Glove Recycling with USU Dining Services

The Inspiration
Recycling is no longer the save-all-action that will restore our world to a clean and healthy one. However, waste such as disposable, regulatory foodservice gloves have only two possible fates after use: recycling or landfill.

Through my experience working with AmeriCorps and the Student Sustainability Office, I've become concerned about USU's astounding amount of physical waste that is often trashed. I decided to tackle a small portion of the waste and give it a new life, ultimately making campus a more sustainable place to work, study, and dine.

Environmental Impact
If our project is successful, Jeff Wooley of Dining Services estimates ~18,000 pairs of gloves per week will be diverted from the landfill. Instead, the gloves will be recycled and turned into new recycled-plastic products.

Human Impact
While this issue may seem like an environmental one at face value, it's rooted in human behavior. Setting a new standard of recycling practices for Dining employees will reinforce the importance of such efforts in and outside of the workplace.

Economic Impact
Dining Services has committed to repurchase the Zero-Waste Boxes as necessary. This commitment ensures the recycling program is likely to continue for years without constant dependence on Sustainability Grant funding.

Personal Outcome
Both my studies and Community-Engaged volunteerism revolve around human-environment interactions and the mechanics of sustainable change within communities. I’m passionate about environmental health in relation to human behavior and well-being; this interdisciplinary project is a great example of how they relate. I’m grateful for Dining Services’ willingness to improve, and I’m proud of the advancements we made together.

Community Partner: Dining Services
Dining Services takes many sustainable measures in their operations, like composting pre-consumer food waste, recycling, and offering compostable takeaway options. The Head of Dining, Alan Andersen, knows there’s always room for sustainable improvement and was excited to work with me on beginning a new sustainable effort.

Our Glove Recycling Process
TerraCycle is a company that makes the recycling of non-traditionally recyclable items possible. After purchasing a Zero-Waste Box for a specific waste stream (i.e. fabrics, PPE gear, electronics waste), they are delivered, filled up over time, and sent back with a pre-paid shipping label. TerraCycle then sorts and redistributes the materials to third-party recycling partners who recycle them for another use.

I wrote and submitted a Student Sustainability Grant in early 2021 to kickstart the program. I requested a large Glove Recycling Zero-Waste Box, 7 small workstation recycling bins, and eco-friendly sticker signage (a prompt sticker is shown on the top right). It passed unanimously.

After discussing the best possible way to collect gloves, Alan and I decided to place 7 mini glove recycling bins at different Marketplace employee workstations. Each bin has appropriate signage and instructions for employees (i.e. what level of glove “dirtiness” is acceptable and why glove recycling is important). These are emptied into the larger Zero-Waste Box every day or week, depending on how quickly they fill up. This process is coordinated by Maggie Smith, the Dining Services Sustainability Fellow, and will be continued by her successors.