

Going 'green' saves 'the green' in Alfred University's trayless dining halls

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The proof is in the pudding or more precisely, in the fries, bagels, cereal, cheese, milk, soft drinks, juice and bottled water, the staples of college dining hall menus. Prompted by its students, Alfred University and AVI Fresh, a division of AVI Foodsystems, Inc. AVI Fresh, its food service partner, opted to do away with dining hall trays at the beginning of the 2008 spring semester, hoping to cut down on food waste and, at the same time, perhaps save some money. The results are in, and they confirm what Green Alfred, a student group that promotes sustainability, and University officials surmised they would see - a reduction in food and beverage waste, and a savings in cleaning chemicals if they did away with the trays, which foster an all-you-can-carry, rather than an all-you-can-eat mentality. John Dietrich, director of Dining Services for AVI Fresh, said he ran comparisons on beverages and food items that college students consume daily, regardless of what else may be on the menu. "Overall, we saw a reduction in the gallons of beverages and the pounds of food used," said Dietrich, who compared the spring '08 consumption to the same items for spring '07, when trays were still in use. Dietrich saw a 9.2 percent reduction in the gallons of milk, soft drinks, bottled water and juice sold, and a 12 percent reduction in the pounds of food (bagels, cereal, deli cheeses and French fries). But that is not the complete story, Dietrich notes, because the University also saw a 3.2 percent increase in the number of meals served in its two dining halls. Adjusting for the additional meals served, he said, means the actual savings is even greater: 11 percent on beverages and 14 percent on food. Dietrich had also anticipated that shelving the trays (they were actually donated to REPO, a student-run center that supplies recycled items for art projects) would save on the chemicals used in cleaning trays and dishes, and he was right. The savings on chemicals was even more significant - a 29 percent reduction. In actual dollars, the University also saw a savings on its food and chemical bills, even though the prices went up. "By cutting consumption, we were actually able to reduce what we paid for food and chemicals, even though the prices we paid to our suppliers for those items increased," said Dietrich. But the cost of beverages, even with the reduction in the number of gallons served, increased. "Without the trayless initiative, though, we would have seen an even greater increase in the amount we paid for beverages, especially since the number of meals we served also increased," said Dietrich.