

School for the Environment Students Work with Restaurants on Alternatives to Plastic

Colleen Locke | December 17, 2018



Estanislau Ribeiro, Laxmi Spearing, and Molly Brady show their capstone class the video they produced on plastic straws and straw alternatives.

Image by: Colleen Locke

Microplastics are so small that they can't be filtered, so they contaminate our water sources.

Professor Douglas's Capstone Students Present Their Findings to Restaurant and Catering Company Clients This Week

As the City of Boston's ban on single-use plastic bags goes into effect for large retail establishments, [UMass Boston's School for the Environment \(https://environment.umb.edu\)](https://environment.umb.edu) students have already been working with local restaurants and catering companies to get them thinking about how they can reduce their

ecological footprint.

This semester, seven groups of seniors in Professor of Hydrology Ellen Douglas (https://www.umb.edu/faculty_staff/list/ellen_douglas)'s capstone class were tasked with contacting a restaurant/catering company that they frequent, doing an assessment of their plastic/single-use dishes/bags/straws, and making recommendations for replacements. An eighth group developed fact sheets and business cards for the students to bring to their restaurant clients during their initial meetings; student Samantha Pham (second from left, below) designed a Proud Protector of the Oceans window decal and button for that eighth group.



Along the way, the students learned about product stewardship, for example, what kinds of materials can actually be recycled and composted, from Megan Byers of the Product Stewardship Institute.

“Plastics don’t go away, but they do break down to smaller, and microplastics. Smaller pieces of plastic are mistakenly eaten by animals, putting plastics directly into our food chain,” senior Molly Brady said in a video (<https://youtu.be/s9JVU6aqf2w>) she and her team members Laxmi Spearing and Estanislau Ribeiro produced

for the class. "The microplastics are so small that they can't be filtered, so they contaminate our water sources, making their way into our drinking water. We are consuming the plastics."

Brady, Spearing, and Ribeiro worked with Capo Restaurant. The restaurant recently went strawless (they now only give you straws if you ask) and was looking to do more. During their final presentation to the class on Tuesday, Spearing said that at the South Boston location, Capo spends \$17,304 on 44,580 plastic items each year. When they meet with their Capo contact this week, the group is going to recommend paper straws. Ribeiro said they identified a product that is non-toxic, the dye does not bleed into the drink, and the straw decomposes in 30 to 60 days. That particular company does require a minimum order that exceeds what the one restaurant uses each year, but Ribeiro thought they could use the extras at the restaurant owner's other locations, if that's the option Capo chooses.

"When we go and deliver [this presentation], we're also going to explain to them what each of these mean and what the difference is, to kind of enlighten them, because as much as, yeah, they're reducing their plastics and they're saving money, ... part of this in working with them was to instill in them that this was an issue beyond just your restaurant," Brady said. "It's worldwide, so it's important to make these changes not just to save money."

Another team worked with Unidine, which operates the cafeteria in the *Schrafft's City Center in Charlestown, where team member Taelise Ricketts works*. In their research, team member Kate Rosenberg said they found birch cutlery is not much more expensive than plastic options; they also found sugarcane serving utensils. They will be presenting Unidine with three options, with one option to replace everything that can be replaced, only replacing plastic with options that are less expensive, and a balanced scenario.

Another team that presented on Tuesday worked with Fairy Café, a Chinese hot pot restaurant in Wollaston. They are recommending that the restaurant not give out utensils and plastic bags unless a takeout customer asks.

“How many times have you gotten plastic utensils in your takeout bag and you never use them? If they automatically didn’t give them out, I wouldn’t even miss them,” Douglas said in support of the students’ recommendations.

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