UA Campaign Urges Campus Consumers to 'Skip the Straw'

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The next time you order a drink on campus, a group of UA students hopes you'll consider forgoing a plastic straw.

The "Skip the Straw" campaign was launched this semester by the UA Cooper Center for Environmental Learning's Outreach Team, a student group whose efforts are supported by the UA Green Fund.

Working in partnership with Arizona Student Unions, the team hopes to cut the UA's use of plastic straws in half by the end of the school year.

Arizona Student Unions currently purchases 670,000 straws a year. That's enough to blanket the UA Mall at least twice, said Deanna Kulbeth, a graduate student in the College of Education and project manager for the Cooper Center Outreach Team. Kulbeth and her team want to get that number down to 335,000.

If successful in reducing demand for straws, the effort would allow Arizona Student Unions to switch to fully compostable straws in 2020 for no more than is spent on straws now.

"There are a lot of straws being used on this campus; it equates to more than two a day for most students, and there are some students who use no straws at all," Kulbeth said. "Straws can't be recycled, and it takes 200 years for plastic to decompose. We are encouraging people to change their behavior and consumption by looking at their choices through the lens of environmental responsibility, and straws are one of the easiest things for people to let go of, we think. After all, there was a time when humans lived well enough without them."

For those who can't or don't wish to give up drinking straws, Kulbeth and her team encourage reusable straws as an alternative.

Straws have become the focus of increasing attention in recent years, thanks in part to reports such as a 2016 study by the World Economic Forum that found seaborne plastic trash will outweigh all the ocean's fish by 2050 unless changes are made to the ways in which plastics are consumed and disposed.

Skip the Straw posters and digital flyers are now displayed in the Student Union Memorial Center, the Student Recreation Center, the ENR2 building and elsewhere on campus. Kulbeth and her team have also hosted information tables at the Wednesday farmers market on the UA Mall.

The Skip the Straw campaign aligns with the goals of the Cooper Center for Environmental Learning, a partnership between the College of Education and Tucson Unified School District.
The center focuses on educating and inspiring people to "live more lightly on the Earth."

The campaign also supports Arizona Student Unions’ continuing efforts to move toward more compostable products, said Todd Millay, senior director for Arizona Student Unions.

"The Student Unions is now at 60 percent of all products being compostable, up from 47 percent three years ago," Millay said. "This partnership is making a difference and demonstrates a holistic approach to solving challenges on our campus. The Cooper Center team is helping drive education that complements the supply change. This will enable us to first reduce usage and then entirely shift the straw product lines to 100 percent compostable a full two years earlier than if we acted alone."

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[1] https://coopercenter.arizona.edu/
[2] https://studentlifefees.arizona.edu/ua-green-fund
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