

SUSTAINABILITY

Campus Sustainability: Berkeley's Zero Waste Research Center

by David Salisbury



UC Berkeley's Zero Waste Resource Center is aiming to inspire environmentally practices that could make the campus waste free by 2020.

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With the world population already at 7.6 billion, and the demands to sustain human growth ever-important, the need to move towards a circular economy for industrial organization with sustainable resources is essential. In 2000, urban populations were creating 3 million tons of waste per day. By 2025, that amount is expected to double. And at this rate, our industry demands will require two planets' worth of natural resources by 2030. Unless we plan on building houses with blown out semi-truck tires and plastic

peanut butter jars, we need to re-evaluate our “consume and dump” model and consider how detrimental that waste will become to our standards of living in the not-too-distant future.

The Zero Waste Research Center

Thankfully, at UC Berkeley the leaders of tomorrow are already making efforts to keep our scenic, vibrant campus as environmentally sustainable as possible. The Zero Waste Research Center (ZWRC) is a student-led center that works to establish new waste-reducing habits by focusing on eco-friendlier means of production. It also institutes circular economy waste systems that can serve as a model for other colleges and universities.

Implemented through Berkeley’s Student Environmental Resource Center, the stated goal of the ZWRC is to make the campus waste-free by 2020. Its efforts include a plastics recycling facility to convert plastic waste into pellets for industry use, specifically for binding filament for the university’s 3D printers (another budding technology that could integrate seamlessly into circular economy models). And thanks to ZWRC, UC Berkeley is the first university to sign on to the Plastic Disclosure Project, which works to decrease the plastic footprint of organizations and corporations by increasing transparency in their plastics consumption and disposal methods.

Circular Sustainability in Corporate America

Corporate America does not have a good track record of cleaning up after itself or being ecologically friendly. If you’ve followed the news over the past few years, it becomes clear that many business-minded people are less interested in sustainable manufacturing, and more interested in, well, business as usual. Oil spills, pipeline controversies, fracking, the Trump administration’s reduction in environmental regulations for business, etc. - the headlines speak for themselves. However, new circular models of waste management might draw their attention. Why? Because its actually good for business. Corporate

researchers, like those at UC Berkeley, have recognized the value in recapturing waste to use as new manufacturing inputs: and this appealing form of reuse is becoming more efficient each year.

In fact, one of ZWRC's best examples of turning industrial waste into sustainable manufacturing inputs comes from within the research lab itself. Lab waste has been hard to eliminate because research work is of utmost importance at the university. Thus, researchers have worked to find other means of disposal for materials like concrete, chemical glass, plastic bottles, and pipettes. The "Refills Not Landfills" campaign was launched to encourage the use of reusable items instead of single-use materials in university activities. The campaign has even worked with local restaurants to encourage reusable materials and education on how to recycle reusable waste.

The Future is Circular

Efforts such as ZWRC's aimed at changing an industry's wasteful habits is not just important, it's imperative. As the world's population grows more technologically advanced, the need for increased production will cause even larger waste issues, and we will begin to see a regression in the ability of our planet to hospitably support life. While efforts like those carried out at the ZWRC remain small, they must become standard practices, as the need to reign in wasteful production has become mandatory.



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