

COM 421 Final Project

Fall 2017

Reducing yard waste

This semester you're going to be dealing with the problem of yard waste disposal in Chicago. [A recent report by WBEZ Chicago](#) found that although collection requests for residential yard waste pick up are at an all-time high, the city is collecting an extremely small amount of yard waste as compared with previous years. Reading that report will give you a good background on the city's system for collection and how the city deals with waste disposal generally.

Why is proper yard waste disposal important?

Yard waste, such as fallen leaves and grass clippings, not only takes up valuable space in landfills, it also decomposes in anaerobic conditions to produce methane. Although commonly overlooked by policymakers and the public, methane produces 86 times more warming than its equivalent of carbon dioxide, a much more recognizable contributor to climate change.¹

Although a methane capture system is in place at landfills across the United States, it has captured only 345 million metric tons in the past twenty years, while 2014 alone saw an estimated 148 million metric tons of methane released by landfills.²

Blue cart recycling: a case study

Waste disposal is a cultural problem as much as a monetary problem. Crafting a program does not ensure that the public will participate. In this section, I've provided a summary of a similarly troubled waste collection effort: the Blue Cart Recycling Program.

The program began in 2007 as an experiment, but quickly expanded to the entire city by 2013. Currently, Chicago uses black bins (commonly called "carts") for garbage and blue bins for recyclables. In 2016, the city cracked down on non-recyclable trash disposed of in blue carts as well as the use of plastic bags to hold recyclable items (plastic bags damage the sorting machinery at recycling facilities, slowing down operations and increasing costs).

To educate the public on these rule changes, the Department of Streets and Sanitation issued press releases, mailed leaflets to all 600,000 households in Chicago (more than once), and commissioned a [website](#) to educate the public on what materials can be recycled and how to properly dispose of recyclables.

Carts also have a sticker explaining which items can be disposed of as recycling. When improper items were found in the blue carts, sanitation workers left the contents and placed a

¹ Vaidyanathan, G. (2015). "Methane? The global warming potential of the gaseous fossil fuel may consistently be underestimated." [Scientific American](#).

² Gies, E. (2016). "Landfills Have a Huge Greenhouse Gas Problem. Here's what we can do about it." [Ensisia](#).

conspicuous warning sticker with a frowning emoji on the bins that explained which content was unacceptable. The sticker was placed over the lid so that it would have to be removed in order to open the bin again. The sticker also threatened removal of the transgressor's cart following repeat offenses.

Concurrently, city officials elected to switch to a more efficient grid-based garbage collection system, reclaiming millions of dollars that were spent on improving the Blue Cart Recycling Program by replacing damaged blue carts.

The results have been unimpressive. Chicago's waste diversion rate (the amount of waste diverted from landfills to recycling centers) has gone from 11.1% in 2014, to 10.2% in 2015, and only just above 9% in 2016 when the new rules were put into effect.³ Other cities claim much higher diversion rates (San Francisco boasts 80% diversion of food and yard waste).

Your project

Working in teams of four, you'll develop a plan for encouraging Chicago residents to reuse or responsibly dispose of yard waste. You must cultivate a knowledge of the problem and of the mechanisms the city currently has in place, then come up with a solution and associated materials to encourage both program adoption and stakeholder participation.

Your project materials can include any information you feel will help you meet your rhetorical goals, but must include:

- A project proposal written with components covered in the corresponding chapter of your textbook;
- A comparison of Chicago's program with three comparable cities (two from the U.S. and one international city), along with data visualizations that effectively compare program costs and waste stream diversion (or comparable metrics);
- A website that showcases your proposal and links to other relevant information;
- A public social media account with some example posts illustrating how you will encourage program participation;
- Instructions for the new pick up procedure and other home disposal methods;
- A promotional card, brochure, or other item for distribution to households.

Advice

Think back on what we have learned this semester concerning audience, effective writing, graphics, accessible design, document design, and instructions. Also consider theoretical concepts concerning risk communication, ethics, and presenting public policy issues. Remember, you need to make the issue important and immediate to stakeholders.

³ Statistics via reporting by the [Chicago Sun Times](#) and [DNAinfo](#).

Think carefully about the purpose and limitations of each document. Obviously you'll want to reuse content and direct people to the website for complete information and additional resources.

Be concise. You're not writing a book on yard waste disposal. People only read documents that are concise and approachable. Use what you've learned to efficiently present information.

Additional requirements

All sources for templates, codes, data, and images should be cited. You can use footnotes, captions, and hyperlinks to help with that. Make sure you are consistent.

All materials are due in a zipped folder on Blackboard by no later than 8:00 a.m. on Monday, 12/4/17. You'll give a ten minute presentation during the final exam period (8-10 a.m. on 12/4) that gives a brief overview of your proposed strategy, documents, and design choices.

Treat this project like a take-home exam and adhere to all university code of conduct guidelines. I expect each team to work independently.

Evaluation

I'll evaluate your work based on the principles we've covered this semester. This is your chance to bring everything together and show me what you learned.

I'll post a rubric with the major components of the project and major principles of communication we have covered. Part of your grade will be based on mandatory group member evaluations that rate your availability and the quality and timeliness of your work.