

The Glocal Challenge: Stickers Team Report

November 16, 2017

In November 2016, Cambridge Rindge and Latin School (CRLS) juniors Anna Albright and Kyla Friedan partnered to participate in the Glocal Challenge, an annual program where CRLS students propose innovative solutions to challenges facing Cambridge residents. The challenge was to answer the question: “How can we reduce food waste in Cambridge?” Together they came up with the idea to incentivize composting by creating a friendly competition in the City of Cambridge curbside compost pilot neighborhood in North Cambridge.

For five weeks in the summer of 2017, the student team worked alongside the compost pick-up trucks to distribute stickers to bins to 168 homes on 12 streets in North Cambridge where composting was happening regularly. Each week, more stickers were added to the bins, with the goal of increasing awareness of the pilot compost program and encouraging people to compete for the most stickers.

Pre- and post- surveys were completed by participants to determine whether or not this was an effective effort. To mitigate the effect of bias from self-reporting, the pre-survey and letter contained no indication of the stickers pilot so that the residents did not simply compost for the five weeks because they felt like they were being watched. However, many other biases were unavoidable, and the data presented here should be read in understanding of that. The conclusion deduced from these surveys indicated that the sticker program was not successful in getting households to compost. However, the team received important input from the community regarding distribution of free composting bags and more education and data about composting will incentivize residents to compost more.

Pre-Survey

Out of the 168 residences that were asked to complete the pre-surveys, 28 residents responded, and all 28 (100% of total respondents) indicated that they composted every week or every other week. This means that the team was not able to hear from any of the non-composters about their thoughts on the sticker incentive program. An interesting information to note was that even though they composted frequently, 2 (7%) of the households that responded were uncertain about what to compost. 11 (39%) claimed that they throw out barely any old or expired food--monthly, 14 (50%) that they throw out some--weekly, 1 (4%) that

they throw out a good amount--every few days, and 1 (4%) that they throw out a lot--every day. But what is to be understood here is that people tend to rate their own actions more generously when they are self-reporting, especially when there are clear right and wrong answers.

Post-Survey

There were a few households who responded to the pre-survey who also responded to the post, while other households only responded to the post-survey. Data shows that 12 out of 24 of the post-survey respondents (50% of the total post-survey respondents) noticed the stickers on their bins and 3 out of the 12 who noticed (25% of total who noticed) compared the amount of stickers to their neighbors'. Four respondents (33% TWN) stated that they enjoyed the stickers, even though only 2 (17% TWN) were actually motivated by them. None of the respondents (0% of the total post-survey respondents) began composting because of the stickers, and 8 (33%) wrote that they are already self-motivated without the stickers and therefore did not need them. 4 (17%) of the respondents said that they generally do not look at their neighbors' bins enough for the sticker incentive to be effective, although another 4 (17%) expressed that they enjoyed the stickers because they felt that they were being recognized for their good actions and because they were colorful and made composting into a game.

Community Recommendations

The community recommendations reflect what the residents think would be the best incentives for them. The majority of respondents requested that composting bags be free or financially and physically more accessible. Residents also wanted to hear more about their own and citywide statistics, including more education around how to compost in Cambridge. Some also thought that free or inexpensive access to the compost soil that is produced from their food waste, better compost bins, more contests, and a financial disincentive based on amount of trash produced by household could be effective ways of increasing composting in their neighborhood.

Conclusion

Academically speaking, the sample size of this program is too small for a conclusive answer regarding the effectiveness of the incentive program. However, a few trends can be highlighted. Because no households out of the 24 that responded claimed to have begun composting because of the sticker program, it is not an overestimation to say that the stickers

did not incentivize more households to begin composting. That said, we also did not receive any pre- or post- surveys from households that do not compost, so we have incomplete information from that group of residents. Another trend to highlight is that most residents believed that free and/or accessible composting bags and availability of statistics and education around composting in Cambridge would increase the participation rate and willingness for themselves and their neighbors to compost. Although the data is imperfect, we hope that this pilot will help to bring about effective improvements in the City's Curbside Compost Pilot as it expands citywide in 2018.