

State of the Planet

EDUCATION, SUSTAINABILITY

What's in Our Waste Bins?

BY PHEBE PIERSON | NOVEMBER 5, 2018

Asami Tanimoto is worried about waste at Columbia. What's in our bins? Where does it go? How can we better manage it? Over the course of the past year Tanimoto, a former environmental consultant and current [masters student in Sustainability Management \(SUMA\)](#), has been trying to find the answers to these questions. Working closely with Columbia's [Office of Environmental Stewardship](#), Facilities, and custodial staff, she's researched and assessed waste on the CU campus, literally digging through trash bins to learn more about what our community is throwing out and what happens to it.

Tanimoto, who is also a Policy and Planning Intern at [Union Square Partnership](#), told us about her work, how her background drives her thinking, and what she hopes for Columbia's waste future. Check out our (edited and condensed) Q&A with her below for answers to your burning questions about the state of waste at Columbia University.

Why did you choose to focus on Columbia's internal waste management?

Before school, I lived by myself, and I'm used to my way of disposing things, which is not a lot. But when I started living with roommates... oh my gosh, the amount of food containers, beverages, food scraps and, because they didn't understand composting, you know, everything went into the trash. It was something that was on my mind, and I was kind of curious to know what the situation was at Columbia as a whole. There were other projects that were shinier and sexier, but I felt like I wanted to do something local. I thought well, I'm at Columbia, why not do something for Columbia?

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Asami performing a waste audit during her EDF Climate Corps Fellowship this summer. Photo: Asami Tanimoto

What did you learn from your waste audits?

My SUMA Net Impact team and I saw that there was a lot of food waste in the Earth Institute and the School of Professional Studies student lounges. People don't quite know what to do with all their food scraps and containers. I think in general people understood that things needed to be separated, but then with things like food packaging, there's still that problem of how much do you clean it out, is it really paper, is it compostable? Even people like me and my colleagues who do this waste audit work, we're always like, well it's paper and the label says "compostable," but there's no composting service here, so it's just going to end up in a landfill.

In general, the signage was lacking across campus. Students are coming from all over the world; they have different practices where they come from, or maybe they've never even recycled before. So just saying "metal/glass/plastic" isn't very clear. And a lot of times the color coding is inconsistent. That was a lot of the recommendation we made to Facilities, make sure the color of the lid actually matches the color of your label, make sure you have signage with illustrations that actually show what can or can't go in there.

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So over the summer, the Office of Environmental Stewardship (OES) made these new labels that go on new bin tops that show commonly found items on campus that would go on these bins. The other thing was the tops. A lot of times food packaging is too big and people don't want to lift the lid, or people don't even know to lift the lid to get it in there. With the new bin tops, they're all big enough that you can put stuff in there.

One of the other things that we recommended to Facilities and OES was trying to educate students more. Students have so many orientation videos that they have to watch—why not one video that says something about environmental stewardship on campus, how waste works, just a simple video. Sustainable Columbia really just launched, and I know they are going in that direction.

What's the weirdest thing your team found when doing waste audits?

What has been baffling me and Matt Akins, who has been doing a lot of the waste auditing with me, is we keep finding an apple core in the plastic/metal/glass bin in the School of Professional Studies student lounge. We don't know if it's the same person, but every time we do an audit we'll find an apple core in there. There are three appropriate bins there, and they're right next to each other. There's no way you can mistake an apple core for metal, glass or plastic.



Matt Akins performing a waste audit at Lewisohn Hall 2nd floor. Photo: Asami Tanimoto

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Waste bins with larger openings and new labels have now been deployed at the Earth Institute. Photo: Phebe Pierson

What's your hope for Columbia's waste future?

Columbia should commit to at least what the New York city goal is—90 percent diversion from landfills—and make that happen. With the spot audits we've done, we've often seen that 80-90 percent can be recycled or composted. I hope everyone—students, staff, faculty—can all be involved in this process, so that when students leave this university they can take that knowledge with them, and use that in their daily lives.

Has living in many different places affected your point of view when it comes to sustainability and waste management?

I spent most of my childhood in Japan, I was born there and raised there, basically. Japan is a very resource-constrained country, and unlike the US, we can't have all these gigantic landfills, so waste is a huge issue. There's definitely a culture of better separating the different types of waste. There are a lot of recycling bins available at stores for hard-to-recycle items like expanded polystyrene, bags, and milk cartons.

I think coming from that background, it doesn't make any sense for me to not recycle when there's an opportunity, or to use any resource to the maximum extent possible. That's part of why I want to be in this field, as well. **Circular economy** really resonates with me.

There's a lot of incinerators in Japan, because, well, what else do you do with your waste? In the US, incinerators are thought of as these polluting, terrible things, and you would never live next to one, and I realized recently that I used to live very, very close to one. What happens is these trash trucks go around the city collecting waste, and then they go into this tunnel entrance, and that's the entrance to the incinerator. So once they collect the waste, you don't see it at all because it's all underground. And that tunnel entrance was right next to my house. But I never thought anything of it, because it's clean, you don't smell anything. And the stack for the incinerator was a little bit farther away, but it was still a part of the community, and no one really thought about it—it was just there.

So the fumes just went into the air?

Yeah, but I think they have very stringent standards because Tokyo is a very densely populated place. The heat from that incineration was used to warm the community pool, and I think the electricity generated was used to power the community center that was attached to the incineration facility. Seeing waste managed that way—or not seeing it—that makes so much sense. Why can't they do that in more places and get the maximum value out of things? So that's the background I came from. It really saddens me to see waste being driven to Virginia to end up in a landfill to just create more methane, whether or not that methane is used in a more beneficial way. I mean, there's so much more that you could be doing with it.

What's your favorite way to reduce waste in your own daily life?

I go to the farmers market for all my produce, so there's no packaging usually. I bring my own bags. I buy things like eggs at the market, and they'll take back the carton that they come in. I buy milk from the farmers market in a glass bottle and they take it back. I don't drink milk, but I eat yogurt and I don't like that yogurt comes in a container. Even if I buy it in a tub, I still end up with a tub, so to get around that I make my own yogurt and I put it in mason jars so I'm not dealing with all the plastic waste that comes from yogurt packaging.

How has the SUMA program been helpful for your understanding of sustainability and your own career?

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Even though I knew a lot about environmental issues already, coming from an environmental consulting background, I never really learned about the history of why we are where we are and the similarity, globally, of the environmental issues. Seeing and understanding things like that was eye opening. Why did I not realize before?! In addition to getting that global holistic education, I got a better understanding of project finance, which is really what I wanted. For the first time in my life, finance is not scary to me, and that's amazing!

I think the SUMA program is great in that it's pretty well established for a sustainability program. So there's all these alumni from the SUMA program and it's great to have that network; to be inspired by them, to have them tell us how they got to where they got, and connect us with people who might be looking for sustainability professionals to hire.

In the Corporate Sustainability Reporting class that Celine Solsken Ruben-Salama teaches, there's a project where you actually prepare a sustainability report for a company, and that was the first time that I'd ever done a report. But now when I go to interviews I can say, hey, I've actually done one before. And the faculty for the program are actual professionals in this field, which is so great. The people who are actually living the sustainability issues and tackling it themselves are such an asset.

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Eri Poinsett-Yoshida

🕒 2 years ago

This article was very interesting to me. There were many topics that I was burning to know why our society is this way with trash. We keep making things that we can't clean up!

Incinerator is an interesting topic. Why we don't have more of this facility here in US? "Recycle" is another topic that not many people know exactly what to do with it. I live in CA. The word "recycle" is used a lot to give an idea that the product is earth friendly.

Without proper recycling process this recycled product is nothing more than just another trash that go to landfills. Immediate things we can do at least to be more aware and responsible with your trash at the individual level to reduce trash.

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