

Taking Time to Track

Going self-op inspires new waste management system at Georgia State.

ATLANTA—The first self-operated dining hall at 31,500-student Georgia State University gave GSU's Insourced Dining Services the opportunity to implement a new waste management system, says Suzanne Paltz, dining hall manager.

"We opened up our first self-operated dining hall in August of 2009," Paltz says. "We worked with LeanPath to implement a waste management system. We, as a university, are moving toward more sustainability initiatives. With having this new self-operated foodservice program, we wanted to move in that direction. We are actually opening our second self-operated dining hall in August of 2011, and that hall will also implement this program. The rest of the campus is managed by Sodexo."

How it works: Paltz says the system starts with weighing and tracking pre-consumer waste in the kitchen.

"We have an electronic scale in the kitchen that weighs our pre-consumer food waste," Paltz says. "It could be trim waste, expired food, over-produced food or spoilage. Each employee clicks on his/her name before weighing any waste. All of our employees have been trained to know that before anything goes to our pulper and extractor, which is where all of our food waste goes, it has to be weighed. Once a week we download the information into a program on the computer and it creates a bunch of different reports. We actually have a dashboard where we can see week to week how we are doing."

Paltz says those reports make it easy for managers to look at the information and figure out where the waste is coming from.

"Let's say one of my employees is showing a lot of excess melon rind waste," Paltz says. "We can find out from him or her exactly why that is.



It could be we've gone through extra melons that week. It could be he or she isn't trimming them as close as he or she could be. We are typically serving the same amount of melons week to week, so if we see a spike, what's the reason for that?

"Another example was we were throwing away lots of expired vegetables. When we looked into it we noticed it was because the cook was cooking all the vegetables at the beginning of the meal. Midway through the meal, the pans of vegetables that hadn't made it to the line weren't good enough to be served. So we cut our production of vegetables in half. Those are ways we are able to use the program's information to change things around. We have noticed a 5% to 10% reduction on a week-to-week basis, depending on things we pick up on and are able to tweak."

One of the biggest challenges in implementing this part of the waste management system was getting the

staff on board, says Paltz.

"It is an extra step for them," she says. "What worked well was when LeanPath came in to do the initial training, they included the employees. That got them really involved in what their part with sustainability was. Since the whole world is moving in that direction, I think it was something that the employees wanted to be a part of. They were not only learning about the cost savings that tracking waste can help with but also how tracking waste can help the earth and the environment."

The department holds weekly Stop Waste Action Team (SWAT) meetings where the managers and employees go over the data to figure out where they can make changes. Paltz says these meetings also have helped make the employees feel more included.

"The employees are able to look at the results and comment about what they thought happened and what we can do as a team to help eliminate that waste," Paltz

says. "That makes them feel like they're a part of it. During those SWAT meetings, we recognize the employees who were the highest contributors, meaning that they had used the program correctly for the most amount of food. Recognizing them made the rest of the employees realize that the managers saw the program as important."

Next steps: After food waste is weighed, the next step of the program sends waste to the extractor and pulper. Currently, that is where the process stops. However, this August a local company called Green Co. will begin picking up the waste to be composted and sold as fertilizer and mulch, Paltz says.

"We'd love to eliminate all waste, but we can't," Paltz says. "We are taking an additional step by having the waste picked up to be composted. Before we didn't have a way to continue the cycle past the extractor and pulper. Now we have this company to complete the cycle. It isn't just

A GSU kitchen employee weighs pre-consumer waste using an electronic scale. Weighing waste helps identify where the operation can make changes.

the pre-consumer waste that will be composted; it's also the post-consumer waste."

All post-consumer waste also goes into the extractor and pulper and will be composted. The dining hall is a trayless facility, which helps cut down on post-consumer waste. The only thing that doesn't go in are plastics, which are recycled. Paltz says once the composting program starts, there are plans to buy some of the composted material back to use on campus.

"Pretty much what you get out of it is what you put into it," Paltz says. "You can just walk through the steps of putting the information in and not really looking at the reports and not being proactive with making changes in your unit. But I strongly suggest that you keep with it and you'll definitely see results."