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Paper Towels vs. Electric Hand Dryers: How a Small Decision Creates Big Questions

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Anya Teehan '24 | Environmental Studies

When you dry your hands, do you prefer to use paper towels or a hand dryer? Why? UNH has recently resumed the transition of switching to all electric hand dryers, paused by COVID-19. However, this switch raised community concerns, so is switching to all electric hand dryers really the right option? From a sustainability perspective, the solution may seem like a simple yes. However, the answer is more complex. Looking at the microcosm of UNH, this issue comes with various factors to consider. Switching to all electric hand dryers requires money, resources, labor, and planning, involving multiple stakeholders over an extended period. So, if we were to take a step back and look at

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UNH from a global perspective, would switching to hand dryers really make a tangible difference?

Suddenly the question around paper towels opens up a much larger conversation. From a sustainability perspective, how much should we push this change? Is putting time, money, and effort towards this problem worth it, or should we be working on something bigger; greater? How can we engage the community in such a minute decision? How can we begin these conversations about sustainability and find a way forward? Who even answers questions like these on a university campus?

UNH is not the only campus struggling with this conversation. [Saint Joseph's](#) University in Pennsylvania has experienced controversy after switching over to electric hand dryers. Student Aodhan Simpson wrote an article in the Hawk Newspaper this October explaining the issues of this sustainability decision. Aodhan stated that Saint Joseph's University sent out an email informing students that facilities management would no longer replace paper towels in school restrooms. Students complained because of a lack of reasoning, and later it was communicated that the switch to electric hand dryers was because of the student's misuse of paper towels. As a result of the backlash from students, Saint Joseph's University returned to pre-pandemic operations.

So why is there backlash against electric hand dryers? Many students believe hand dryers spread germs and are less hygienic than paper towels, however this misconception is disproved by the CDC, [WHO](#), and Johns Hopkins. Additionally, many students appreciate the choice of using paper towels, in order to clean up a spill or to grab the door handle. However, paper towels do not offer a sustainable solution.

It may feel as though the slight action of air drying your hands will not make a large sustainable impact, but if we apply this change to UNH, things could look very different. Extrapolating data from a 2020 Duke University Study, and applying the data to UNH suggests that UNH has

the potential to save up to 13% of all landfill waste by switching to electric hand dryers. That is a lot. Not only does the switch offer environmental benefits, it provides economic ones well. A financial analysis by Duke University showed potential savings of up to \$96,000 over 5 years.

There are multiple factors to sustainability. Not only is there an environmental and economic factor, but there is also the human factor and the social factor. It is impossible to have control over every decision on a university campus, so it becomes very easy to focus on what seems lacking. The switch to electric hand dryers is an opportunity for students, faculty, and staff to become involved and make a sustainable impact on UNH campus. Additional opportunities for engagement are less likely to become available if students do not take action on current issues. This is a sustainability topic that every student has a say in, through day-to-day actions. There are many other areas as well in which students can support sustainable choices, not just through using electric hand dryers. Individual actions can be a catalyst for change, turning off the lights, limiting water consumption, using reusable bags and cups. Student actions are what define UNH as a community, if we want to continue to see a more sustainable campus we must put in the time and effort to do so.

There are many variables in a sustainability discussion such as this one. What about the research? During the research process, scientists must look at multiple variables, and choose which variables are most important for them to focus on. This creates bias, swaying the results of a study one way or another. This brings about the question: which issues are most critical for UNH as a community?

As one of the top 5 most sustainable campuses in the country, UNH has a reputation to uphold. One way UNH can continue to maintain this standard is trying something new. Should UNH launch its own study regarding paper towels versus electric hand dryers, or should we put our efforts somewhere else? There are no easy answers. The paper towel dispute simply provides an interesting case study about how a

small action like hand washing has become a sustainability flashpoint on the UNH campus.



Anya Teehan, '24

Meet Anya:

My name is Anya Teehan and I am a junior at UNH studying Environmental Conservation and Sustainability. I transferred to UNH this semester and I love it already; my favorite part is how close both the ocean and the mountains are to school. I started working at the Sustainability Institute during the fall semester and it has been an amazing experience. I have already learned so much and worked with so many amazing people. I can't wait to see what the spring semester brings!

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