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From the community: Oakton students launch successful effort to 'ban the bottle'



The decomposition rate for a plastic bottle to break down in a landfill site is more than a 1,000 years. (Posted by Oakton Community College, Community Contributor)

By **Community Contributor Oakton Community College**

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At a recent meeting of the Oakton Community College President's Council, the [Students for Social Justice \(S4SJ\)](#) club presented their findings on why they believed a single-use plastic water bottle ban was appropriate for Oakton. They had gathered 1,150 petition signatures and dozens of letters in support of their objectives.

Why ban a simple convenience like bottled water? This question began last spring with students in an [Oakton Community College](#) honors core seminar taught by professors Hollace Graff and Richard Stacewicz. As students learned more about the complicated issues surrounding bottled water, their commitment to the assignment gained momentum, and the class project grew into a campus-wide political action to ban sales from vending machines and food service.

After reviewing the evidence students presented, the President's Council agreed to support the ban, putting Oakton among a number of colleges across the nation that have taken a similar stance, including two local universities, Northwestern and Loyola.

"This type of transformative experience is illustrative of how an Oakton education ties the classroom to the real world and offers a laboratory to innovate," explained [President Joianne Smith](#).

"We challenged the students to research an environmental issue from many perspectives and to take an ethical position-right or wrong-on their research," explained Professor Graff. "The students chose single-use plastic water bottles, something that they were familiar with in everyday life. They then set their own goals for the project and organized the research project into teams. The amazing thing was that the students didn't stop when the class was over and graded. Those who didn't graduate last spring saw it through for another year until they had created change on campus."

The teams divided their research into numerous areas including the ecological impact of plastics, the human rights issues surrounding water usage on a global scale, the implications of corporate profits for a public resource, and recycling and landfills. They also researched convenient alternatives.

"As students, we learn more by combining research with service learning and especially service action," said recent Oakton graduate Simone Montgomery of Winnetka (New Trier), co-president of S4JC. "As we began to make presentations to other clubs on campus, it was extremely

gratifying to see how many different students came together to add their voices and support for this project."

One group estimated that at Oakton's Des Plaines campus alone, students and staff discarded between 1,000 to 2,000 pounds of plastic water bottles per year. Even though they found most of the empties were not purchased at the college, but brought on campus, students believed a ban would still have the positive outcome of raising awareness of the issues.

Fellow S4JC co-president and Oakton graduate Roxana Berinde of [Niles](#) (Niles West) said, "It is sad that we buy a water bottle, drink it, and toss it, without ever considering the results of our actions. I was shocked once I began to learn all of the different ways in which a simple convenience like this can have long-lasting negative consequences for people and our environment."

One student team found studies that estimated only 30 percent of single-use plastic bottles are recycled, meaning the remainders end up in landfills or worse, as litter. The team argued a ban could help to slow the growth of landfill sites like the one just across Central Road from Oakton's Des Plaines campus.

Another team discovered negative consequences that included unfair corporate water usage, global warming, and global pollution, as well as a negative economic impact on college students. For example, the team calculated a gallon of bottled water is 2,000 times more expensive than a gallon of tap water. They also found that Canada and the US are two of the only major developed countries that don't agree clean water should be a basic human right.

"Access to clean fresh water is perhaps the most important issue of the 21st Century, as we saw recently in Flint, Michigan," Professor Stacewicz said. "As a society we need to consider whether we are going to make water a human right or if we are going to allow it to be privatized and sold to us."

Others reported on the decomposition rates of plastics and found that it takes over 1,000 years for plastic bottles to break down in a landfill site while also leaching pollutants into the soil and groundwater in the process. Containers that aren't recycled or sent to landfill create an unattractive permanent litter that can end up fouling natural environments, rivers, and the ocean and can be devastating to wildlife. Additionally, the process of manufacturing bottles, filling them with local water supplies, and transporting them to markets wastes precious fresh water resources, energy resources, creates pollutants and greenhouse gasses, and may release carcinogens into the bottled water before it is consumed. The final team report referenced a 2012 study showing that in the previous year the U.S. bottled 10 billion gallons of water, and the processing and transportation of those bottles consumed 17 million barrels of oil.

The ban is not unanimously supported at the college. Some students and staff said in interviews that they appreciate the convenience and portability of bottled water. For that reason, the "ban-the-bottle" group applied for and received a grant from the [Oakton Educational Foundation](#) to supply convenient alternatives to bottled water that are safer for both the environment and the end user. With the grant, the group has already begun to distribute multi-use stainless steel water bottles and will be attempting to raise additional funds to install more water bottle refill stations. Already available throughout the new Margaret B. Lee Center for Science and Health Careers and at several locations in the Des Plaines main building and Skokie campus, these refill stations cool and filter tap water to create a healthier and more economical alternative to bottled water. The ban is not intended to take effect until after the college fulfills its vendor contract obligations.

"While there is still work to do with our vendors and in the college to fully activate this initiative, we will be moving forward and hope that by the start of the fall semester, we will no longer be selling single-use plastic water bottles on campus," President Smith said. "I could not be more proud of these students and the ways they are trying to positively impact the community."

At the college's annual student leadership awards banquet, the Students for Social Justice Club received the "Event of the Year" award for their work on this project. Other students active on the project included Rushanas Hasan (next year's S4SJ president), Lance Lindsay, Meghan Johnson, Kayla Gubov, Angelica Ramirez, Lachlan Chen, Josh Fabella and Sunayna Punjabi.

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