

Jefferson Dining Hall: OU audits amount of food trash to help minimize future waste

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Sarah Dewitt (left) and Sonia Marcus
Empty clear off the plates in Jefferson
Dining Hall.

In an effort to reduce waste at campus dining halls, Ohio University officials are tabulating the amount of trash produced at four meals in Jefferson Hall to demonstrate how much goes unused.

Last night marked the final session of a four-session food waste audit that began Jan. 21. Office of Sustainability representatives weighed the trash after students disposed of it and were testing whether or not the presence of signs, charts and fact boxes placed around the dining hall would have an effect on the amount of food students wasted.

The results from that test have yet to be tabulated. But the removal of the trays in a February audit sparked a 75-pound drop from the previous audit on Jan. 28 — when students were allowed to keep their trays. With the trays, students produced 268 pounds of waste; without them, they produced 193 pounds.

Still, it's just a test. Officials haven't landed on any one particular solution to decrease waste.

"We're trying to improve efficiency, minimize waste and improve environmental impact," said Sustainability Coordinator Sonia Marcus, adding that she heard from some unhappy students when the trays were taken out.

"Students are very vocal about their displeasure for being inconvenienced for just one evening," she said.

The idea for the audit began with the student group Green Network approaching Dining Services and coordinating with the Office of Sustainability about a year ago, said Richard Neumann, director of Dining Services. Green Network wanted to monitor and then show students the amount of food thrown away to give a sense of perspective.

"Food waste seems to be a concern among environmental groups as long as I can remember," said senior Nathan Jud, an employee of the Office of Sustainability, adding that the waste OU generates is two to three times as much as Harvard University found in similar studies of its own waste.

Jud was in Jefferson last night helping two women from the Office of Sustainability clear plates into plastic-lined trash cans. Once the plastic bags became full, they removed them to be weighed later.

For Marcus, the problem lies in students taking more than they plan on eating and they should emphasize minimizing waste above all.

“You don’t only want to focus on what to do with the waste once it ends up in your dumpster,” she said. “That’s a last resort.”

Marcus added that portion sizes represent another factor in how much gets thrown away. She has spoken to Dining Services regarding this and other methods of limiting how much food students receive.

Within the state of Ohio, OU is among the leaders in waste control, said Edward Newman, Recycling and Refuse Manager. However, he made it clear that Ohio doesn’t do as good a job at encouraging proper environmental disposal as states such as New York and New Jersey.

“Hopefully next year we will be one of the powerhouses,” he said.