

The 3 C's: Compost, Compost, Compost

Purpose

In 2009, Santa Clara University adopted an on-campus composting program as part of efforts to strengthen the culture of sustainability and achieve a zero-waste model on campus. In this study, we sought to learn more about students' barriers to, perceptions of, and participation in composting programs to identify ways to strengthen the on-campus composting program and help inform the creation of a municipal program in Santa Clara.



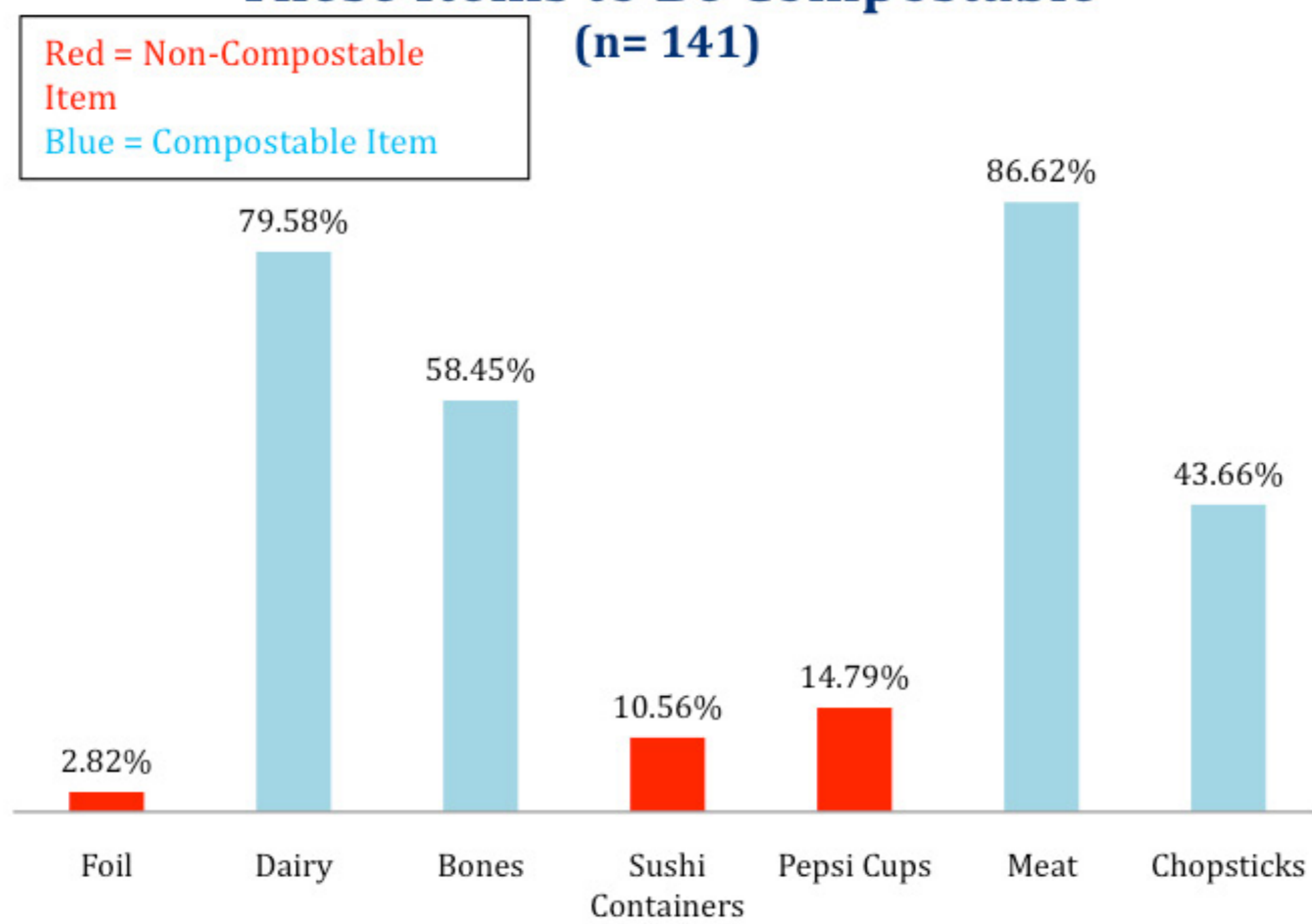
Methods

To gain an accurate understanding of students' attitudes toward and understandings of composting programs, we conducted focus groups of students with varying levels of self-reported support of the culture of sustainability and knowledge of composting. Observations of students' composting behavior in the Marketplace dining hall provided data showing actual participation in on-campus composting. This preliminary information informed a 13-question paper survey that focused on understanding of, participation in, and barriers surrounding current composting programs, and willingness to participate in a municipal curbside composting program. The surveys were administered to a variety of Santa Clara University classes and were filled out anonymously.

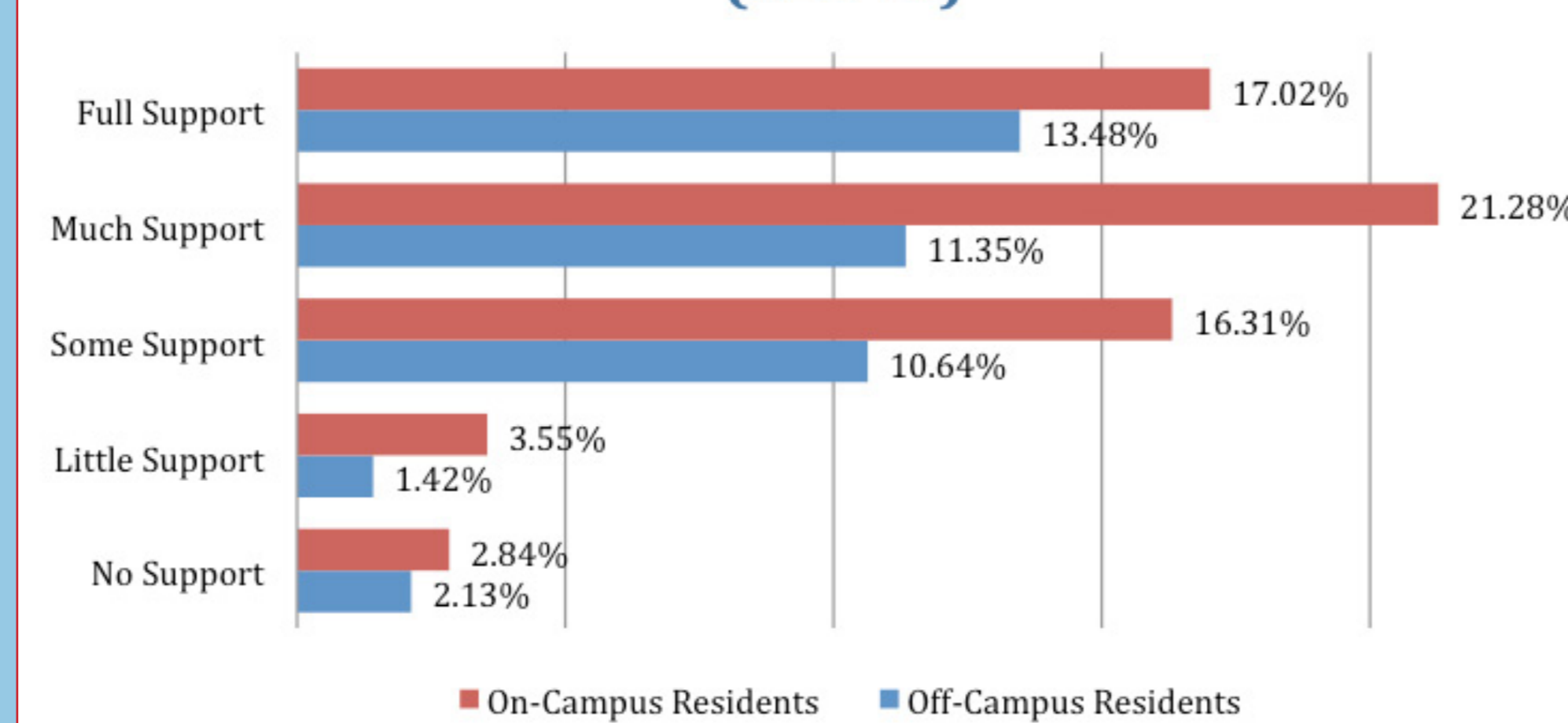
Findings

Surveyed students overall reported a positive attitude about composting programs and 71% (n=141) reported either liking or loving the environmental movement (self-scored a 4 or 5 on a 5-point Likert scale), thus indicating that there is a strong culture of sustainability on campus. There were, however, still many results that indicate that further expansion and strengthening of composting programs is needed to more fully integrate composting into daily practice.

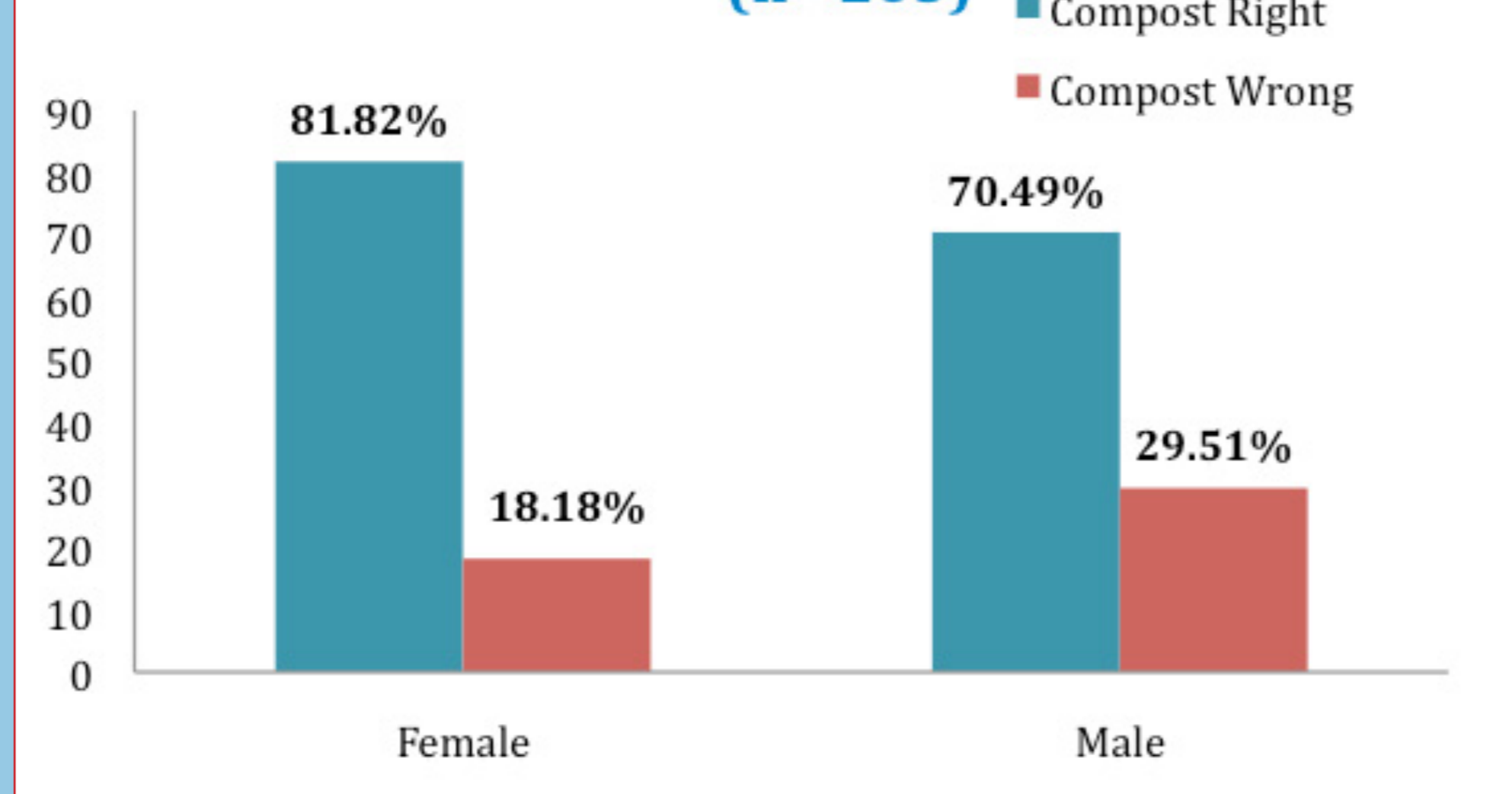
Percentage of Students Who Believe These Items to Be Compostable (n=141)



Willingness to Participate in Municipal Curbside Composting Program by Residence (n=141)



Benson Composting Habits by Gender (n=265)



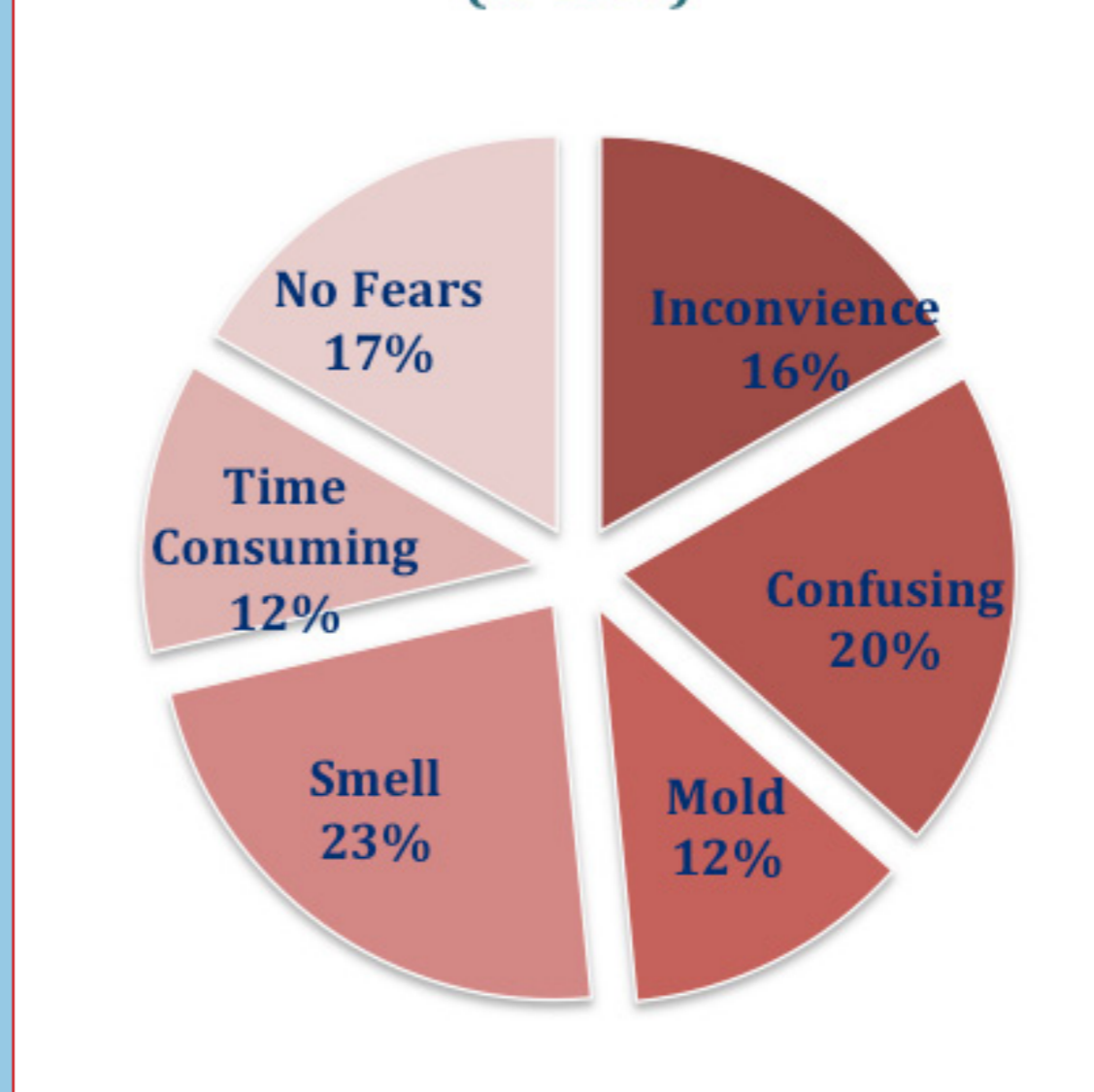
Reported Composting Knowledge

Students were asked to select which items were suitable for composting on-campus. While many students correctly identified compostable items, there is still a significant lack of knowledge that could lead to unnecessary landfill waste and contamination of compost with non-compostable items.

Concerns about Composting

Surveyed students were asked to indicate what concerns they have about participating in a composting program. Their concerns are associated with mismanagement of the composting program and the individual compost bin.

Concerns about Composting (n=141)



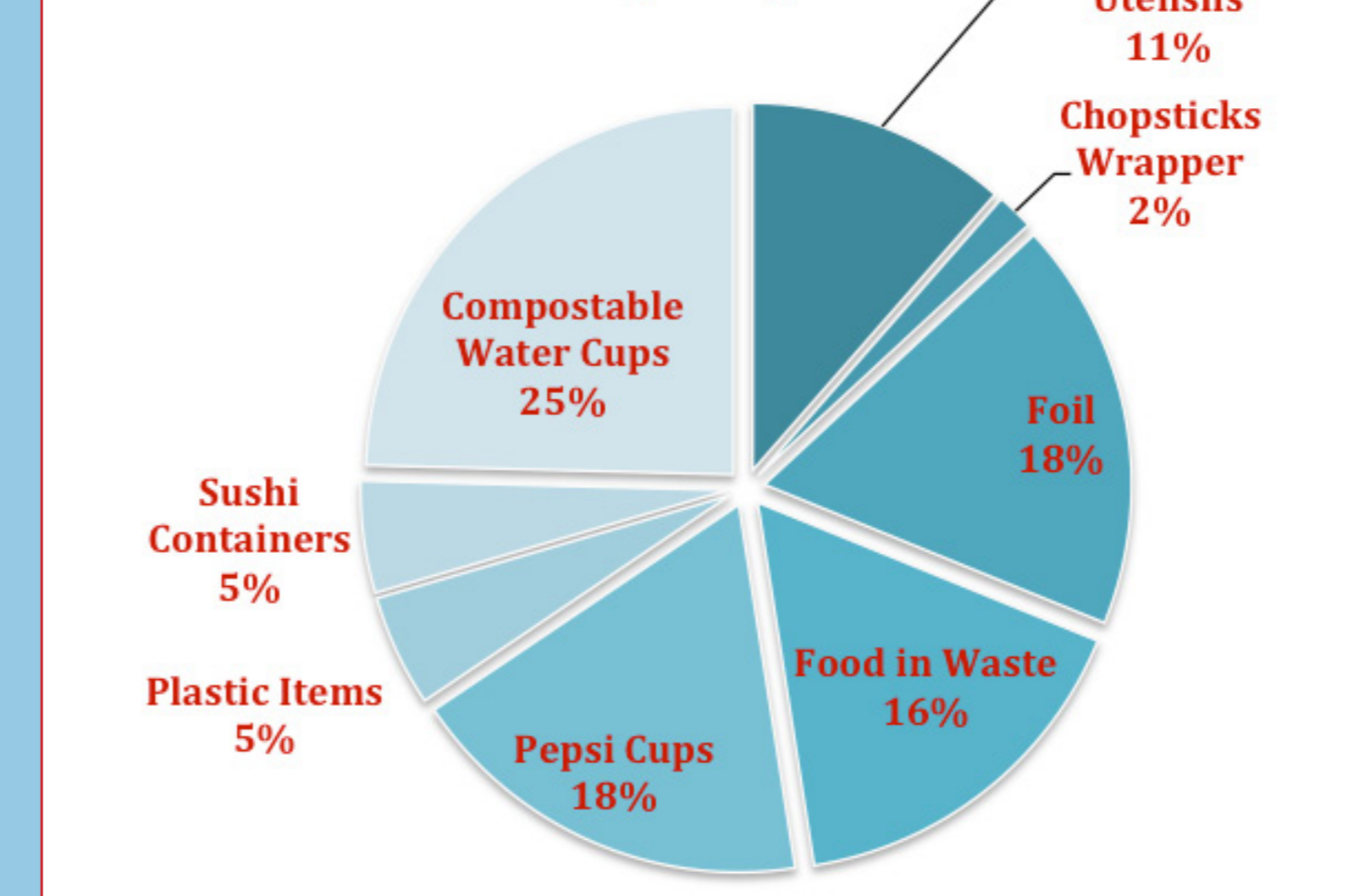
Municipal Composting Program

When asked to rate their willingness to participate in "a composting program in the city of Santa Clara, wherein the city would provide a wheeled outdoor compost bin and collect it weekly (like the trash and recycling pickup)," 90% of students indicated neutral to full support.

Observed Composting Behaviors

When composting habits were observed, 76.6% of student's composted correctly in Benson while 23.4% did not. Females are more likely to compost correctly than are their male counterparts. Improper composting practices can render compost unsuitable for processing.

Observed Items Most Frequently Composted Incorrectly (n=61)



Discussion

Overall it appears that SCU students are on-board with the sustainability movement, including participation in both on- and off-campus composting programs. Despite this self-reported support, there are issues with and confusion about composting. Even if the majority of students compost correctly, a few errors can undermine the whole process. Overcoming these misunderstandings and mistakes is crucial to successfully expanding composting programs.

Recommendations

Several steps can help overcome barriers and make composting part of students' daily routines.

- Increase the number of composting bins with comprehensive, engaging, and easy-to-read instructional signs on campus.
- Decrease the use of non-compostable items used in campus dining facilities.
- Create a highly visible weeklong composting education program at the beginning of the school year, including workshops, fliers, and Sustainability Squad representatives guiding proper waste disposal.
- Provide students who live on campus with bins, signage, and facilities to compost in their residence halls.
- Work with the city of Santa Clara to set up a curbside composting program, using data and materials from the on-campus program.



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