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Ohio University
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Audits give students food for thought

Feb 19, 2008

By Kim Corriher

How carefully do you watch your waste?

On Monday, Ohio University's Office of Sustainability revealed results from recent food waste audits conducted at Jefferson Dining Hall, demonstrating the need for the university community to be more "waste-wise."

The goal of the audits -- which found an average of 4.5 to 6.3 ounces of food per person was thrown away during dinner service -- is to increase awareness of food waste among students and the entire Ohio University community.

"A greater change will come from students being aware and taking action than from any kind of institutional change," said Nathan Jud, a senior who works in the Office of Sustainability. Jud helped design the audits in conjunction with members of the Green Network and Dining Services. "This is another example of being aware of the impact that you do have and the impact you can have."

Audits were conducted during dinner service over four Mondays (Jan. 21, Jan. 28, Feb. 4 and Feb. 18). The audits focused only on edible food disposed of by student consumers, not kitchen waste, nonedible food waste (banana peels, bones, apple cores) or trash.

Here's a look at average collections per person on the four audit dates:

- **Jan. 21:** 5.24 ounces per person (756 people served, 248 total pounds of waste).
- **Jan. 28:** 6.29 ounces per person (680 served, 268 pounds of waste).
- **Feb. 4:** 4.52 ounces per person (681 served, 191 pounds of waste).
- **Feb. 18:** 5.56 ounces per person (709 served, 246.5 pounds of waste).

Jud said the totals are "unusually high" when compared to those of other institutions. He noted in particular a similar study at

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Harvard that found an average of 3.3 ounces of food wasted per person.

According to Director of Sustainability Sonia Marcus, the audits were performed without any indication to students about what was happening during the January dates. But on Feb. 4, the absence of trays caught some people's attention. Marcus said the hope was that the inconvenience of having to juggle plates and bowls without trays would draw attention to how much food was being taken from the stations.

"It's not about depriving anyone, it is more about making people aware of their actions" Marcus said

On the "no-tray day," there was a drop in the total amount of food waste generated, even though more people were served.

The final audit was conducted Monday, when signs and charts displaying the results of the first three audits on columns and table tents around the room drew attention to the effort and its goals.

Senior Kara Johnson sat beneath a sign noting that on Jan. 21st, the equivalent of 330 people could have been fed on the amount of food thrown away.

"It's even worse than I thought," Johnson said of the results. "That's a lot of food wasted."

While the facts and figures drew attention, they didn't necessarily draw action. "Education doesn't seem to have much of an immediate effect on waste, but the tray removal did," Marcus said.

An exit survey conducted during the Feb. 4 audit shows students may be open to changing their ways. Eighty-three percent of the 134 students participating said they supported efforts to reduce food waste within the dining halls. Ninety students, or 67 percent, indicated they were "concerned" or "very concerned" about the amount of waste generated.

"This gives us someplace to start," Marcus said. "There's been no determination as to what will happen from here, but this gives us some information to move forward with."

To speak with a media consultant about this story, please contact Sonia Marcus, sustainability coordinator, at 740-593-0026 or marcuss@ohio.edu.

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