

## Dorm Recycling at UNI: A History and Proposal

“Recycle (v). To convert waste into reusable material.” Or more simply put, to “use again”. While the Oxford dictionary may condense the meaning of this action into a few words, recycling is a core part of many things in our universe, including you and me. You see, because of its cyclical nature the universe is constantly finding new ways to make use of material, and we humans have been using recycling for a long, long time. Traditionally, recycling has been an *open system* - pieces of waste will be combined to turn, say, a plastic water bottle into a fleece sweater (it’s a whole process). But many items today are becoming part of a *closed system* - being able to be used again, and again, and (you guessed it) again. Think of aluminum cans as a good example of this type of system - fairly easy to process and reuse.

But enough about systems - let’s make this personal. The University of Northern Iowa has done a fairly good job promoting recycling on campus, but there is one noticeable area in which their recycling campaign is lacking. Although students have access to recycling cans in their dorms, there are no major recycling dumpsters outside the dorms for residents to dispose of their recyclables, and barely any attention has been brought to this matter. This paper is designed to inform the student and faculty body of UNI about this issue, and how it can be fixed. But first, let’s take a brief look back at how the Cedar Valley and the university has utilized recycling in the past.

The earliest known residents of the Cedar Valley were the Meskwaki and the Sauk peoples, with one of the leaders of the latter, Chief Black Hawk, becoming the county’s namesake (Cedar Falls, 2023). The Native Americans of the Cedar Valley (and throughout Iowa) were very good at practicing the concept of *environmental climate resiliency* - the idea of a cycle of *resilience, adaptation, vulnerability*, and changes to the *climate* that can ultimately

strengthen a civilization's ability to recover from disasters and use the natural resources available to them wisely. In terms of recycling, Marlin Ingalls, working for the Office of the State Archaeologist notes that waste created by Native Americans was either put in empty pits previously used for food storage, or would be reused during sacred ceremonies (Ingalls, 1994).

Moving forward several centuries, modern recycling in Iowa (and Cedar Falls) would emerge in the back half of last century. 1978's "Bottle Bill" reduced carbonated/alcoholic container waste, and according to the Iowa Recycling Association, around 71% of containers are redeemed annually today (IRA, 2020). Just over a decade later, the monumental Waste Reduction and Recycling Act drove landfill reduction through recycling, which still continues to this day (Iowa Association of Naturalists, 1998). Closer to home, in recent years, the University of Northern Iowa has become more involved in recycling efforts around campus and in the broader Cedar Falls community.

According to their website, the Iowa Waste Reduction Center (an affiliate of UNI) began in 1988 as a response to the Groundwater Protection Act, but grew into a major beneficial entity for small businesses working to become better stewards of the environment, with a special emphasis on reducing food waste (treating it as a resource) (IWRC, 2025). In addition to the IWRC, the Panther Parkway Recycling Station, located on the west side of campus, has also contributed to the diversion of materials from local landfills, with data reaching as far back as the early 2010's, indicating a gradual increase in recycled materials such as cardboard and plastic bags (UNI, 2025).

With a better understanding of how recycling has been used historically at UNI and in the Cedar Valley, let's now turn our attention to the present state of recycling on campus. One major benefit of some recycling receptacles on campus is their clever use of *energy*. 12 Big Belly *solar*

*kiosks* are located at high traffic areas on campus to provide more space for recycled materials.

What is a solar kiosk, you might ask? A solar kiosk is a trash can with the added component of a *solar compactor* - the compactor uses the sun's energy to crush down materials, thus making more space for more waste. Another clear way in which UNI has promoted recycling is through plastic bottle disposal stations. A map (see Fig. 1) displays locations of these stations at various points across campus, mostly (like the solar kiosks) in high traffic areas. Besides these two methods, the aforementioned Iowa Waste Reduction Center and Panther Parkway Recycling Station continue to operate effectively and around 40 tons of paper were recycled along with just under 100 tons of single-stream recycle materials in fiscal year 2025.

However, as mentioned at the top of this paper, one group of locations on campus could use some improvement in regards to communication about recycling locations, and it's arguably the most important - the residence halls. Although individual rooms have small recycling cans in them, a step in the right direction, the larger issue of *close* disposal locations and communication about them remains elusive. A public news release in 2010 mentions the dispersal of recycling containers to dorms, and mentions that 'a room in each residence hall has been designated as the collection center for sorting [recycling]' (UNI, 2010). But 15 years have passed since this release, and information is not readily available about these 'disposal rooms' on university webpages, if they even still exist. Furthermore, students would be more inclined to dispose of their recycling along with the rest of their waste in the easily visible dumpsters located around the outside of the dorms. Lacking are analogous recycling dumpsters that would offer students living on campus the option to responsibly dispose of their recycling as opposed to the current situation of everything being disposed of in one dumpster.

So what is to be done about this lack of recycling disposal stations near dorms on an otherwise recycling-friendly campus? I propose a two-pronged solution:

1. Address communication issues around recycling in dorms (exploring several possible options to accomplish this)
2. The addition of more recycling disposal locations around residence halls, with more attention drawn to them.

Let's start with the issue of communication. Improving communication on recycling locations around residence halls could begin with the establishment of clear, relevant information boards in the dorms that students can easily access. One benefit of this is that it would bring more awareness to recycling in the dorms beyond just individual rooms. However, although boards are generally placed in high traffic areas in dorms, this doesn't guarantee everyone will see them. Another solution to providing better communication could come through the Resident Assistants (RAs). RA's could also play a role by briefly covering recycling procedures during house meetings or distributing informational cards at the beginning of each semester. This method could be beneficial because it provides a face-to-face interaction about recycling locations, not just text on a sign. The only drawback with this option mostly concerns students following through. Words given at the start of the semester don't necessarily translate to a wholehearted effort by the end. This brings us to the 2nd part of the solution - the fact that increasing the physical availability and visibility of recycling disposal locations around the outside of residence halls is essential for changing resident habits.

Many students currently gravitate toward the most convenient option - the large waste dumpsters located just outside the buildings. By introducing clearly marked, co-located recycling dumpsters, responsible disposal would become easier to implement and receive a similar status

as throwing away trash. The location of these new bins should be in high-traffic areas, and contain clear labels indicating the recycling dumpster's accepted materials, and perhaps even color-coded to create an important distinction from the trash dumpster. You could also add some simple directional signage from dorm exits to the nearest recycling dumpster which would further reinforce their presence. When looking at cost, implementation of this plan would likely be easier through renting dumpsters via a local company as opposed to outright buying dumpsters and having the city of Cedar Falls come and pick recycling waste up. One possible option is Rite Environmental, a company which started as the brainchild of (believe it or not) a student at UNI! They offer monthly pick up services, and based on typical market range, would likely cost between \$200-\$300/month/dumpster (Rite Environmental. 2025). Factoring in 1 dumpster per residence hall on campus, the total per year comes out to between \$20 and \$30,000. This sounds like a lot of money, but going through the city of Cedar Falls (\$125 per dump, 1 dump per week = \$500/month, \$6000/year, \$54,000/per year for 9 dumpsters) is more expensive in the long run (City of Cedar Falls, 2025). You still may argue that \$20 - \$30,000 is a fair sum of money, but it would only be a small fraction of the university's total budget, \$174.2 million as of 2025 (Iowa Capital Dispatch, 2024).

In closing, I hope this paper serves as both a guide and a proposal for the storied history of recycling in the Cedar Valley and on campus, and a way forward to continue our path towards sustainability. One major factor that any civilization hoping to prosper must grapple with is *technology* - Egypt built the pyramids, Rome created massive infrastructure networks (roads and aqueducts). But today, we must continue to figure out how *technology* can help us become better stewards of our campus, our community and our planet. Even though my proposal is simple - 'just' being more clear about where recycling around dorms is and how to fix the lack of

recycling dumpsters around dorms - the proposal is part of my legacy on campus, and I hope it's something future students and faculty will keep in mind, even after I'm gone. May the addition of new dorm dumpsters be the direction our diligent and dedicated campus so desperately desires.

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