

## **Signage, Nutrition, and Outreach - Essential Ingredients for Combating Food Waste at UCLA Dining Halls**

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Although the University of California, Los Angeles is an environment which champions sustainability efforts campus-wide, students who dine at the UCLA Dining Halls are creating a substantial amount of food waste, ultimately skewing the university's diligent sustainability endeavors.

With a larger than ever freshman class, UCLA Dining expected to see an increase in the amount of food being wasted. However, dining staff noticed an unproportional increase in food waste that cannot be explained simply by the increase of students. Decreasing food waste would further UCLA's overall sustainability goals and benefit the environment. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct research on the causes of the increased food waste, and to focus education on aspects such as sustainable eating and nutrition to bring awareness to the issue of food waste through innovative approaches. By getting students more aware of not only the various sustainability programs within UCLA Dining, but also the environmental and health reasons behind the programs, there will be a greater change in post-consumer waste in the UCLA Dining Halls.

The 2018 SAR Food Team is engaging with students through three different mediums: 1) Signage, 2) Nutrition Education, and 3) Outreach. The team is using data and responses from a preliminary waste audit and surveys to guide the sign creation process. Furthermore, nutritional education combined with an outreach event will focus on interacting with UCLA students and providing them with the knowledge to make informed and mindful decisions regarding food selection.

In response to preliminary survey findings that a majority of students in UCLA dining halls believe encouraging customization is an effective way to reduce food waste on campus, the team designed signs highlighting existing customization options in UCLA dining halls. Another possible reason for the issue stems from a general lack of student awareness regarding the environmental impacts of food waste on a university scale. In response, the team constructed signage aimed at highlighting the considerable environmental impacts of food waste and reminding students that their conscious, individual decisions can and do have a major impact on the environment.



Figure 1: Shows the four types of signage that have been dispersed throughout the dining halls. Signs will be found on the digital monitors, at the food service stations, and on the dining tables in the form of table tents.

Our second approach aims to increase student awareness about nutrition and mindful eating in an effort to create more conscious students when it comes to food and food waste. Possession of nutritional information can help students cultivate healthier eating habits and fundamentally reduce their food waste. There have been numerous initiatives undertaken by UCLA-affiliated groups to bring attention to the importance of [conscious eating](#) - making informed dietary choices. One of our aims is to assess the nutritional awareness among diners at the residential restaurants and publicize educational initiatives to strengthen student nutritional knowledge. Following this, we can quantitatively determine whether or not linking the impact of daily food choices on personal health to the collective ecological impact of daily food choices on the environment can influence food waste behaviors. Our expectation is that knowing the recommended composition and quantity of food will aid in reducing consumer food waste.

Results from our dining hall surveys indicate that students are “vaguely aware” of the nutritional value of the food they consume. The team reached out to Dolores Hernandez, the Nutrition Education Coordinator at UCLA, for permission to publish and distribute nutritional guides from the former [Student Nutrition Advocacy Club](#) in the dining halls and at our outreach event on The Hill.

In addition to creating signage about food waste and educating students about the nutritional value of their foods, the SAR Food Waste Team also hosted an event that directly engaged with students in an effort to teach them about food waste. This event was the culmination of the educational aspect of our project, because it also incorporated the signage and nutritional information that the other sub-teams created. Furthermore, through the high traffic location of the event and the free food we provided using funds from The Green Initiative Fund, we were able to reach more students and raise awareness about food waste. In total, over a hundred students at the event pledged to be more food conscious.

Overall, the multi-faceted educational component of our project aims to give students a well-rounded understanding of food waste. Since food involves so many different aspects, it made sense to split the educational component into multiple, smaller projects and tie them together through their relation to waste. By using different approaches to educate students about food waste, we can reach students from diverse walks of life more effectively.

Half-eaten hamburgers, melting mounds of soft serve, untouched pizza slices, and other egregious sights like these have become all too common at UCLA's Dining Halls. Bins full of uneaten food begs the question: are UCLA students fully aware of the impact of their wasted food? With proper education, students will be more mindful of the impacts of their eating habits, make more nutritious food choices, and create a lasting, more sustainable future at UCLA, one without excessive food waste.

Thumbnail:

