

# Giving Sustainability a Hand

Student helps launch recycling program for disposable gloves

By: Liz Ahlberg

**M**adeline Kull didn't know much about sustainability initiatives before starting an internship at the Illinois Sustainability Technology Center, but found that the field fit her like a recycled glove.

Through the internship, the senior from Northbrook, Illinois, launched a program to recycle the nitrile gloves used across campus from the dining halls to the labs. Since beginning in the fall 2014 semester, a pilot program of glove recycling in the Ikenberry Dining Hall and the ISTC labs has already diverted 4,000 pounds of gloves from the trash to the recycling bin.

Kull, a student in the civil and environmental engineering department, wanted more hands-on experience in the field she hoped to soon enter as a graduate. She applied for an internship with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. The EPA placed Kull at ISTC, part of the Prairie Research Institute, in the summer of 2014. She jumped into the glove-recycling project.

"A large percentage of our waste stream is these gloves," Kull said. "If it's so easy to take it out of the waste stream, why wouldn't you do it?"

The university purchases more than 20 tons of gloves each year. An ISTC audit in 2013 found that single-use gloves comprised 20 percent of the building's waste, by weight.

"In a research campus such as ours, single-use gloves and coffee are probably the most-sought items daily," said Shantanu Pai, the ISTC researcher who oversees Kull's internship.

Wanting to make recycling an easy choice for workers, Kull created two designs for receptacles that would attach to the large trash bins already in use. She worked with the supervisors at University Housing to install the receptacles at



PHOTO: L. BRIAN STAUFFER

Madeline Kull launched a program to recycle disposable gloves during an internship at the ISTC. 20 tons of the gloves are used in labs and dining halls on campus each year.

Ikenberry Dining Hall.

"When we implemented the nitrile glove recycling, the Ikenberry Dining Hall was very into it," Kull said. "They genuinely want to divert these gloves. They're not getting anything out of it, per se; they're just recycling. It was nice to see that people are interested in helping to reduce their waste."

Kull and Pai also coordinated with Kimberly-Clark, the company that manufactures the gloves, to take advantage of their RightCycle program. The Student Sustainability Committee awarded the project a grant to cover the cost of shipping the collected gloves to RightCycle.

"The glove-recycling project definitely added to my experience at Illinois, because before my internship I had never really delved into anything regarding sustainability," Kull said. "I didn't get to take the environmental impact courses until my senior year. It was definitely a good lead-in for that."

In addition to preparing Kull for her senior-level classes, the glove-recycling program introduced her to other opportunities for environmental action across campus. She helped to organize Illinois' first Game Day Challenge, which diverted waste from the homecoming football game to recycling and compost,

and also is working to support efficiency efforts in sorority and fraternity houses.

"It's really cool to see all the student involvement on this campus," Kull said. "If you're interested in sustainability, you should definitely look around, talk to other peers or classmates and find the different projects that are going on. Every student has their niche, whether they're involved in a club or Greek life, and in each of those groups you can find people who are interested in sustainable projects. It's everywhere on campus."

With the success of the fall pilot of the glove-recycling program, now Kull and Pai are working to expand it campus-wide and exploring funding options for the shipping costs, the only ongoing expense of the program.

"Madeline and I are working closely with Facilities and Services to devise a cost-effective plan to recover and recycle all 20 tons of gloves circulated on campus today," Pai said. "We should have a pilot plan ready by May. ISTC will miss Madeline when she graduates."

"I would definitely like to do more with zero-waste after graduation," Kull said. "I like what I'm doing, and I'd definitely be interested if I found a job opportunity in the waste field."