

Students Take Waste Reduction Experiences into the Workplace

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Where are the students today who helped us achieve some remarkable environmental results in reducing waste at Portland International Airport?

That's the question we ask as we celebrate the 15th anniversary of Community Environmental Services, a partnership with Portland State University, where students help direct and run our waste minimization program. Over these 15 years, the program has helped PDX divert nearly a third of the airport's waste from going into landfills.

This month we caught up with these two alumna—Meredith Sorensen and Julia Metz—and asked them about their experiences at PDX and what they are doing today. Here's what they had to say:



Meredith Sorensen

What were your greatest accomplishments at PDX?

Three elements stand out. The first was expanding the food waste collection program at PDX. This was back in 2006 before food waste was such a hot topic. The second was creating liquid collection stations at airport security checkpoints. This really helped the janitorial staff who previously had to lift heavy bags of liquids, and it saved disposal costs. The final element was running a successful team—we were everywhere!

Tell us about your career today?

After working at PDX, I received a fellowship to travel around the world studying trash. I then returned to Portland and forged a career path that blends storytelling, public relations and communications with a focus on recycling (organics), clean energy (anaerobic digestion), and gardening (composting).

What else you would like to share?

I am the first person in the world to hike the length of Madagascar. In 2004, I completed an eight month mega-transect while teaching farmers about composting along the way. It combined my long-distance hiking skills with my local expertise. I had previously thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail, a footpath from Maine to Georgia, and was fluent in Malagasy and understood the culture.



Julia Metz

What were your greatest accomplishments at PDX?

A lot of exciting groundwork had been laid by prior CES team members, which teed up a lot of the projects I took upon my arrival. One of these was the launch of the food donation program which also tied into the 24-hour waste sorts that I coordinated for every restaurant in the airport. The sorts allowed the team to understand better the specific challenges and opportunities for each restaurant, including food donation potential. This resulted in a more intentional and customized outreach strategy for different scenarios.

Tell us about your career today?

I'm now working with an affordable housing non-profit, Portland Community Reinvestment Initiatives (PCRI), as a housing developer. The project management, outreach, and collaboration skills that I gained while working at PDX have continued to be a huge asset, even in jobs outside of the waste management world.

What else you would like to share?

I truly appreciated the opportunity for professional development while completing my graduate degree at PSU. It helped me be more competitive in the job market after graduating. The lessons I learned and the connections I made with people from both CES and the Port continue to be invaluable.



