronger presence with the residents: hosting tabling sessions for online surveys, hosting the focus group at their complex lounge, etc.

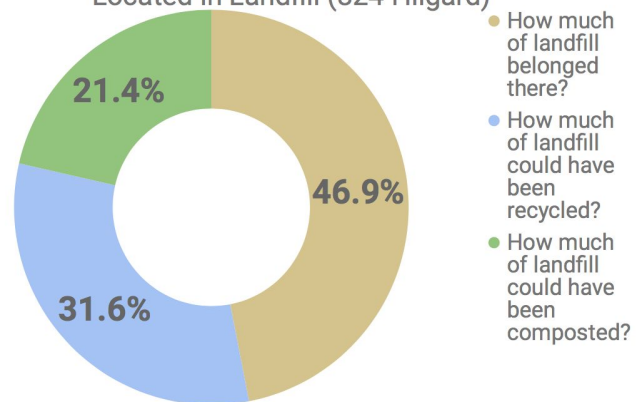
However, at 824 Hilgard, it seems that waste diversion has remained largely unchanged with 17% of landfill comprised of compost waste in February to 21.4% in May-- a slight increase from the two audits. It should be noted that in the May waste audit, significantly more waste was diverted away from landfill and to compost in both complexes.

A successful composting program in UCLA’s Hilgard apartments will facilitate the proper sorting of organic waste and recyclables, but during our team’s February waste audit, it became apparent that the success of the composting system had largely eroded. Proper sorting and successful waste diversion calls for both a conscious effort among residents and greater institutional support. We continue to encourage greater

Proportions of Compostables and Recyclables Located in Landfill (720 Hilgard)



Proportions of Compostables and Recyclables Located in Landfill (824 Hilgard)



resident engagement through education and direct outreach and continue to push our partners in UCLA administration to recognize the potential impacts of waste diversion efforts in Graduate Housing and beyond. As UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability Assistant Director Cully Nordby told us, “You guys have the potential to be compost heroes for the residents.” We continue to keep these words in mind as we move forward with this project, knowing that we have a real opportunity to engender a passion for sustainability among UCLA graduate students despite the initial challenges our team has faced. By addressing the concerns of Hilgard residents, promoting education and a greater understanding of waste sorting, and encouraging UCLA administration to focus greater time and energy on waste diversion initiatives, we will reform the waste patterns of students in UCLA housing and lead a cleaner and more sustainable future.