Reducing Single-Use Plastic Waste: The College of Saint Rose

Executive Summary

Colleges are facing unprecedented challenges. The price of a degree has doubled since 1980, student loans form the largest chunk of U.S. non-housing debt, and enrollment nationwide has faltered (Moldanado, 2018). Higher education institutions can no longer rely on business-as-usual-practices to survive in a rapidly changing world. Sustainability is the game-changing opportunity the industry needs to take advantage of to improve its economic, social, and environmental standing while meeting the urgency of the times.

The College of Saint Rose, a private college in Albany, New York, is well-positioned to embrace sustainability with a mission to help students live upstanding lives and give back to their communities. Yet, for years, Saint Rose unwittingly contributed to issues of sustainability. On-campus, garbage bins filled with plastic waste while recycling bins remained idle.

Saint Rose is one system that represents a larger problem. Since the 1950s, only 9% of the world’s plastic waste has been properly recycled (Geyer, Jambeck, & Law 2017). Most plastic derives from oil, a fossil fuel, emitting climate-change causing greenhouse gas emissions in the production process. The majority of plastic ends up in the landfill or polluting the ocean after one use, causing irrevocable damage.

With Saint Rose battling the challenges that plague higher education today, reducing its plastic footprint could help to foster innovation, boost morale, and enhance economic vitality. Saint Rose could use the framework, “The Marine Debris & Plastic Source Reduction Toolkit for Colleges and Universities,” to ban certain single-use plastics, replace materials with eco-friendly alternatives, codify rules and guidelines, and create a green task force to oversee the plan (Product Stewardship Institute, 2013).