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Audit highlights diners' food waste

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As a result of the large volume of food that is thrown away on campus, Ohio University conducted a waste audit to encourage students to watch what they discard.

The OU Office of Sustainability, the Green Network and Dining Services are working toward bringing to students' attention the issue of food waste by emphasizing the by-product.

"Ultimately our mission is always the same - to stimulate critical thinking around sustainable living issues. It's not to brainwash and it is not limited to disseminating the right information, but creating an opportunity for an exchange of dialogue and critical thinking," said Sonia Marcus, the Office of Sustainability coordinator.

The university conducted four food-waste audits at Jefferson Dining Hall during regular dining hours, beginning last month and ending Monday. The dump-line detail broke down the waste into three categories: edible food waste, inedible food waste and trash.

The leftover grub was sorted and weighed. That amount was then divided by the number of diners to determine the average amount of unnecessary waste generated by each diner.

Over the course of the four days, a total of 1,200 pounds of edible food was dumped off of peoples' trays - averaging between 5.24 and 6.29 ounces per person.

Messenger photo | Kristin Heinichen

Nathan Jud, who organized a food audit at Ohio University, and Sarah Dewitt check the food that has been discarded by students at Jefferson Dining Hall.

At the third audit, organizers removed all the trays in the cafeteria, and food waste decreased by more than 28 percent. "Some people were very supportive and some people were very whiny. And then others were just confused," Marcus said of the trays being removed.

"The national average - of schools with a conservation-minded student population - is 3.25 ounces per student per meal. Based on that figure, we developed our own expectations of what we might find with food waste at our own dining hall," Marcus said.

At Monday's audit, organizers weighed food waste in full view of the students.

Nathan Jud, Office of Sustainability employee and the main organizer of the audit, explained how this program will improve the dining habits of OU students. "In the short term, I believe this audit will (positively) affect the eating habits of a portion of the students. It might not last their entire career at Ohio University, maybe only the quarter, but a subset of that will have long-term effects on their eating habits," Jud said.

Decorating the dining hall are banners that reveal the results of rejected food through the audit program. Jud read off two of the many facts displayed. "From our findings on the 28th, there was enough food wasted per person to feed another 357 people," Jud said. "Over the course of three of the audits, approximately 1,000 meals were thrown away."

When food is wasted, so is energy, explained Marcus. The energy it takes to plant, harvest, package, transport and prepare the food cannot be recovered. "Creating food takes input and energy, and when we dump food in the trash and it goes in the landfill, we are not making the best use of that resource," Marcus said.

Carelessly casting away foodstuffs also has social ramifications.

"This is about social justices. A lot of people can do better with a little bit more food on their plates," Marcus said, contrasting those in need against those who do not "treat food with respect."

Then there are the economic consequences that directly affect OU students. "Obviously the cost to Ohio University students - the cost of the meal plan - goes up. Dining services has to factor in the food that is getting dumped. If there were better conservation efforts, it would certainly be reflected in operations of that particular department," she said.

Exit interviews showed that while 90 out of 134 students were "concerned or very concerned about food waste," 90 people agreed or somewhat agreed that they were entitled to take as much food as they wanted.

Jacob Dummermuth and Shane Dowd were unable to clean their plates. "In our defense, the spaghetti is terrible," Dummermuth said, smiling.

Dowd said that because the meal plan has been previously paid for, students should be able to help themselves to as much food as they want, regardless of their ability to polish it off.

"It costs a lot to eat at the dining halls," Dowd said, explaining that his parents pay for his meal plan.

Dummermuth, whose parents pay for his meal plan, disagreed with his buddy. "If you know you're not going to eat it, then you shouldn't pile it on," he said.

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