

A Recycling Plea to Mount Holyoke from Roger Guzowski, the Five College Recycling Manager

It's time to get over your guilt. Putting something into the recycling bin shouldn't make you feel good. Putting the **right thing** into the recycling bin should make you feel good. Putting the wrong thing into the recycling bin should make you feel worse than throwing it away.

For a comprehensive list of materials that can and cannot be recycled, go to:
www.mtholyoke.edu/go/recycle

If you have something that is not recyclable that you feel guilty about throwing away, look at your decision to buy it in the first place. Don't contaminate the recycling bin with your guilt.

In my opinion, despite the tremendous rise in recycling over the past 20 years, one of the great failings of the recycling industry or movement (whichever you prefer to call it) is that we have reduced recycling to guilt. This oversimplification of "recycling-good, trash bad" is coming back to haunt us. When I started in this field, we spent most of our time fighting against the perception of "away," that there was some sort of magic trash fairy that waved a magic wand at night and made trash go "away," somewhere that we didn't have to worry about it. I think in that regard we were successful. However, in our rush to oversimplify recycling, we have created a new version of this same trash fairy mythology. In this new version, there is the perception that a recycling fairy comes and waves a magic wand and that anything and everything in the recycling bin is magically transported to some sort of fairy land of environmental goodness. Conversely, anything put into the trash bin is watched over by some sort of evil trash fairy who waves a magic wand and makes everything go some sort of evil brimstone-laden place of environmental badness. That oversimplification, rather than a focus on markets and quality, is exacerbating a very bad downtrend in the recycling industry right now.

There are many reasons why we recycle, most of them environmental or financial. However, none of that has anything to do with how recycling works. Recycling is a manufacturing process. The reason that we are able to keep stuff out of the landfill by recycling is that someone is taking that stuff and using it to manufacture new products. To do that, quality matters. That is why we have rules about what we can and cannot recycle. We are not trying to make life difficult. However, if someone is going to make a finished product that someone will buy, they need a certain quality of material coming to them. For more detailed info, check out the "How the Recycling Process Works" PowerPoint presentation at www.mtholyoke.edu/go/recycle.

With this current economic downturn, this quality issue is even more critical. Here's some more detailed info about what's going on:

Recycling markets, which have been riding a long-time high, are the latest financial bubble to burst. Again, recycling is a manufacturing process. If the manufacturing economy is in the toilet, there is significantly less demand for material goods, which means there significantly less demand for our recyclable discards to be used to manufacture new material goods. Unfortunately, like the drop in the overall economy, the drop in the recycling markets has been very fast and very brutal.

- Residential mixed paper has none of the revenue value it had just 2 months ago (mill prices dropped from \$80/ton to \$0).
- Perfectly clean newspaper (no inserts, etc) has only 25% of the revenue value it had less than 2 months ago (mill prices dropped over \$100/ton).
- Corrugated cardboard has only 38% of the revenue value that it had less than 2 months ago (mill prices dropped \$65/ton).
- Sorted office paper has only 69% of the revenue value that it had less than 2 months ago (mill prices dropped \$70/ton)
- Even perfectly clean white ledger paper has only 87% of the revenue value that it had less than 2 months ago (mill prices dropped \$40/ton).

As a result, unless we have high quality clean recyclables, we are going to have a very tough time ensuring that those materials are recycled. You are going to start to see stories again about recyclables getting thrown into the landfill. We want to ensure that our stuff isn't one of those stories.

Luckily, our trash costs are high enough that avoided landfill cost is as much of a financial driver as revenue value (e.g. even if we don't get any revenue for our paper, there is still value in not paying \$70-80/ton to dispose of it in the landfill). That means that the College will continue to have financial as well as environmental reasons to recycle.

However, that loss of revenue value is a concern once materials leave campus. For the past few years, recycling markets have been abnormally high. As a result, a lot of mills have been very lax about recycling quality (in some cases because there was so much demand that was all that was available, in some cases deliberately so they didn't have to pay top dollar). That gave many the impression that certain materials were recyclable that really weren't. Now that the market is crashing, there is a glut of poor quality recycled materials on the market and little incentive to clean up those materials because there is less demand for the finished goods that the recycling mills are making. There is a lot of marginally-contaminated stuff that was OK when the market was hot that is now considered too contaminated. That is leaving a lot of material without a market, which eventually means that much of that marginally-contaminated material may eventually get landfilled. To ensure that does not happen to our material, we need to ensure that our material is free of contamination.

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Any assistance you can provide in helping to spread word to peers to keep contaminants out of the recycling would be greatly appreciated.

Thanks.

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