

Reuse, recycle, refill: Writing the future with green pens

November 12 2013, by Cathy Cockrell

While conducting a "waste audit" on select campus trash bins, sustainability-minded Berkeley students discovered not just to-be-expected coffee-cup lids but a surprising assortment of oddball plastic items, from plastic bags to pipette trays and contact-lens cases.

"I had a whole team of four trying to figure out what each plastic was," recalls fourth-year student Kristen Klein, coordinator of the Zero Waste Research Center, a project funded by students via a grant from The Green Initiative Fund (TGIF). "We separated the plastics out, Nos. 1 through 7," and wrote a "huge report" on the campus's plastics footprint, she says.

The campus is striving to meet the UC system's aggressive sustainability goal of "zero waste" by 2020. And last year Berkeley became the first university in the world to sign onto the Plastics Disclosure Project, committing itself to track the lifecycle of plastics used on campus and to reduce its plastic waste.

Klein's student team—via its unglamorous trash audits and time-consuming efforts to ascertain each plastic's origin and ultimate fate—collected much of the baseline data for the first disclosure report, which is currently being finalized.

Pens, in particular, caught the attention of the students and staff committed to waste reduction. By weight or volume, they make up only a small fraction of the trash the campus sends to landfill. But this cheap,

disposable writing tool—ubiquitous on a campus and typically made of "virgin" (vs. recycled) plastic—is a poster child for the throw-away mentality that zero-waste advocates decry.

"All we're using is the ink," notes Lin King, manager of Campus Recycling and Refuse Services. "When we're out of gas, do we throw away our car?" he asks rhetorically. "So why are we using just the ink and then throwing the whole pen away?"

While there's an effort afoot to recycle campus pens through Terracycle company's "pen-recycling brigade," it's even more important, Klein notes, to "buy better products in the first place."

So plans are in the works for a series of campus roadshows, where free samples of greener office products will be distributed, to encourage [campus](#) purchasers to make the shift.

Pilot's "B2P" (bottle-to-pen) ballpoints, made of high-grade No. 1 plastic from recycled beverage containers, will be featured. So will the company's ink refills (a once-standard system that, from a [zero-waste](#) perspective, is preferable to recycled-plastic pens), mechanical pencils with lead refills and refillable Dry Erase markers. The road shows will also showcase recyclable Post-it notepads, which use a plant-based adhesive for the sticky edge and come in a recycled paper box (vs. non-recyclable plastic-film wrapper).

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

Citation: Reuse, recycle, refill: Writing the future with green pens (2013, November 12)
retrieved 19 September 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2013-11-reuse-recycle-refill-future-green.html>

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