

# Food Waste Collection Survey University of Wisconsin–Madison

## FINAL REPORT

Issued: August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Ended: June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022

*Final Report Completed: August 1st, 2022*



# Table of Contents

- **Background**
- **Survey**
  - Who completed the survey?
  - How aware were you of the food waste collection program that operated on campus from Fall 2009 to Summer 2021?
  - How frequently did you utilize the previous food waste collection program?
  - What feedback do you have about the previous food waste collection program?
  - How concerned are you about food waste generated at the UW-Madison campus?
  - To what degree is it acceptable if UW–Madison has no outlet for food waste, other than throwing it away in the Dance County Landfill?
  - How likely are you to utilize a food waste collection program if it is re-introduced?
  - Contamination of food waste/compost bins is a major issue. What communication methods would help prevent contamination of the food waste stream?
  - Who should be responsible for providing an outlet for inedible food waste?
  - Further comments, concerns, and suggestions
- **Conclusion**
  - Summary of Findings
  - Next Steps
  - Future Considerations
  - Food Waste Collection Timeline
- **Acknowledgements**





# BACKGROUND



## What happened?

Before August 2021, food waste (commonly referred to as “compost”) was collected in a variety of locations at UW–Madison, such as buckets, carts, and dining facilities. The organic material was hauled away to an anaerobic digester. When the digester was sold to a new owner, Clean Fuel Partners LLC, notified UW–Madison that it would no longer accept food waste due to its conversion to a renewable natural gas (RNG) production facility. Now, the facility only accepts manure as a feedstock.

UW–Madison sought out a new vendor and issued two different simplified bid requests. However, neither attempt was successful, so UW–Madison was forced to suspend the collection of food waste. While UW–Madison could collect and haul the food scraps, it did not have an outlet to accept the material. Without any immediate options, UW–Madison halted its general collection and management of food waste generated on campus. All containers including carts and buckets used in the [Compost Stewards program](#) were collected.



## Survey Creation and Details

UW–Madison wanted feedback from campus stakeholders before issuing next steps.

The Office of Sustainability sent out a survey. It asked respondents a series of questions and offered stakeholders an opportunity to provide feedback.

The survey was available from August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021 – June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022. There were 9,484\* responses from 1,276 people\*\*.

*\*Does not include responses about contact information, “How frequently did you utilize the previous food waste collection program,” and “Are you interested in helping with a new food waste collection program at the UW-Madison?”*

*\*\*Though 1,276 people took the survey, not everyone completed all questions.*

Question	Total
Designation	949
How aware were you of the food waste collection program that operated on campus from Fall 2009 to Summer 2021?	1161
How frequently did you utilize the previous food waste collection program?	1161
What feedback do you have about the previous food waste collection program?	533
How concerned are you about food waste generated at the UW-Madison campus?	1026
To what degree is it acceptable if UW-Madison has no outlet for food waste, other than throwing it away in the Dance County Landfill?	1026
How likely are you to utilize a food waste collection program if it is re-introduced?	1026
Contamination of food waste/compost bins is a major issue. What communication methods would help prevent contamination of the food waste stream (check all that apply)?	1,154
Who should be responsible for providing an outlet for inedible food waste (check all that apply)?	1097
Please add any comments, concerns, or suggestions about the food waste management at UW–Madison	351
Sum	9484
Survey Takers	1,276



# Office of Sustainability

Official website for the UW-Madison Office of Sustainability.

[Home](#)[Data & Reporting](#)[Strategic Initiatives](#)[Students in Sustainability](#)[Get Certified](#)[Services](#)[About](#)

[HOME](#) / [NEWS](#) / [CAMPUS USERS RESPOND TO FOOD WASTE SURVEY](#)

## Campus users respond to food waste

Posted on [December 16, 2021](#)

On August 4th, 2021, the Office of Sustainability [informed](#) campus users of changes to the UW-Madison food waste collection program. As part of the announcement, a [survey](#) was circulated to assess the thoughts, opinions, and ideas of the UW-Madison community. *If you have not already completed the survey, please consider providing your feedback.*

[TAKE THE SURVEY](#)

### Initial Results

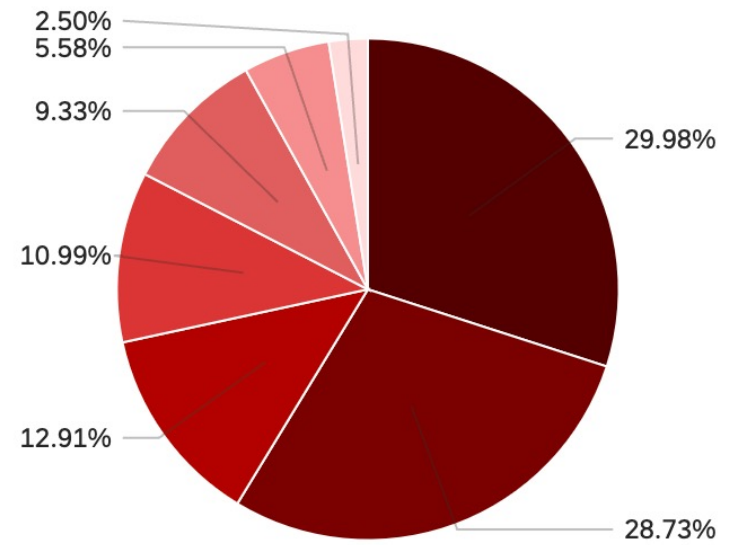
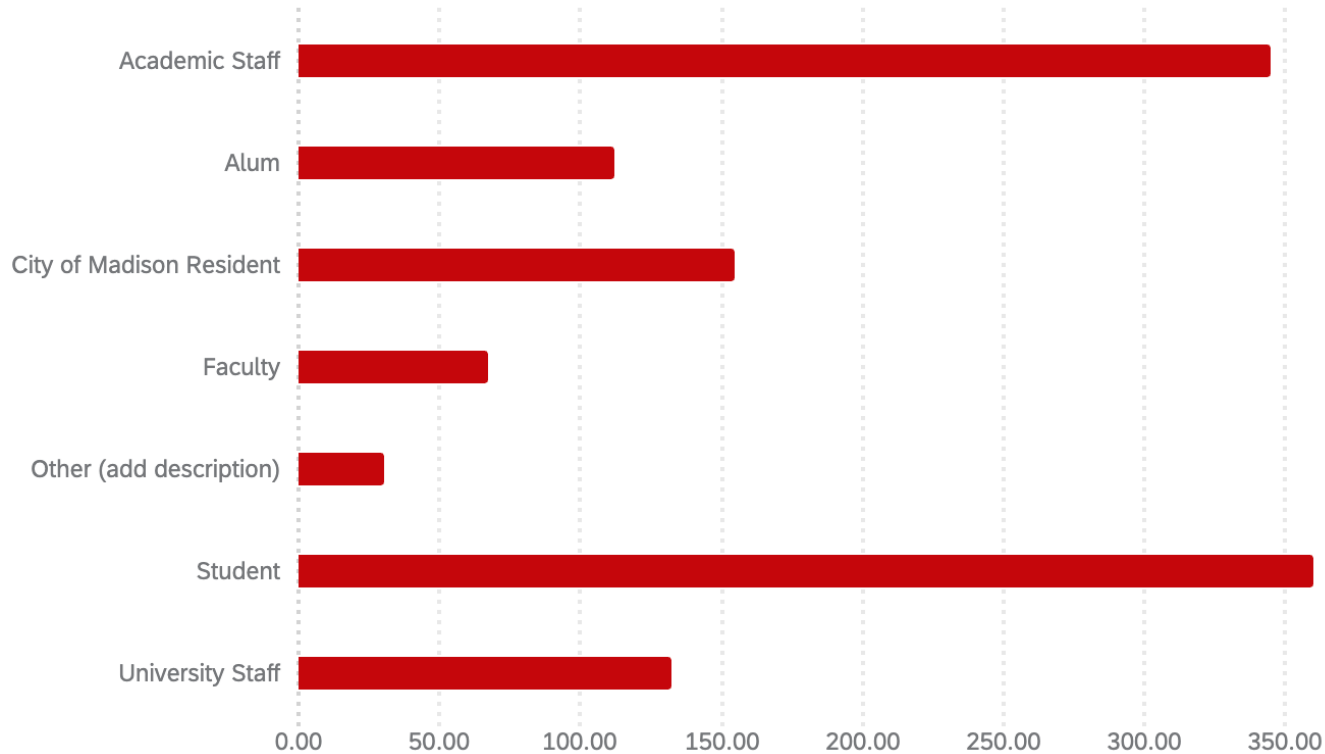
Preliminary survey results were compiled on September 27th, 2021. At



## SURVEY RESPONSES

Recent posts

# Who completed the survey?

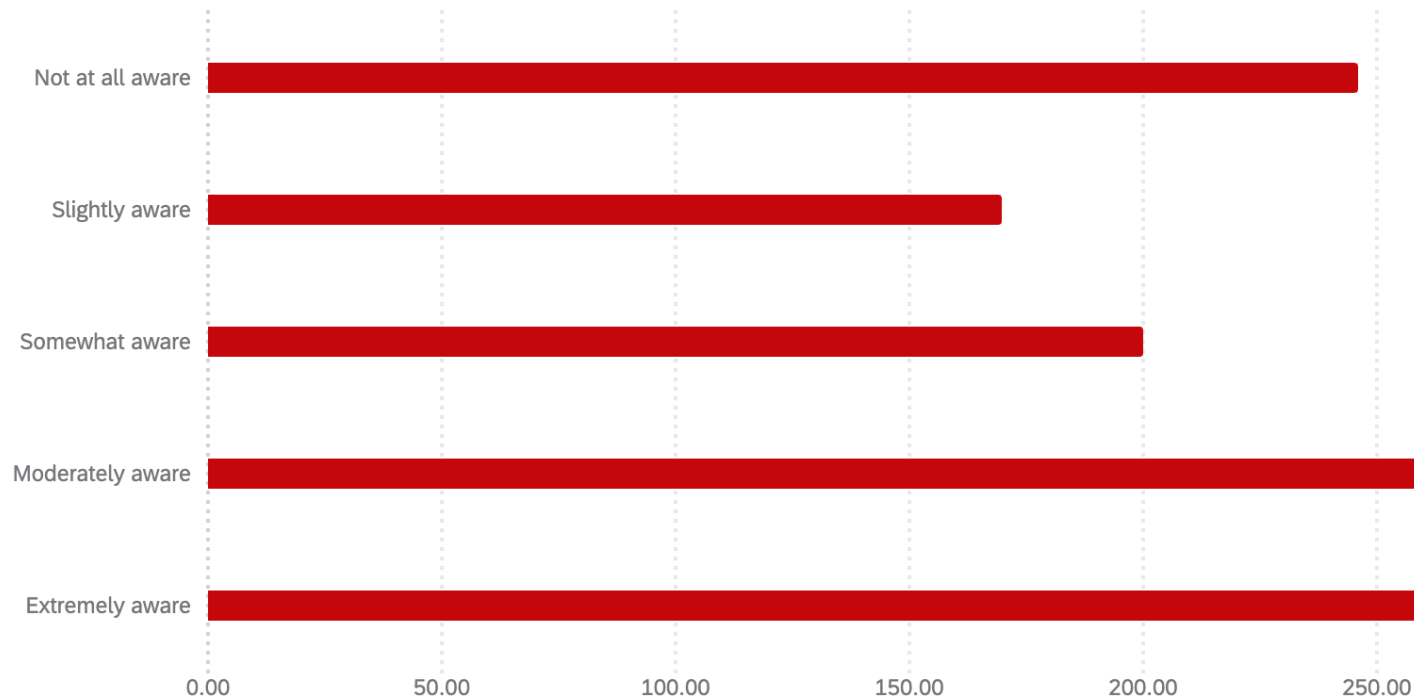


■ Student ■ Academic Staff ■ City of Madison Resident  
■ University Staff ■ Alum ■ Faculty ■ Other (add description)

*Note – Survey takers could choose multiple options*

# How aware were you of the food waste collection program that operated on campus from Fall 2009 to Summer 2021?

How aware were you of the food waste collection program that operated on campus from Fall ... 1,161 ⓘ

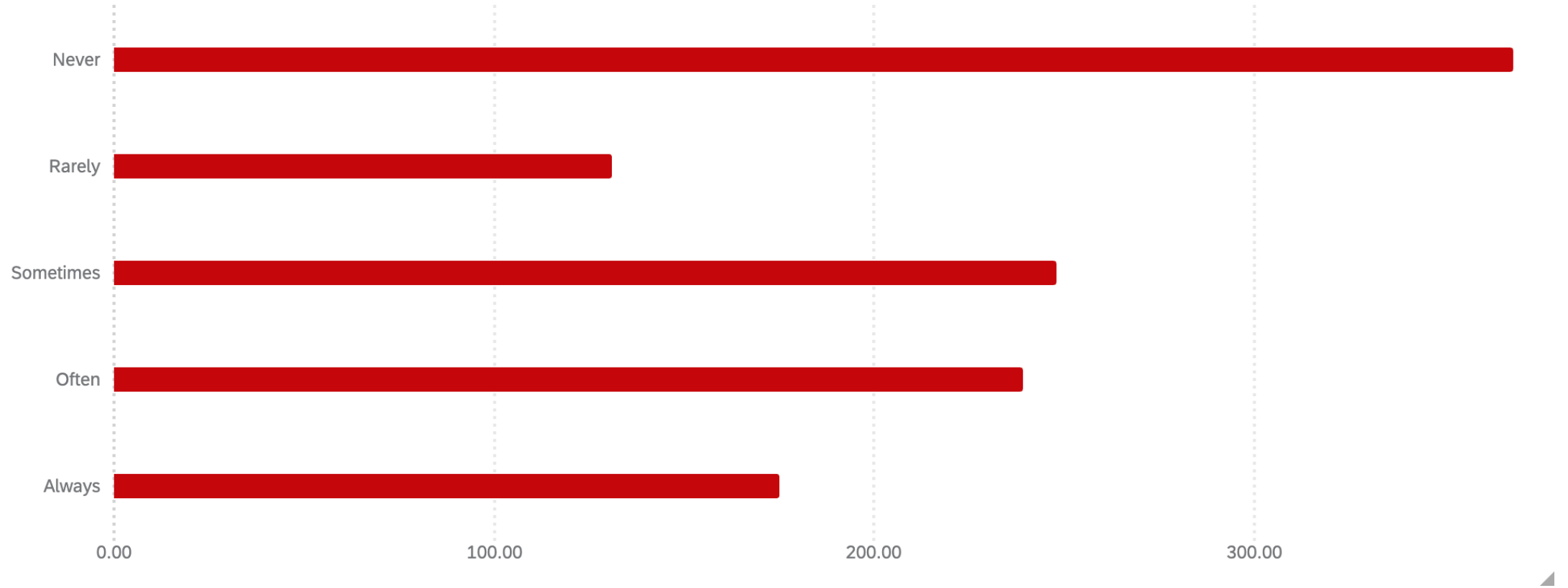


## Analysis

- Overall, respondents' awareness of the program was **equally distributed**
- **21%** of respondents were “not at all aware”



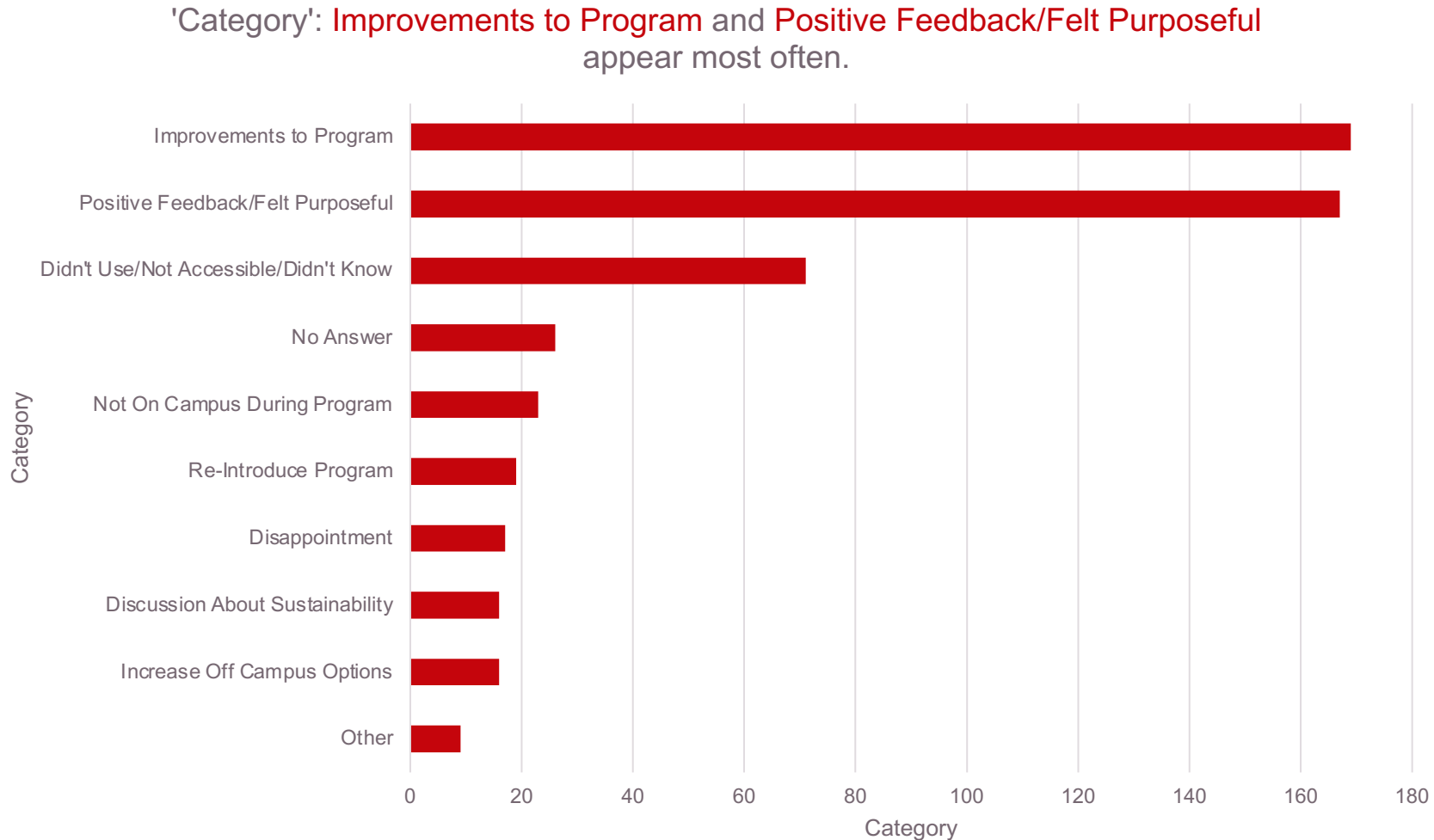
# How frequently did you utilize the previous food waste collection program?



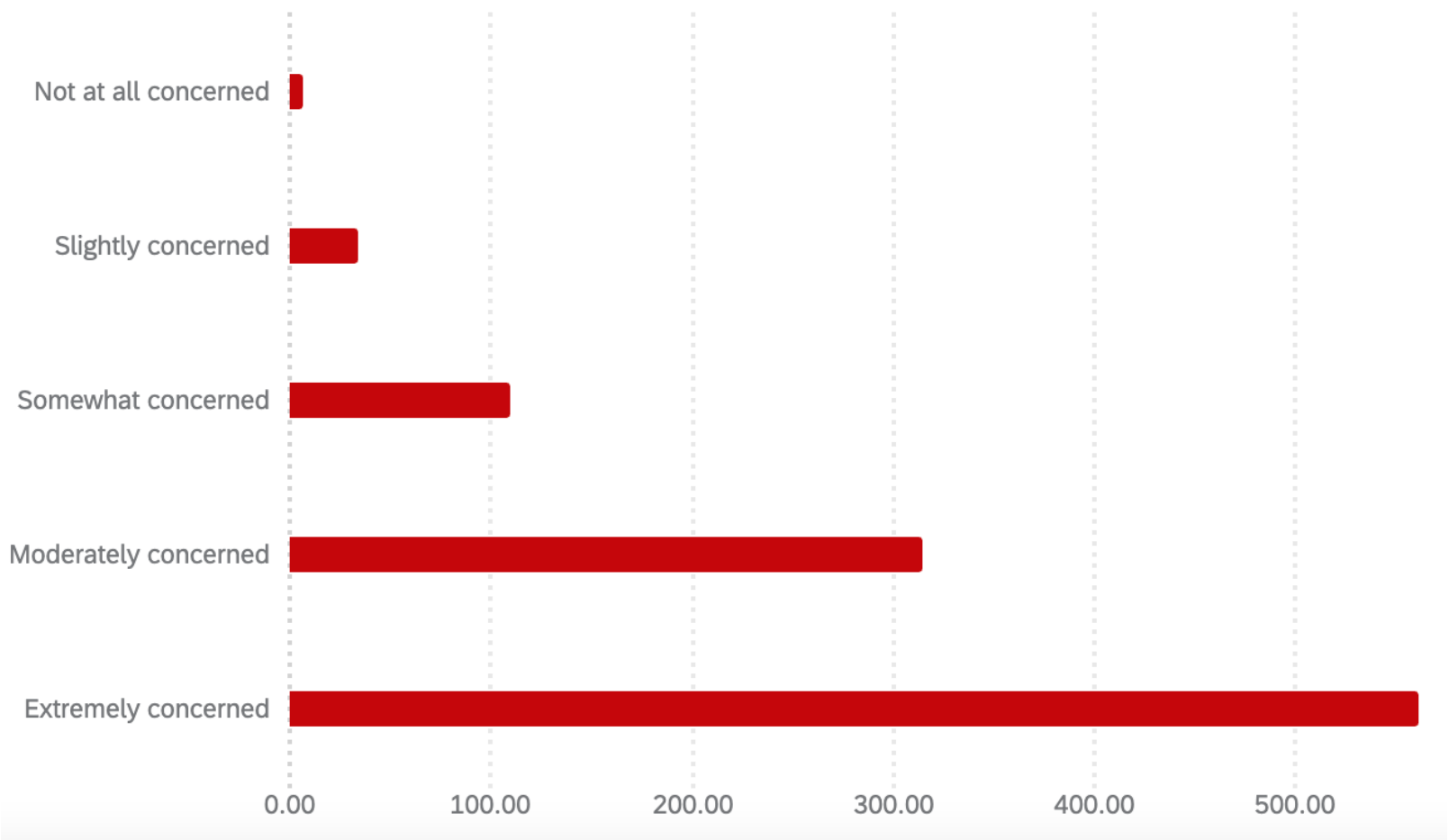
# Analysis

- Most respondents (**64.34%**) said they **Sometimes** to **Never** used the composting program to dispose of food waste.
- The remaining **35.66%** said they **Always** or **Often** used the program.
- On average, respondents **Sometimes** used the service.

# What feedback do you have about the previous food waste collection program?



# How concerned are you about food waste generated at the UW-Madison campus?

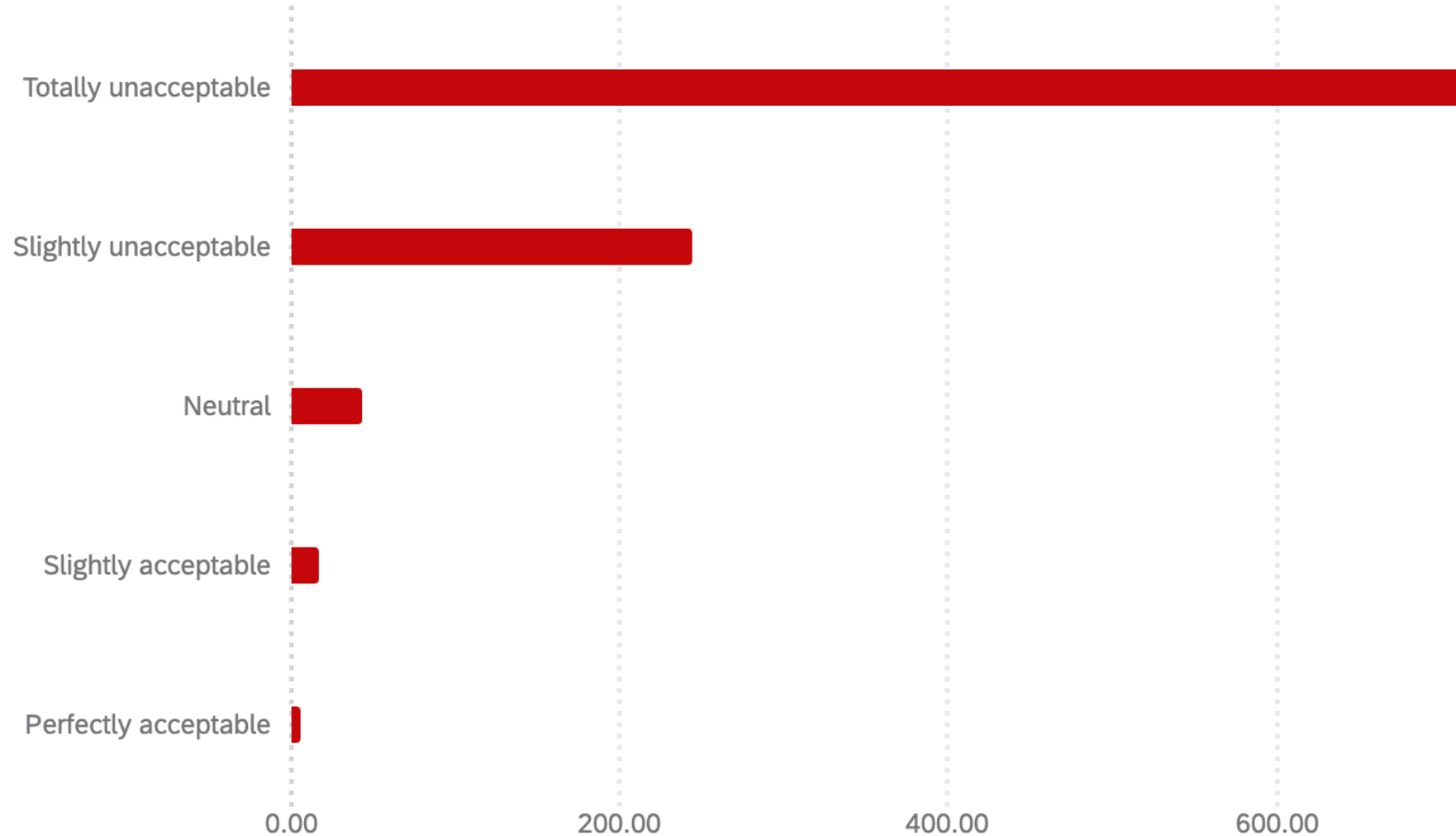


## Analysis

More than half of respondents are **extremely concerned** about the food waste.



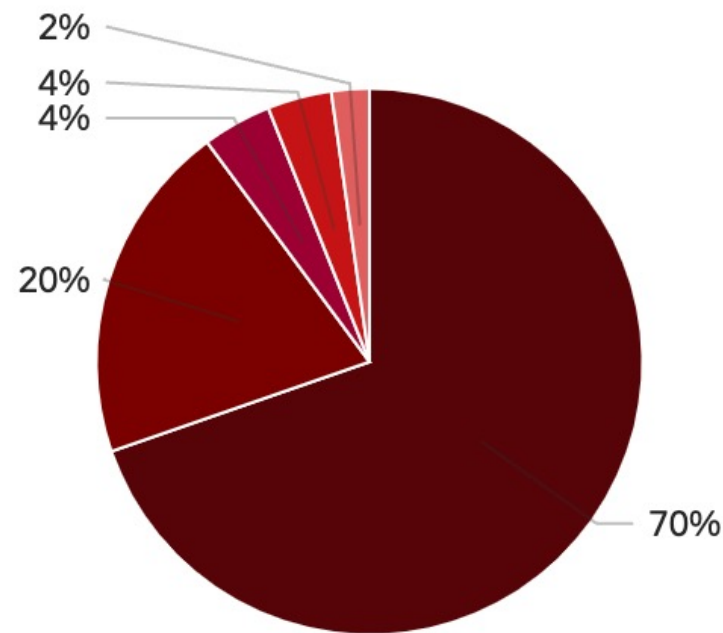
To what degree is it acceptable if UW-Madison has no outlet for food waste, other than throwing it away in the Dance County Landfill?



## Analysis

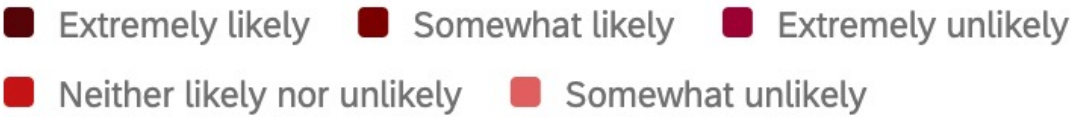
Respondents believe it is **unacceptable** that UW-Madison does not have an outlet for food waste.

How likely are you to utilize a food waste collection program if it is re-introduced?

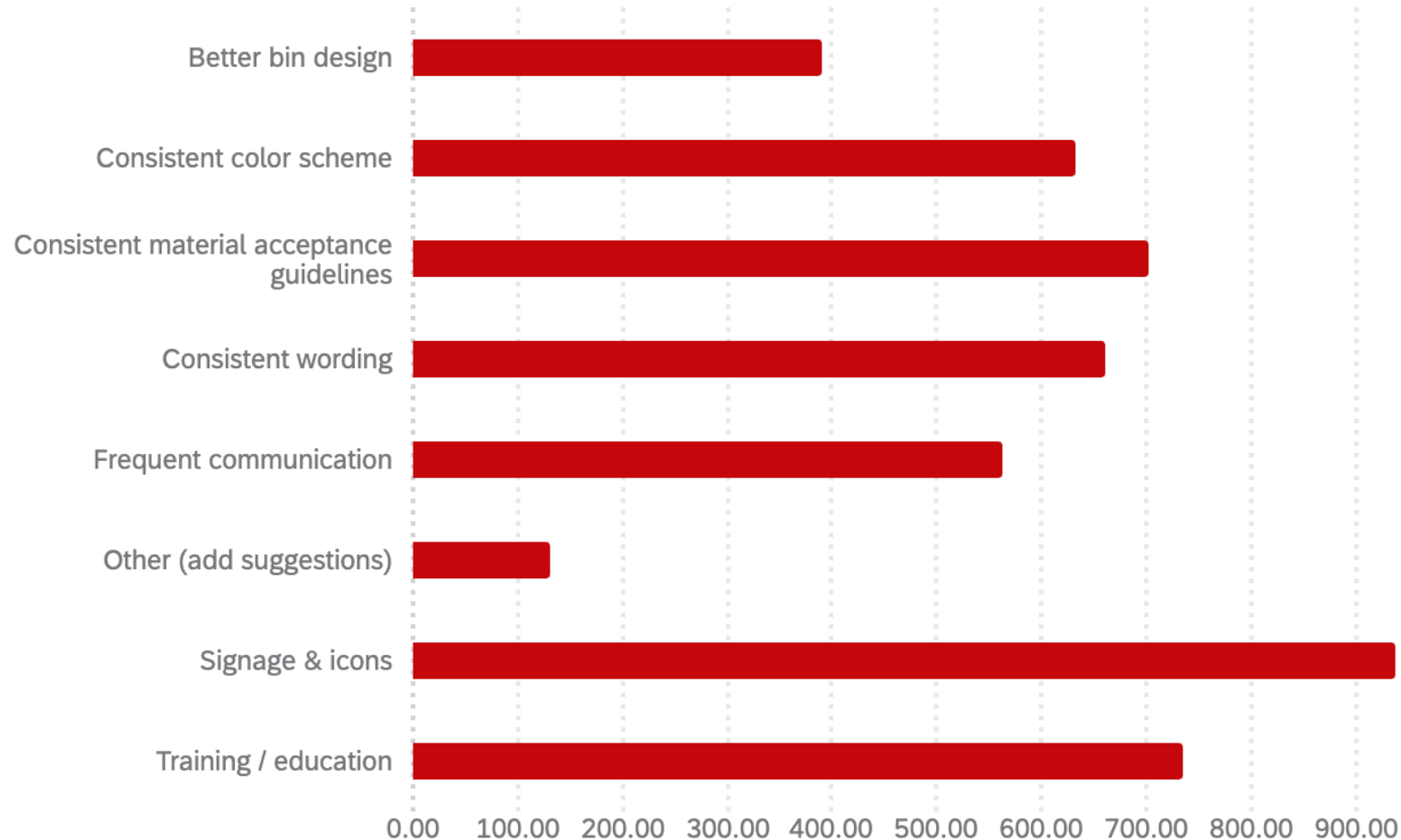


## Analysis

Respondents said they would **likely** use a re-introduced food waste collection program with **~70%** stating they were **Extremely likely** to.



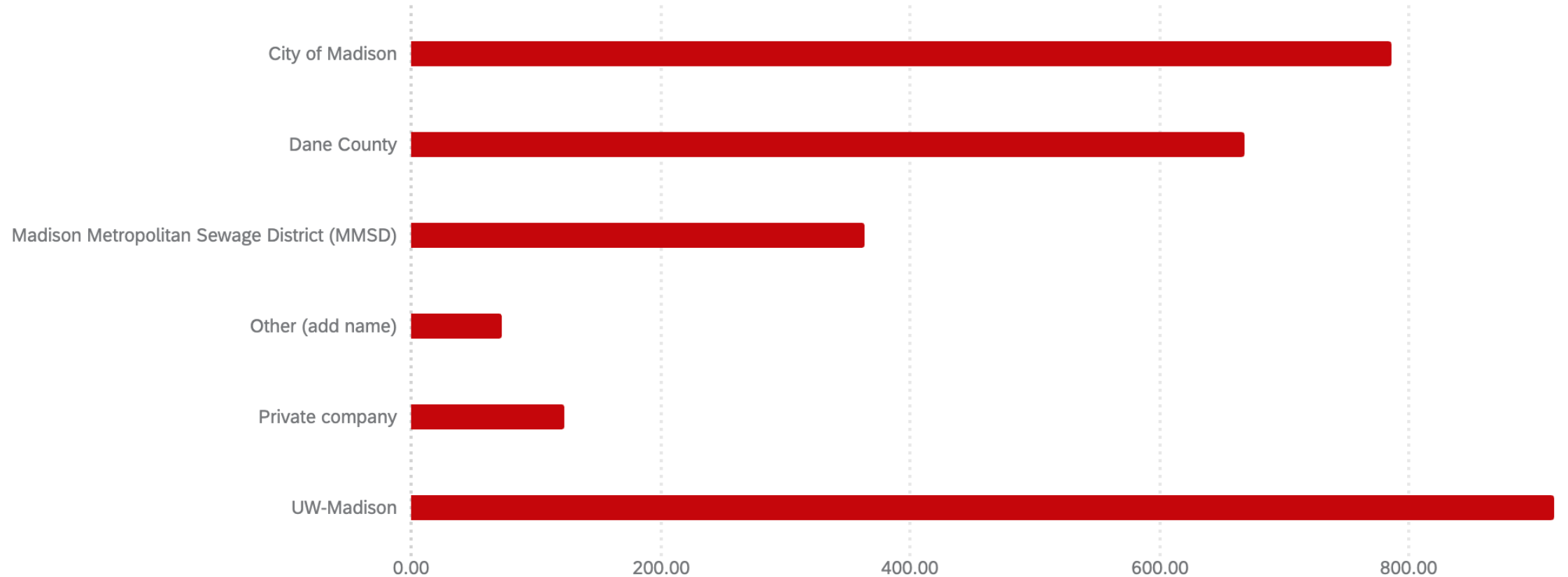
Contamination of food waste/compost bins is a major issue. What communication methods would help prevent contamination of the food waste stream (check all that apply)?



## Analysis

Overall, **all communications proposed** to decrease contamination were **accepted** by survey takers.

# Who should be responsible for providing an outlet for inedible food waste (check all that apply)?





# Analysis

- A majority of respondents stated **UW–Madison** or the **City of Madison** should be responsible for providing an outlet for inedible food waste.
- The least preferred outlet chosen by respondents was for a **Private company** to take the food waste.
- Among respondents who selected **Other (add name)**, most said they had **No Answer** or said that **Individuals** should take care of inedible food waste. Respondents who had **No Answer** stated they were not qualified to answer this question. This was also the case with **No Answer** categories for other questions. Respondents who selected **Individuals** believed that everyone has a part in composting, and we should all be taking care of our own food waste.

# Further comments, concerns, and suggestions

## **CIRCULAR ECONOMY**

“This should be a priority. The University System undoubtedly generates a large amount of food waste. It is their responsibility to not only reduce that food waste, but also manage it in a sustainable way that gives back to the environment. UW–Madison should work towards a circular system wherever possible.”

## **NATIONAL LEADER OPPORTUNITY**

“The food waste issue offers UW–Madison the opportunity to become a national leader in sustainability. I am excited to see the UW Office of Sustainability reach out to gauge campus community feedback on the situation.”

## **STEP TO REDUCE FOOD WASTE**

“The university really has to work on its waste issue. I work in a dining hall and the amount of food waste we have is astronomical. And I work in a smaller dining hall. I don’t understand why we don’t have a more robust food saving or donating program for the excess food from dining halls every night. Maybe our old composter wouldn’t have had an issue with the level of our compost if we avoided all this food waste.”

## **LANDFILL IMPACTS**

“This is crucial given the impacts that landfill disposal of food waste has on the environment. We must find a solution to this issue for now and the future.”

## **COMPOST AWARENESS**

“Food waste is a growing concern and if UW–Madison reintroduced the food waste collection program students would likely learn more about the positives of proper collection and participate. As a freshman living in the dorms, the compost bins were not talked about very much. I began to use the bins and had started to tell others on my floor about them. Then the bins were suddenly gone. It can have such a positive impact on the environment if we were to return to composting.”

## **A BETTER MADISON**

“I think it's a big problem that Madison and Dane County also don't have an outlet for food waste. I am disappointed to learn that the UW compost program has been suspended, even though I don't eat on campus much I think it is an important part of being a greener university.”

# Further comments, concerns, and suggestions

## **PLANET, PEOPLE, PROFIT**

“We are such a large campus and one that many other universities look up to, that its important that we lead with a strong food waste management program. Our students and staff care about the environment and how we operate. In the long term we want to save money over all and make our community better. Proper food waste management plays a big role in those goals.”

## **CONSUMER HABITS**

“I work in partnership with the Unions, UW Housing and UW Hospital. Each of these institutions have worked hard to offer composting programs and provide education. The greatest challenges is helping consumers understand that there is a cost involved and someone/thing has to pay that cost. The single most important message to get out there is this "stop buying food that you will not eat before it spoils".”

## **SPREAD TO OTHER AREAS**

“Having a compost program is very important, not only to divert food waste from the landfill, but also as an educational opportunity for students to grow into responsible global citizens and continue composting after graduation.”

## **ESSENTIAL COMPONENT**

“A productive food waste management system is an essential component of a sustainable, green campus!”

## **THE WISCONSIN IDEA**

“I think it is a great loss to the campus and the community to not have a proper system in place to dispose of food waste. I only see negatives of allowing food waste to go to a landfill. It seems grossly irresponsible of the institution to not manage and have a system in place to compost food waste, especially given the fact the institution has organizations like WI Conserve and make claims on sustainability. This also flies in the face of the Wisconsin Idea - we should not be making the state worse by throwing away our scraps. We should be leading in a push toward sustainable practices as an institution and educating external organizations to follow in our footsteps.”

## **REDUCE >COMPOST**

“I think food waste REDUCTION should be communicated more broadly around the campus community to reduce the amount we have to dispose of.”

# Further comments, concerns, and suggestions

## **MEANINGFUL IMPACT**

“With all of the issues and crises going on in the world, organizations like the university have the responsibility to make positive changes and increase sustainability. Individual action will never be enough, and huge corporations and governments are difficult to sway, but universities are at a level where we can make changes to improve the health of the community and world and serve as a model for others. Even with the difficulties faced in losing a previous outlet for food waste, UW–Madison has no excuse for returning to wasteful operations.”

## **CLIMATE ACTION**

“Food in landfills is a major contributor to greenhouse gases and climate change. UW–Madison needs to find a way to drastically reduce the amount of food that is sent to landfills and composting is an excellent solution. UW–Madison needs to take this opportunity to design an effective system that catches and redirects as much food as possible. For once UW has a chance to actually be green and sustainable instead of showing off performative actions that have minimal impact.”

## **NORMALIZED PRACTICE**

“It is so important to make normalize composting and make it easy and accessible to do. It is possible educate and make it part of the culture to make it ‘normal’ to split up food waste from recycling and trash.”



An aerial photograph of a farm complex with several large white barns, a parking lot, and surrounding green fields. A large white diamond shape is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the word "CONCLUSION" in black capital letters. The background shows a mix of green fields, some with crops, and a residential area with houses in the distance. The lighting suggests it might be late afternoon or early morning, with long shadows.

# CONCLUSION



# Summary of Findings

## **Multiple Choice (Q2, Q3, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q12)**

The survey was taken mostly by UW–Madison students and staff, with few identifying as faculty. Most respondents had some awareness of the program; however, 21% of respondents didn't know it existed. The previous service was not used often by survey takers; only a third participated in the program. For the respondents that utilized the program, many claimed the service made them feel purposeful.

Respondents said that they would use a new food waste program if it were introduced, though they said that the service would need to be improved. Suggestions for improvement mostly centered on creating awareness and the bins' locations, designs, and signage. All suggestions purposed by the survey respondents, including universal design and better education, were documented. They suggested the bins should have had a distinct, easy-to-understand design about what is and what isn't acceptable (including home food waste). Respondents stated the signage contradicted itself in different buildings, if it existed at all.

Respondents were concerned about how much food waste the university produces and believed it was unacceptable that the material was going to the Dane County Landfill. They said that both UW–Madison and the City of Madison should have a solution for food waste. Survey takers preferred the vendor not be a private company.

# Summary of Findings

## **Written Comments and Suggestions (Q5, Q9, and Q10)**

Respondents said that the composting system was not widely known, some not knowing it themselves, and asked that the University had done more awareness about it. Many who didn't know the composting program was available or didn't use it was because it was inaccessible to them as they were mostly in the dining halls and dorms. Hence, responders suggested that the program should have been in more places such as academic buildings or staff break rooms. Those who were off-campus students desired that the program be expanded to the City of Madison as there is no composting service.

Respondents who did use asked that the composting bins had better signage. Many reported that those who used the service were disposing of ineligible items like plastic and metal. They suggested the bins should have had a distinct, easy-to-understand design about what is and what isn't acceptable (including home food waste). As well, this signage should have also been universal across the campus. Respondents stated the signage contradicted itself in different buildings or was frankly non-existent. Users also requested the bins had been changed more frequently to increase its use. Additionally, if the bins hadn't been changed recently, the area would smell heavily causing displeasure to the program.

A few respondents desired the composting program had expanded to more types of material such as compostable or biodegradable products.

# Next Steps (Outlet/Processor)

In Spring 2022, University Housing Dining and Culinary Services received financial support from the Green Fund to implement a food waste reduction technology system called Lean Path. The staff at Rheta's Market will pilot the technology in order to measure and prevent food waste—saving time, money, and helping the environment. This project will also be used as a living-learning lab for student and faculty research.

As of August 2022, the West Madison Agricultural Research Station (WMARS) started accepting “back-of-house” food waste on a trial-run basis from a limited number of campus locations, including Dejope Residence Hall, Gordon Dining & Event Center, Union South, and Memorial Union. The FP&M Physical Plant Waste & Recycling team collects and hauls the food waste to WMARS. WMARS processes the food waste using a windrow composting method to create finished compost. A long-term outlet/processor is still under consideration.





# Next Steps (Food Waste Reduction & Recovery)

In Spring 2022, University Housing Dining and Culinary Services received financial support from the Green Fund to implement a food waste reduction technology system called Lean Path. The staff at Rheta's Market will pilot the technology in order to measure and prevent food waste – saving time, money, and helping the environment. This project will also be used as a living learning lab for student and faculty research.



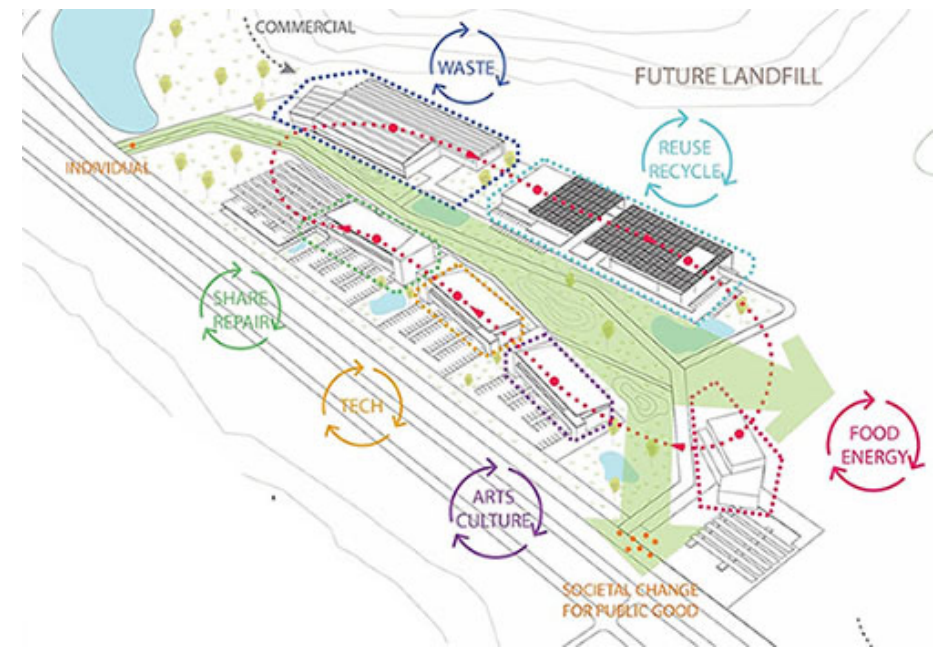
The Food Recovery Network – Madison Chapter (FRN) is a student organization that recovers leftover food from dining halls and makes them into delicious, free meals for the campus community. During the 2021-2022 academic year, the organization saved ~7,000 lbs. of food from the landfill. FRN continues to improve and expand its services.

# Future Considerations

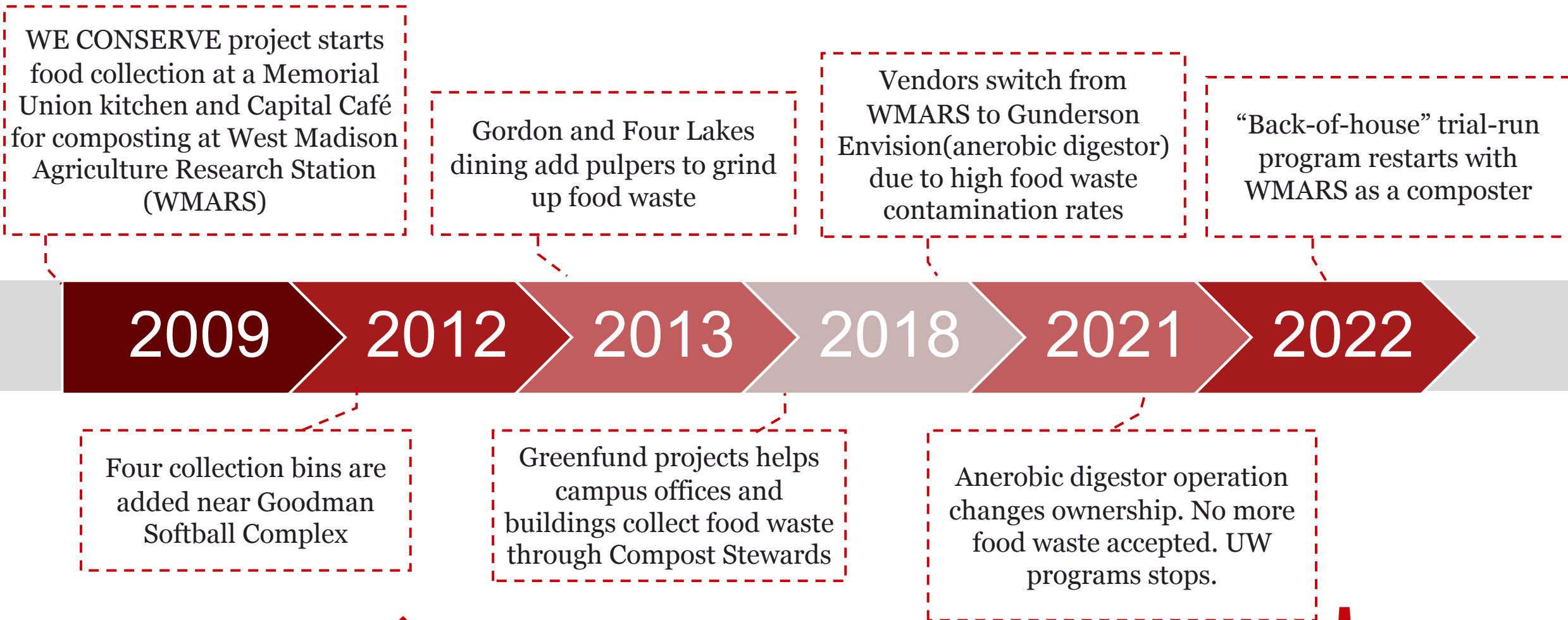
One potential future outlet is the Dane County Waste & Renewables' Sustainability Campus. Under its current concept plans, the campus would include organic recovery options and opportunities for research/technology.

More information can be found at:

<https://landfill.countyofdane.com/projects/WastandRenewableProjects/Sustainability-Campus>



# Food Waste Collection Timeline





# GET INVOLVED



## Food Recovery Network

UW–Madison branch of the national Food Recovery Network that fights food insecurity and food waste by recovering food from university dining halls. Serves free meals twice a week.

[win.wisc.edu/organization/FRNUW](http://win.wisc.edu/organization/FRNUW)



## The Open Seat

Supplies UW–Madison students in need with free boxes of food packed and distributed by Second Harvest Foodbank.

[asm.wisc.edu/the-open-seat/support/](http://asm.wisc.edu/the-open-seat/support/)



## F.H. King – Students for Sustainable Agriculture

Student-run agricultural collective in Eagle Heights that grows free produce and promotes sustainable farming.

[fhking.org](http://fhking.org)



## Slow Food

Nonprofit organization on the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus providing food for all members of the community.

[slowfood-uw.org/volunteer/](http://slowfood-uw.org/volunteer/)

Learn more at <https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/prevention/food-assistance/>

# Acknowledgements

## Contributors

Post-Composting Survey Creator:

*Travis Blomberg*

2021 Initial Report Creators:

*Cora Klemme '22, Eliza Lindley '23,  
Morgan Barlin '22, Rebecca Forbes Wank*

2022 Final Report Creator:

*Emily Johnson '25*

## Recognitions

*Survey Respondents*

*West Madison Agricultural Research Station*

*Wisconsin Union*

*University Housing Dining & Culinary  
Services*

*FP&M Physical Plant – Waste & Recycling*

*Rob Cramer (Vice Chancellor of Finance and  
Administration)*