



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Alessandra Biaggi

Senator Biaggi and Lehman College Announce \$340,000 in Capital Funding for Composting Education Center

ALESSANDRA BIAGGI February 21, 2020

BRONX, N.Y., Feb. 19, 2020 – State Sen. Alessandra Biaggi (D-Bronx/Westchester) and Lehman College President Daniel Lemons announced the allocation of \$340,000 in capital funding on Feb. 19 for the creation of the Lehman College Composting Education Center.

"I am honored to award Lehman College with \$340,000 in capital funding to expand its composting initiative and create a Compost Education Center. For more than two decades, Lehman College has served as a leader in reducing our borough's carbon footprint by composting up to 60 tons of waste annually to nourish campus grounds and Bronx community gardens," said Sen. Biaggi. "Creating a centralized program for compost education with the proper infrastructure is an important step to further engage our students and community members in sustainable living. I want to thank Lehman College President Daniel Lemons for spearheading this critical project – I look forward to the program's success."

"Lehman College was one of the first schools in the City University of New York system to address food waste through innovative solutions," said Lehman College President Daniel Lemons. "This funding is essential to our expansion of Lehman College's sustainability efforts. It will allow us to convert our current composting infrastructure and augment our

collaboration with the New York City Compost Project and the New York Botanical Garden in adding to the instruction for our students and the community on the best ways to utilize garden and food compost.”

When composted, food scraps and other organic waste become a useful product that adds nutrients and improves the quality of soil for trees, gardens and more.

The funding will allow Lehman College to create three 15’x30’ “windrows” or large bays that will allow it to more efficiently compost the more than 60 tons of garden and food scrap waste it produces each year, as well as the tools to manage the operation—a front loader and a sifter. Each bay will contain composting materials at different phases in the process. Once the project is complete, Lehman will likely be able to increase the 1.3 tons of compost it produces annually. But more compost is not the only benefit to the improved infrastructure.

“It means more efficiency labor-hours wise, but it also makes more sense to a visitor, to see different materials and how they transform,” said Jodie Colón, manager of the NYC Compost Project. “It really gives Lehman the opportunity to host workshops and events—hosting school groups and community groups and educating them on the composting process.”

What prevented Lehman from advancing its composting capabilities was its limited equipment and infrastructure, said Vice President of Administration and Finance Rene Rotolo.

“Our compost operation has expanded to the point where we can no longer operate in the manner that we did years ago,” she said. Sen. Biaggi’s funding changes that.

Lehman College has been a leader in sustainability practices for decades—it’s been composting the gardening waste on the school’s 37-acre Bronx campus since 1996. In 2009, the College began a food scrap collection program after a CUNY Sustainability Project intern,

Edward Hernandez, worked with the College to do so. That same year, Lehman began its partnership with the NYC Compost Project at the New York Botanical Garden and the program has only grown. Several years ago, Lehman added food preparation scraps from its cafeteria to the program, diverting daily an additional 50 pounds of compostable material from the municipal food waste stream. Today, Lehman produces annually more than 51 tons of gardening waste, 9 tons of food scraps, and it collects more than 1 ton of food scraps from the public. Its Pumpkin Smash event alone, which it hosts annually after Halloween, produces another 3-plus tons of food waste—all composted. This all translates to an accumulative 1.3 tons of compost (the waste shrinks during the process) annually that the College gives away twice a year to community gardens and individuals.

But it also uses what it produces when it comes to compost—as a leader in sustainability, Lehman's homegrown compost can be found on the campus itself: in its pepper patch, in the Biology Department's medicinal garden, and in plants and herbs grown by Cooking Club. Even by a casual stroll across campus will lead to Lehman compost--Buildings and Grounds crews fill in low spots collecting water with compost and they use it to feed nutrients to campus trees. Twice a year Lehman gives away its compost, to community gardens and individuals. In fact, Lehman's compost received Cornell University's Cooperative Extension's seal of approval when it was found to test in the highest-quality category, suitable for use in growing food for human consumption.

But composting is not only about producing, said Ilona Linins, director of Lehman's Office of Environmental Health and Safety.

"We want to make the leaves disappear, we want to make the food scraps disappear," Linins said, who leads Lehman's composting program. "It's ethically important to do so. We have the landfills filling up and this is one way of diverting a pretty significant waste stream."

“This will definitely put Lehman on the map as a forerunner of a sustainable campus, said Colón. “So many colleges do sustainability projects with their students, but Lehman also does it with the community.”

Lehman has been recognized for its innovative program among CUNY colleges and universities--the College was the recipient of CUNY’s first Senior Vice Chancellors Sustainability Award, and other schools visit the operation to see what is viable on their own campuses.

Lehman College senior Joshua Palomino, who works with Linins in the composting program, said he feels positively about his school’s leadership in composting and sustainability.

“It makes me think we’re doing our job,” he said. “In our community, we give back just as much as we take in.”