

“To Go” Containers: Improving Boston College’s Carbon Footprint through Dining Services

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ABSTRACT: Boston College and Boston College Dining Services (BCDS) pursue a common mission towards sustainability in their respective practices. Although Dining Services seeks to minimize its costs, regulate its waste management, and reduce its carbon footprint, its consumers (student diners) value convenience to coincide with their rigorous academic and extracurricular lifestyles. Consequently, BCDS offers a “To Go” container available at dining halls, including Corcoran Commons, for students to take their meals to the library, class, or their dormitories. However, BCDS discovered a higher generation of waste, as diners more frequently request a “To Go” container over traditional dining china even if they remain in the dining hall. Boston College Dining Services seeks to reduce its waste, and ultimately its carbon footprint, by embracing a revised strategy of the “To Go” container system. *OBJECTIVES.* In order for BCDS to achieve its goals of mitigating waste management, the research team strives to determine a stronger comprehension of the rationale behind the bias towards “To Go” containers over china and to educate students of Dining Services and Boston College’s commitments to sustainability. *METHODS.* In addition to discussions with Dining Services directors and group observations, the research team designed and distributed an online survey with specific questions in order to enhance knowledge of diners’ rationale to inform BCDS “To Go” strategies. *RESULTS.* The survey and observations concluded that students perceive “To Go” containers as cleaner, more convenient, and more pragmatic with their needs. Furthermore, students are predominantly unaware of BCDS waste management and business practices. *CONCLUSION.* Alternative “To Go” containers or systems, as well as increased education of Dining Services practices and broader sustainability initiatives, are viable options to reduce waste and the carbon footprint.

Background to Boston College Dining Services and the Problem Statement

In order to meet the demands and busy schedules of Boston College students, Boston College Dining Services (BCDS) introduced the “To Go” container in lieu of traditional dining china. Although this option appealed to consumers (student diners with corresponding BCDS meal plans) as practical and convenient (see picture in Appendix A), the increased usage of “To Go” containers perpetually exerts a supplemental financial burden for BCDS and an increasing waste management issue for the broader Boston College community, threatening its mission of environmental sustainability. Over time approximately 60-70% of student diners regularly chose a “To Go” container, regardless of whether or not they remained in the Corcoran Commons dining hall (BCDS). Furthermore, per the request of BCDS, certain meals began to be served solely in “To Go” containers, including pasta and salad, due to the potential safety hazard they may incur. Nevertheless, BCDS undertook various immediate solutions, such as ordering 6000 plastic (but reusable) 32 oz. black bowl containers (BCDS). Such measures proved unsuccessful as student diners stole these bowls (along with other reusable silverware, trays, and china) for personal use in dormitories, and BCDS incurred a greater financial loss. In addition, compostable plates, such as those at the Hillside Bar, were temporarily explored as a viable substitute, but proved more expensive.

Although BCDS operates within the broader framework of Boston College’s administration (i.e., it receives insurance and benefits through the university), it runs as a separate business entity (BCDS). Consequently, in order to minimize costs while maximizing process efficiency and satisfying its customers, BCDS attempted to comprehend the rationale of its diners for consistently choosing “To Go” containers. They discovered three preliminary reasons: students considered it easier to ask for a “To Go” container or were not offered one; students perceived “To Go” containers as cleaner (“more sterile”) than dining china; diners were unsure if they would remain with their friends in Corcoran Commons or return to their dormitories or the library (BCDS). Despite these observations BCDS neither conclusively determined the diner’s ultimate rationale nor pursued further ameliorating practices.

Another chief component of the preliminary data on the rationale indicated that many students were unaware of efficient kitchen technology employed by BCDS during

meal services. Inevitably, while Dining Services staff sought immediate education of these diners on their practices, few students effectively dispersed this knowledge that discounts perceptions of sterility, waste management, and BCDS business operations.

However, the issue transcends beyond the immediate effects of “To Go” containers on Boston College Dining Services’ business costs. The increasing reliance on “To Go” containers by consumers imposes a danger to the sustainability and environmental health of Boston College by enlarging its carbon footprint, despite sincere efforts of constructing LEED certified academic buildings in recent years and the annual NRG Games to spur conservation efforts in student dormitories. Although BCDS are required to compost, recycle, and properly dispose trash, the immediate effect from this dependence generates significantly greater overall waste at Boston College, as the “To Go” containers are also thrown into bins in dormitories and around campus. This contrasts with BCDS’ currently implemented measures of ensuring environmental sustainability in its routine operations, as the kitchen in Corcoran Commons is equipped with a high-tech, energy efficient dishwasher. Consequently, the use of dining china produces less waste, conserves water and energy, and reduces business expenses. Furthermore, this dependence instills a poor ethic of environmental awareness among consumers, creating the illusion that such practices are permissible, and arguably may perpetuate this rationale beyond Boston College. In alignment with BCDS and university mission of stewardship, the task remains to reduce Boston College’s overall carbon footprint by reducing dependence on “To Go” containers.

Objectives of the “To Go” Project

Per the team’s discussions with Boston College Dining Services, the project seeks to fulfill several goals. The chief physical component of the project sought to improve an understanding of specific factors influencing the consumer’s rationale for choosing a “To Go” container. In particular, the objective of this portion was to design an informative survey and provide further observations for BCDS’ current and future “To Go” container strategies, as well as to expand an information exchange between and within the student body and BCDS. While Dining Services had already conducted its independent research on this topic, another objective was to analyze the “To Go” approach at other universities

and provide further suggestions of implementing a similar system. As this component surpasses the timeline of the project, the group project also strove to recruit potential consumers to a trial of the new system in future academic years. All of this data collection attributes to the broader project aim to reduce BCDS and Boston College's carbon footprints. The project analyzed the results of the survey, group observations during dinner sessions, and discussions with Dining Services on their needs to design an educational poster that vividly describes waste management practices behind the "conveyor belt" in Corcoran Commons and for students to embrace outside the dining hall (see Appendix B). This seeks to satisfy the ultimate goal of improving education on sustainability and waste management practices, as well as communication between the supply and demand endpoints (BCDS and its consumers).

Research Questions Pertaining to Project Goals

In order to refine the scope of the research methods, the project team developed a set of questions, emphasizing three issues: diners' perceptions of dining hall operations, students' bias towards the use of "To Go" containers, and BCDS' support of sustainable dining and waste management practices. The research questions are stated below:

1. What factors correspond to the diners' rationale to choose a "To Go" container, despite their intentions to remain in the dining hall?
2. Do students truly perceive university china and silverware as less sterile than a "To Go" container?
3. Do students generate greater waste when opting for a "To Go" container over dining china?
4. What type of training does BCDS management provide for dining hall employees, specifically regarding the provision of dining china and "To Go" containers?
5. Are diners aware of proper disposal methods of "To Go" containers, as well as of broader waste management practices through BCDS?

As these questions, reflective of the project objectives, target multiple respondent pools, the group applied a three-prong approach to the research, consisting of online-based

student surveys, observations during dinner services, and conversations with dining hall employees.

Methods

Correspondences with Boston College Dining Services

In order to understand the operations, needs, and objectives of BCDS, the team conducted meetings with its directors at Corcoran Commons. Over the course of the semester project, the research group met with representatives of BC Dining Services and of BC's Office of Sustainability. Megan O'Neill, the Associate Director of Restaurant Operations, and Derrick Cripps, the General Manager of Corcoran Commons dining hall, were the primary BCDS contacts, and we typically worked with Derrick to coordinate the surveys and other steps of the project. Derrick also led the team on a tour of the dining hall kitchen and behind the conveyer belt to illustrate their daily operations and technologies used in their kitchens. Bob Pion, the Program Director in the Office of Sustainability, also played an integral role by helping to understand BCDS operations and issues with the university's waste stream and carbon footprint. When unable to meet in person, the team and BCDS corresponded via email. Furthermore, the group provided weekly progress reports on our research to these three collaborators, as well as weekly or monthly updates to Dr. Tara Pisani-Gareau, the team's course professor and a major source of support and information throughout the project.

Conducted Student Survey on "To Go" Container Use

The research team developed an online survey comprised of eight questions, with the goal of identifying the rationale behind using "To Go" containers instead of reusable china and silverware. Prior to the administration of the survey, the group submitted an application to the Institutional Review Board to approve the methods and intent of the survey-based research. Despite several drawbacks throughout this process and numerous amendments, this step was facilitated by relaying active updates to Boston College project directors and Dr. Tara Pisani-Gareau and received formal approval by the IRB Committee. Included in the IRB application was a flyer to attract participants to the survey and ultimately distributed in Corcoran Commons. Survey Monkey, a commonly

used and reliable survey system that allows for the cross-examination of data to determine correlation between question responses, was the utilized online tool. The research team conducted the survey over a 48-hour period. To commence, the group approached diners at random in Corcoran Commons to receive their consent and consequent responses to data collection. BCDS posted a link to the survey on its Facebook page, spurring additional responses. The survey captured a total of 98 student responses.

The survey questions consisted of the following:

1. What is your class year at BC?
2. In a typical week, how many times do you visit Corcoran Commons [Lower] Dining Hall for meals?
3. How often do you choose a "To Go" container?
4. Why do you choose "To Go" containers over dining china?
5. Which do you consider more sterile: dining china or "To Go" containers?
6. How do you dispose of "To Go" containers outside of the dining hall?
7. Collection of waste in Lower Dining Hall occurs via a conveyer belt system. How does BC Dining dispose of it?
8. Undergraduate juniors and younger only: Would you be willing to participate in a one-month trial to test an alternative dining container beginning Fall 2014?

These survey questions focused on asking undergraduate students why they choose "To Go" containers instead of reusable china, as well as testing their overall understanding of disposal thereof. This information would be used to implement an educational program in the dining halls. The survey also included a basic demographic question, with the intent of recruiting non-graduating students to participate in a future trial under BCDS auspices.

Observations in Corcoran Commons

The research group supplemented the online survey results with two observation sessions at Corcoran Commons, tallying the number of undergraduate students choosing “To Go” containers for their dinner, as well as the number of diners who actually left the dining hall with these containers for “To Go” eating. Three members of our research team monitored the registers, and cataloged the number of students with “To Go” containers in contrast with those with china. The fourth team member observed and noted a quantitative measurement of the number of students physically leaving the dining hall with “To Go” containers. These totals served to provide insight into the rationale based on the proportion of students choosing “To Go” containers, despite remaining in the dining hall to eat their meal.

Researched Innovative “To Go” Programs at Other Universities

To achieve a holistic analysis of BC Dining operations, we also researched dining operations at other universities in the greater Boston area. This methods component focused on universities employing “à la carte” dining systems, rather than “all you can eat,” which is an important distinction in considering the “To Go” behaviors of students; “all you can eat” programs encourage the diner to stay in the dining hall for meals, and with limited takeout options, this system propels the student to rely on dining china. The objective of this method was to discover any alternative processes for Boston College’s consideration in order to reduce its waste tonnage from “To Go” containers, and encourage the use of reusable china and silverware. Independent research by the team largely relied on online resources, analyzing the systems and practices at Boston University, Harvard University, the University of Maryland, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Generated an Educational Poster Prototype for BCDS

In accordance with the research team’s recommendations, the group produced a prototype for an educational poster to display in Corcoran Commons, at events, and in student dormitories. The poster depicts how Boston College and BCDS organize food waste into trash, recycling, and compost, and the type of containers that are composted.

In addition, it includes a section explaining the superior cleanliness of BCDS dining china and the importance of composting “To Go” containers.

Environmental Studies Department Poster Symposium

To highlight our findings and spread awareness of the “To Go” project and its concerns, we the team designed and presented an educational poster to students and faculty at the Environmental Studies Department Poster Symposium on April 29, 2014.

Results

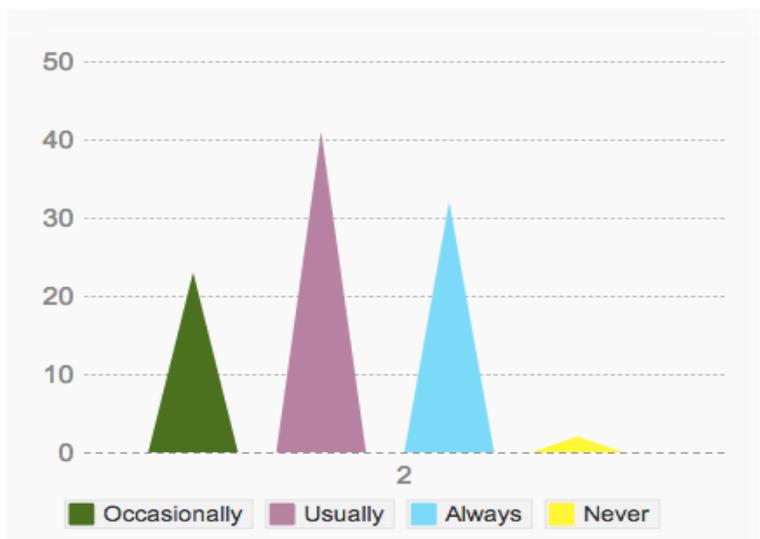
The online survey distributed to students in Corcoran Commons and via the BCDS Facebook page, the team’s observations during dinner services, and discussions with Dining Services provided key insights and perspectives on the issue of “To Go” containers. In addition to explicating specific factors involved in the rationale, the results convey that diners are considerate of BCDS and Boston College’s mission of sustainability and open to further education and discussion on the issue. The diners’ overall strong eagerness to participate in a future trial of “To Go” container alternatives confirms this openness to dialogue. Nevertheless, a lack of effective communication between BCDS and consumers persists, as students demonstrated a substantial shortage of awareness of waste management practices behind the “conveyer belt” and the Corcoran Commons building, sustainability standards, and routine business operations.

Survey

According to the results of the survey distributed to student diners, the prevailing statistic measuring the frequency of weekly visits to Corcoran Commons ranged between zero and five or twenty and twenty-five. Among these diners, 41.84% checked “usually” when prompted how often they choose a “To Go” container. In addition, Figure 1 illustrates that solely 2.04% of respondents never use “To Go” containers, further exhibiting a significantly stronger bias against dining china and a preliminary hint of a lack of education about kitchen and waste management practices. In contrast with BCDS’ initial findings that many diners were unsure whether to remain with friends in the dining hall to eat or to return to dormitories as an influential factor to choose a “To Go”

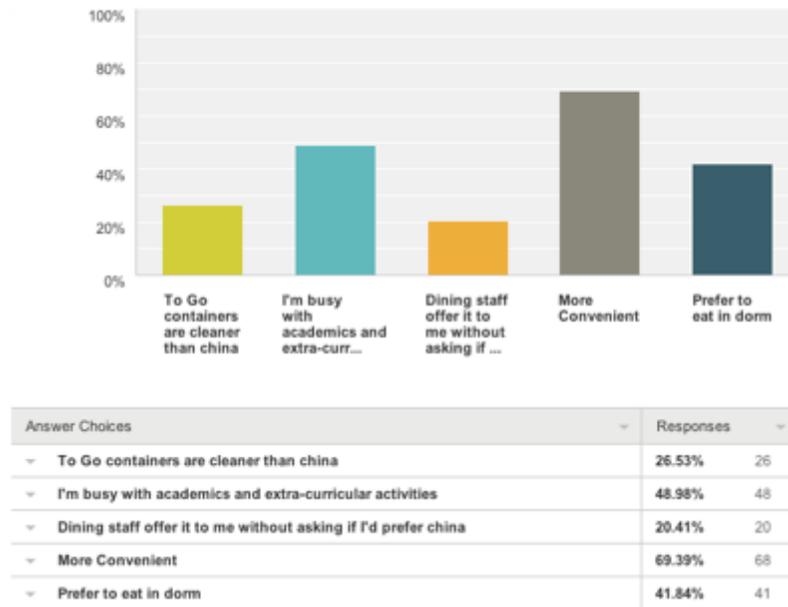
container, this low statistic also shows that many who stay in Corcoran Commons do not necessarily utilize dining china. Another critical factor in the rationale states that respondents largely consider “To Go” containers as preferable due to their superior convenience over dining china (see Figure 2). Although this matches the original intent of pragmatism to meet the needs of busy academic and overall student lives, it also demonstrates that even when the dining china option is available but dining hall employees automatically serve food in a “To Go” container, the diner finds it inconvenient to request dining china or is unaware of the option thereof. Of the ninety-eight survey participants, 73.47% admit to disposing the “To Go” containers into regular trash bins when they take meals beyond the dining hall. Figure 3 displays the other 26.53% disposing of their containers largely through recycling or composting when self-sorting. The results of Figure 3 do not indicate waste management of “To Go” containers and food behind the “conveyer belt,” but rather when diners take the container to their dormitories, class, or the library.

Figure 1. Frequency of “To Go” Container Use



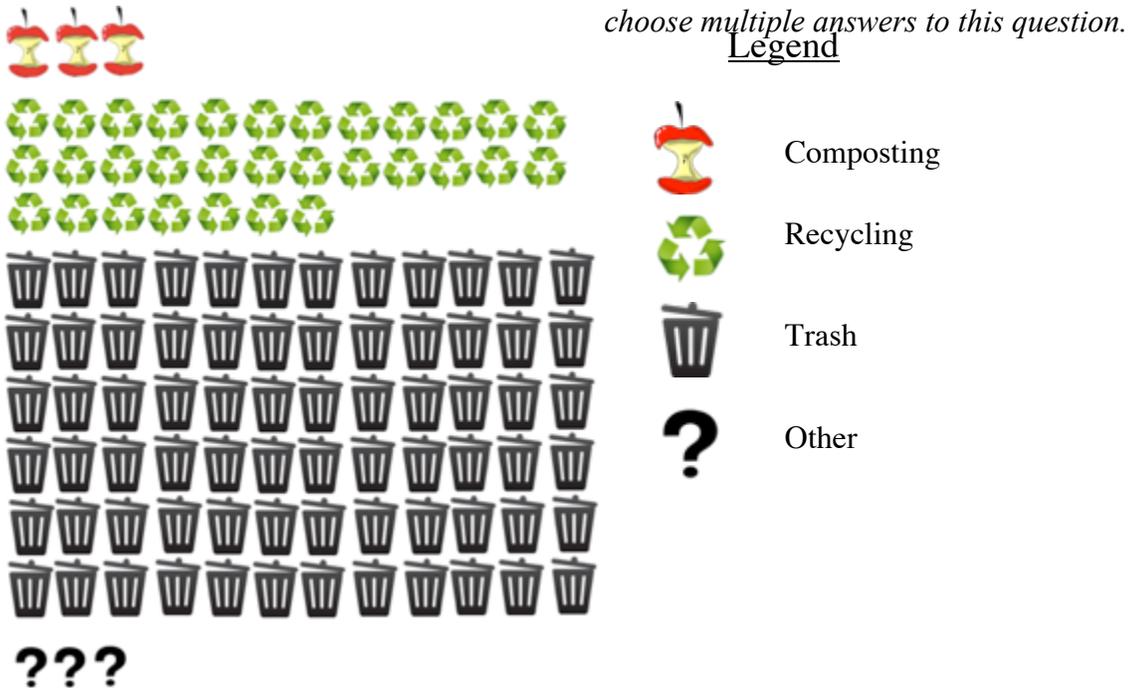
The survey results conveyed a surprisingly low statistic of students never using “To Go” containers, while reliance thereof (“Usually” and “Always”) is cumulatively over 70% of dining hall attendance.

Figure 2. Rationale for why respondents choose “To Go” containers over dining china



Convenience and academic compatibility are the two most popular reasons contributing

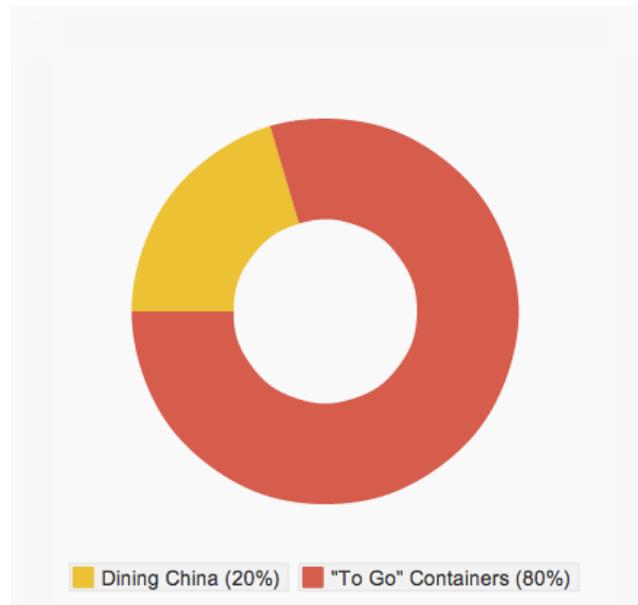
Figure 3. Disposal of “To Go” Containers Outside Dining Hall



The vast majority of survey respondents admit to disposing the containers to trash, although they may be composted or recycled.

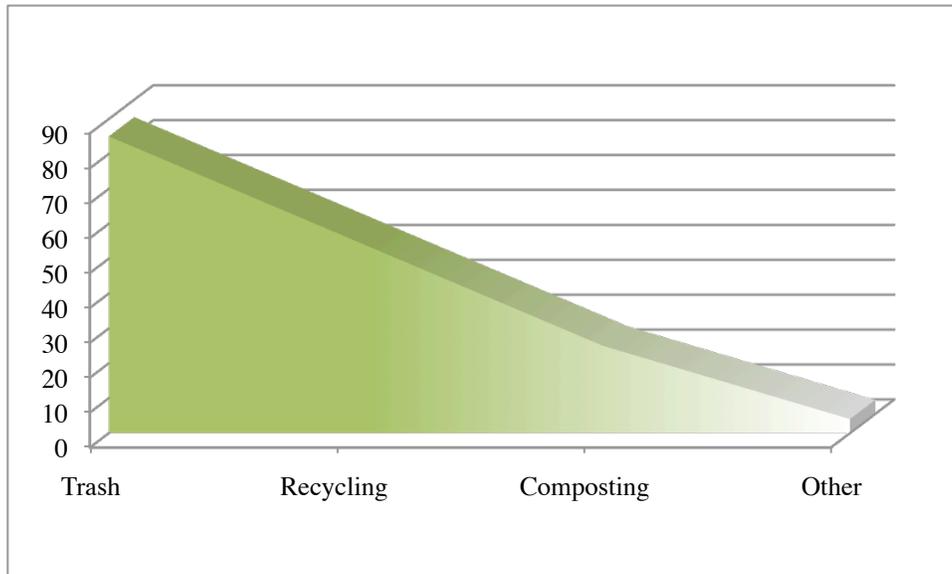
One of the most compelling results of the survey is that many respondents considered “To Go” containers as more sterile than dining china (BCDS also explained that diners are unhappy when they see water spots on silverware or plates; see Figure 4). Although Figure 2 indicates that it was not the paramount reason, perceptions of sterility are still a strongly significant factor to the rationale. When asked about waste collection behind the “conveyor belt” in Corcoran Commons, the majority of students responded that it goes to the trash or to recycling (see Figure 5). Ultimately, most of the non-senior students recorded their willingness to participate in a trial of an alternative dining container in the near future under BCDS auspices for investigative purposes of its function within dining operations and environmental impacts.

Figure 4. Assessment of Sterility of Dining China vs. “To Go” Containers



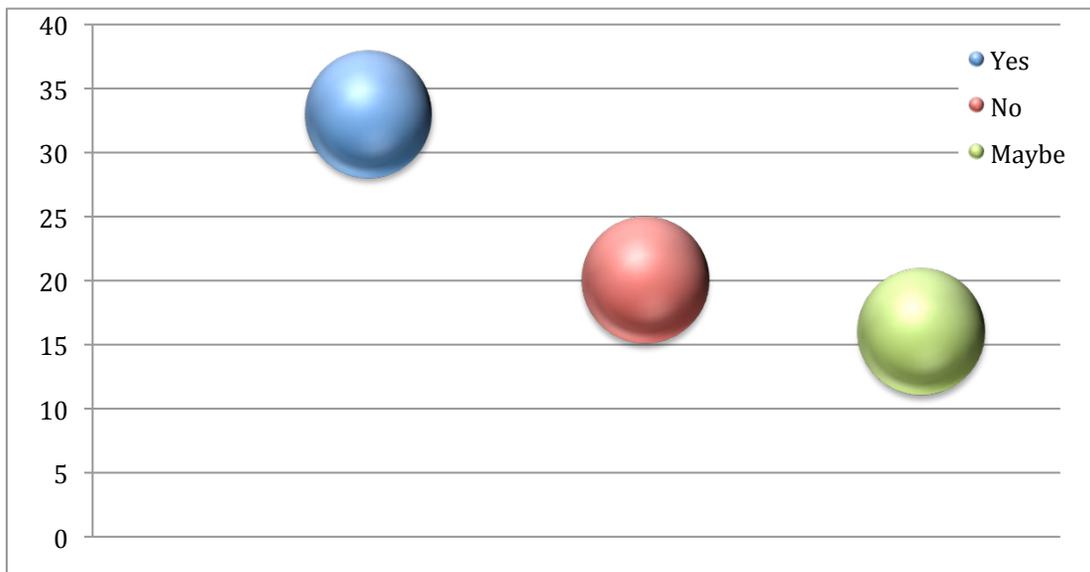
Students perceive “To Go” containers as significantly cleaner than conventional china.

Figure 5. Assessment of Knowledge of Waste Collection Via Conveyer Belt System



Diners convey a strong presumption that “To Go” containers are immediately disposed into trash, revealing an unawareness of BCDS waste management practices.

Figure 6. Non-senior students’ levels of willingness to participate in a one-month trial to test an alternative dining container.



A significant number of students exhibited an enthusiasm for sustainability measures at Boston College and through BCDS via participation in the alternative “To Go” container trial.

Observations

After conducting observations of diner behavior during two 45-minute intervals at dinner service, the team tallied the proportion of “To Go” containers to conventional china (see Table 1). Originally, the group hypothesized that students would choose dining china when remaining in Corcoran Commons for the meal, but the results show an average of 93% usage of “To Go” containers in lieu of dining china during the observation sessions. The second day of observations revealed that a substantial increase of “To Go” containers leaving the dining hall compared to the first set (see Table 2). Both sets of data reinforce not only a trend towards “To Go” containers due to its convenience, but also because of the type of meal served (Day 2 served sushi available only in plastic containers, as well as Pad Thai in the conventional “To Go” container).

Table 1. Observations, reported as number of individuals that pass through registers with “To Go” containers or dining china during a forty-five minute time block, at dinner in Corcoran Commons Dining Hall.

Register	Day One		Day Two	
	“To Go” Container	Dining China	“To Go” Container	Dining China
1	51	3	146	6
2	100	8	135	8
3	80	12	97	10

Table 2. Observations, reported as number of individuals that leave Corcoran Commons Dining Hall with “To Go” containers during dinnertime.

Day One	Day Two
42	102

Discussion of the Results

During the observation periods at Corcoran Commons, the results of the student survey, and communications with Dining Services, the team determined two main inferences on the rationale behind the use of “To Go” containers in the dining hall and

their effects on waste management and BCDS business operations. To commence, diners and BCDS suffer from a nonalignment and deficiency in communication. While certain meals are available solely in “To Go” containers (e.g., pasta, salad, sandwiches) due to legitimate health and safety concerns, other dishes sold during each meal service are available in dining china; interestingly, the original intent of “To Go” containers included that diners must request them, rather than the status quo trend of asking for china. Thus, while BCDS asserts that diners are encouraged to request dining china when available, many students are unaware of this practice due to a deficiency in communication. This corresponds to the survey results indicating a preference for “To Go” containers for their convenience factor. In addition, many students are severely uninformed about BCDS waste management guidelines and procedures. Although many students regularly (yet unknowingly) pass through the back doors of Corcoran Commons leading to its trash, recycling, composting, and compacting bins and machines, they assume that “To Go” containers are composed of recyclable materials and presume its place in the trash. Furthermore, few students witness what occurs behind the “conveyer belt” or in the kitchens, including the energy efficient dishwashers that extensively clean the dining china and silverware, nor do most diners know any basic facts about BCDS costs and daily functions (the project team conveyed a very surprised reaction). At the moment students merely enter Corcoran Commons to grab a meal without considering all of these factors, all contributing to the rationale behind a disproportionate favor of “To Go” containers over dining china. However, the results of the survey, in relation to participation in the future trial, clearly shows that students have an interest in sustainability measures and are willing to cooperate with any organization, but to reiterate, this communication of enthusiasm was largely dormant until the recent survey.

From another perspective, Dining Services conceded that it prefers to work in smaller groups to improve education and communication of their business necessities and daily routines, as well as an awareness of its sustainability measures within the context of the broader Boston College community. Nevertheless, this preference to communicate in smaller groups does not deter either actor from forging networks of communication that may grow over time. In essence, a shortage of communication drives the bias towards “To Go” containers, as students are unaware of the consequences of usage on the carbon

footprint or of the innovative kitchen technologies adopted by BCDS. In addition, the results of the survey corroborate this challenge, as some participants (fruitlessly) attempted to extract answers to questions such as “what occurs behind the ‘conveyer belt’” from the team during survey distribution.

Another noteworthy realization through the group’s interactions with Dining Services, observations, and survey data is that BCDS’ short term objectives in the “To Go” project are not only to understand diners’ rationale in order to implement immediate remedial measures, but also to readjust the “To Go” framework itself rather than slowly eliminating it. In particular, finding an alternative “To Go” system based on approaches at other universities, or purchasing new containers made of substantially more sustainable materials than the status quo option, differs from a potential long term goal of appealing to diners to remain in the dining hall and eat using dining china and silverware; the team remains unaware of any such distant goals. For instance, as aforementioned that certain meals are served solely in “To Go” containers, increased investment in dining china such as reusable bowls may reverse the trend towards “To Go” containers. Admittedly, this long term goal faces sincere challenges. In the team’s discussions with BCDS, Dining Services has previously attempted to purchase big, reusable bowls, but as many were stolen, BCDS faced no immediate necessity to purchase more of these reusable plastic containers. In addition, when the team asked why Corcoran Commons adopt comparable alternatives such as the biodegradable plates already present in the Hillside Café, Dining Services explained that these were too costly, especially as Corcoran Commons experiences a high transaction capacity. To clarify, however, this goal is a long term, stepwise-implemented solution, and embracing a new “To Go” approach or containers possesses immense potential to reduce the carbon footprint. Nevertheless, in order to substantially reduce waste (via “To Go” containers), re-phasing in dining china as the default option and continuing integration of energy efficient technologies into Corcoran Commons would drastically diminish BCDS and Boston College’s carbon footprint.

In essence, the results of the survey and the team’s observations and communication with BCDS indicate a strong preference from both main actors (students as consumers, and BCDS) to perpetuate the broader “To Go” container framework. Results from the survey indicate that the consumers possess little knowledge of waste

management, technologies, and business practices at Corcoran Commons, exacerbated by diners' persistent disposal of "To Go" containers into the trash and ultimately increasing waste and the carbon footprint. Furthermore, students claim that "To Go" containers are more convenient for usage than dining china, fit better with rigorous academic and student life schedules, and are cleaner than dining china. Simultaneously, BCDS focuses on meeting customer satisfaction, implementing sustainability measures through technology, and minimizing costs and does not seek to invest in actual dining china. Contrarily, BCDS seeks a viable, more environmentally friendly "To Go" container substitute. This permits greater flexibility and pragmatism for students' needs, and merely the approach to "To Go" container usage may change, but this does not stimulate the consumer to remain in the dining hall as another tool of reducing the carbon footprint. The results of the survey also indicated that non-senior students conveyed an interest in participating in a trial in following academic years to determine the efficacy of the new "To Go" container system, inviting increased communication between Dining Services and its consumers.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion of the results, the team proposes three recommended courses of action for future Dining Services operations and interaction with its consumers. The ultimate goal of these suggestions is to reduce the carbon footprint of Boston College and BCDS through mitigating waste control practices from both endpoints (BCDS and diners), improving education of Dining Services daily needs and business conduct to modify the students' rationale for choosing a "To Go" container, and to encourage further discussions of sustainable action among BCDS, the student body, and the university.

Recommendation 1: Increased Student Education

In order to combat negative perceptions of the sterility of dining china in contrast with "To Go" containers and to expand knowledge of BCDS waste management and business operations, the team suggests enhanced communication through educational efforts. Regardless of whether Dining Services explains its practices and how students

may positively contribute to a small or a large audience, this pedagogy should commence during Freshmen Orientation and Welcome Week activities. As incoming students are already becoming exposed to the campus dining halls during orientation, specific instructional sessions during these periods aim to cultivate students' sustainable habits in preparation for their life at Boston College and after graduation. Furthermore, the group designed an education poster that describes sustainable waste disposal and BCDS operations (see Appendix B); this poster is currently under review by Dining Services for placement in Corcoran Commons, other dining halls, and dormitories. In essence, these educational efforts strive to reverse an observed ethic of condoning unsustainable practices such as over-reliance on "To Go" containers.

Recommendation 2: Focused dining employee training

In order to facilitate increased communication between Dining Services and diners, the team advocates greater emphasis of BCDS' sustainability goals in its training program for dining employees. Currently, many meal options require the use of a "To Go" container, but for other foods students may request dining china. As diners are increasingly unaware of this practice, the carbon footprints and streamlined business operations of BCDS and Boston College would ultimately benefit by standardizing dining china as the default food vessel and to request a "To Go" container on demand. In summation, the framework of the training program does not require substantial reorganization or incur additional costs, but serves as a powerful tool to reduce the carbon footprint through greater education within Dining Services of sustainability efforts, including the use of reusable containers.

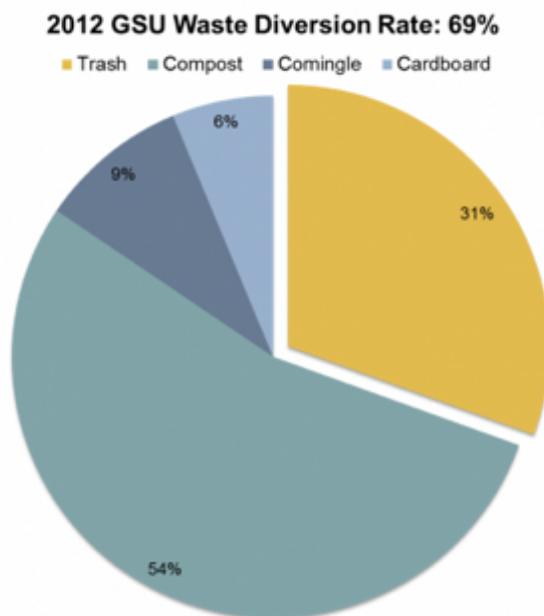
Recommendation 3: Research alternative "To Go" products

In order to manage waste sustainably and modify the "To Go" container system, Dining Services directors have embraced immediate measures to reduce their carbon footprint. For instance, the organization often uses reusable crates instead of cardboard boxes for food deliveries. In addition, Lower Live in Corcoran Commons composts its appropriate food waste, consequently diminishing landfill waste. Furthermore, the kitchen possesses modern technology such as the energy and water efficient dishwasher.

Begun by Dining Services directors, the research team continued investigations of sustainable and comparable “To Go” systems at other universities.

The first case study analyzes the system at Boston University (BU). With over 33,000 students enrolled, BU has four main dining halls, as well as close to 30 other dining options. They serve over 6.2 million meals each year (“Sustainability Program”). According to the team’s research, BU demonstrates a dedication to sustainability through their website. In its published sustainability report, BU operates the greenest dining hall in the country (2013 Sustainability Report). The university successfully diverted 69% of waste from landfills from the George Sherman Union, GSU (see Figure 7, 2013 Sustainability Report). The dining services at BU offers a variety of green programs to generate student interest (i.e., meeting local farmers and fishermen, brewers nights, farmers markets. BU also sells reusable “To Go” containers at the GSU Union Food Court as an alternative to disposable containers and the students receive a \$0.25 discount for each time.

Figure 7. Boston University Waste Management Practices (2012)



Boston University serves as a competitive model for sustainable waste management.

Pledging “a 30% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2016,” Harvard has initiated new programs and strengthening existing ones (“Sustainability”). Considered as a common ground for its population, food is a source of inspiration to tackle sustainability challenges. In the second annual Sustainability Report, Harvard embraces clear steps to become less wasteful and more sustainable. For instance, the university has also joined local initiatives, including Keep Local Farms, whose goal is to stabilize milk prices in New England, and serving seafood sustainably per the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch guidelines (*Sustainability Report 2010*). Harvard’s program also targets communication, as the Food Literacy Project raises awareness of food issues among students and faculty, and promotes engagement and behavioral changes (*Sustainability Report 2010*). In addition to reusable dishware in all dining halls, Harvard offers recyclable and compostable disposables. The university piloted a ban of plastic bottles in one of the main dining halls and instead offered filtered water in a compostable cup or in a reusable water bottle (Harvard also provided every student with a reusable aluminum bottle); this program resulted in a 67% or 9,653 reduction in plastic bottles sold or in circulation (*Sustainability Report 2010*). Overall, Harvard composted approximately 583 tons annually and diverted 59% of recyclable waste from traditional disposal (“Sustainability”). Despite the differences in diner population size and operations, Boston College may adopt many similar programs according to its needs.

With the exception of one dining hall, dining services at the University of Maryland is predominantly à la carte (“How to Get Involved”). The university promotes sustainability programs, such as encouraging students to remain in the dining hall with reusable china, glass and stainless flatware rather than “To Go” containers (“New to Dining Students”). Furthermore, University of Maryland’s dining services offer reusable “To Go” containers for five meal-plan points, and at no cost students receive a clean container in exchange for a used, dirty container. In addition, students receive a discount (20 cents) for using reusable cups rather than disposable ones (“New to Dining Students”). Finally, the University of Wisconsin-Madison features a program within its à la carte system that permits students to purchase reusable coffee and iced-coffee mugs and to receive one free refill and ten cents off every consequent refill (“University

Housing”). Aligned with its mission of sustainability, Boston College and BCDS possess the capacity and resources to foster similar programs.

Conclusions

Boston College and Boston College Dining Services successfully pursue sustainability in their multifaceted operations, and the student body (BCDS consumers) willingly embrace action to promote these efforts. Nevertheless, the “To Go” container project revealed continually different visions of their essential necessities. In particular, students seek satisfaction in their meals, enhanced by the ease and convenience of using a “To Go” container in light of their rigorous academic and extracurricular lives. Furthermore, Dining Services seeks to minimize its costs, waste, and ensure diners remain satisfied so as to perpetuate future business with diners. Consequently, the “To Go” project sought to develop an improved comprehension of students’ rationale for consistently choosing “To Go” containers, despite remaining in Corcoran Commons, and to propose solutions to reduce waste. In addition to the convenience factor, perceptions of sterility and concerns about health and safety (“To Go” containers are sole option) proved vital considerations. The research team determined three recommended solutions, both short term and long term, to target waste production and the carbon footprint from “To Go” containers, involving improved education and communication, as well as adopting “To Go” system models from other universities. Future areas of research and projects include the alternative “To Go” container trial under BCDS guidance and investigations of its compatibility with BCDS’ streamlined operations. Furthermore, a project investigating the connections between modern, energy efficient technology, religious or philosophical perspectives on stewardship, and efforts to diminish the carbon footprint could potentially contribute to Boston College and Dining Services’ sustainability efforts.

