

To the environmentally motivated student who has stumbled upon this wreck of a letter,

Before we begin, we would first like to express our gratitude to you for reading this letter. This alone indicates that you have taken an interest in sustainability, and are willing to implement change to make this world a better place. So thank you!

That being said, allow us to briefly introduce ourselves and explain why, on earth, you are reading – and should finish reading – this letter.

We, Sophia Sonnenfeldt '22 and Sang Hwan Lee '19, have undertaken a group project, over the course of the Spring of 2019, that deals with sustainability on campus for an Environmental Studies class, “Our Planet’s Plastic Plight (ENVI 329).” This letter is a product of the findings of our group project: it is essentially a letter of warning, and simultaneously, a letter of encouragement.

Now, if you have stumbled upon this letter after having realized that apathy regarding recycling and waste management is an issue on campus, then, by all means, ignore this entire section. If you are, however, concerned that people don’t recycle properly because of a general lack of information, then you are the perfect audience and should read the following:

**You are wrong.**

It is not a lack of information that leads to unsustainable behavior. It is apathy.

We made the same mistake when we first began this project. We thought that a lack of information was the main catalyst for the high contamination rates of our recycling stream. Based on this false assumption, we designed different posters and attempted to test their efficacy. What we discovered, however, was that only a small minority of environmentally aware students read our new posters while the vast majority simply did not care. In other words, *we were preaching to the choir the moment we identified lack of information as the main cause* and sought to deal with it by designing and testing new posters.

Yes, we understand that apathy is a particular can of worms that you’re hesitant to open. After all, how do we even begin to address this issue? However, big problems require big solutions, and apathy is so much more than “a big problem.” It is our belief, that no matter the hardship, no matter how high the barriers, only when we begin to acknowledge that apathy is the main issue on campus can we even begin to improve campus behavior when it comes to sustainability.

So where do we go from here?

At the end of the Spring of 2019, we proposed a four part plan, all addressing different groups on campus. The targeted groups were the Sustainability Working Group of the Williams Strategic Planning Effort, First Days and Ephventures, the Zilkha Center, and last but not least, you - the future student who wants to pick up the torch from where we left off. And in this letter addressed to you, we had one more specific proposal that we were unable to act on due to time constraints. We hope that you find our proposal to be of great interest and use (We won't go into the details of what exactly we wrote in those letters, but you will be able to find copies in the same database you found this letter.)

The final piece of the puzzle that we were unable to create during our time is a mockumentary: specifically, a mockumentary that visualizes the path of where our waste goes and how it is treated. If you are unaware of what a mockumentary is, we highly recommend first seeing *The Majestic Plastic Bag* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLgh9h2ePYw>).

We recommend creating a mockumentary that focuses on the visualization of the pathway of waste generated by Williams, because a fundamental aspect of waste is that it is invisible. The moment we throw out the trash, it leaves our sight. And like the old adage, "Out of sight, out of mind," we promptly lose interest and forget what happened to the trash that we took out. We envision that this mockumentary will put the issue of waste back on the radar for many students, and will be one of many effective tools in the arsenal that you will deploy to battle apathy.

To help with creating a mockumentary, we have one starting point that you might want to consider: perhaps you could start by creating a storyboard that focuses on one specific piece of waste and follow it from the student's room to the waste bin, then to TAM (the Material Recovery Facility that takes all trash generated by Williams), where it will be sorted, and then on to whatever other facility that it goes to later on: all from the perspective of the singular piece of trash you identified, of course.

Regardless of what we write, however, the choice is entirely up to you. Certainly, you can ignore everything we wrote, decide that lack of information is the main cause of lack of sustainable behavior on campus, and follow in our footsteps. If that is the case, we have great confidence that you will find yourself exactly where we were: crippled and discouraged by the inevitable realization that apathy is the main villain. If you do go down this route, then we have two things to say: one, welcome to the club! And two, please add your name at the bottom of this letter so that others don't make the same mistake that we did.

If you do decide to heed our advice and face apathy head on, then we will say the following two things: one, thank you for listening to us, and two, that your journey will be an uphill battle, but we believe in you.

We hope our letter does not discourage you from enacting change. After all, the next worst thing than disregarding apathy as a major cause is *to become an agent of apathy*. We do hope that our letter aids you in identifying a fundamental nature of Williams that has plagued any and all concerted efforts to put sustainability front and center. And we hope that we have also provided a decent starting point.

We would like to end this letter by repeating what we wrote earlier. If you do come to the realization that apathy is the main cause, and that you do want to deal with it, then your journey certainly will be an uphill battle. It will be tedious, it will be hard, it will be frustrating, and there will be moments when you absolutely want to give up. However, know that we have faith in you and that you are not alone - even during those bleak moments when an absolute sense of isolation and loneliness grips your heart, know that the traces left by those countless others who walked before you are always here to help and will echo throughout to provide motivation. This is to say that this is not simply metaphorical talk: there are resources listed on the Environmental Studies Department website (<https://sustainability.williams.edu/category/student-project>) generated by other students that will certainly help you.

In closing, good luck, and thank you for reading this letter to the end. We sincerely hope you achieve what you aimed for.

Two of those who walked before you, and who hope to guide you forward,  
Sophia Sonnenfeldt '22  
Sang Hwan Lee '19