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Wasted? The Rise and Fall of the Recycling Occupational Movement

Abstract

We know little about occupations that see their employing organizations primarily as sites of furthering societal-level change, or those that are “movement-driven” rather than being driven by organizational or occupational goals. In this historical case study, we examine the longitudinal evolution of the movement-driven occupation of recycling coordinators in higher education. We find that recycling coordinators were largely successful at not only establishing recycling within their organizations, but also in embedding an environmental ethos in their organizations that set the foundation for new areas such as sustainable transportation, emissions reductions, water conservation, and green building. However, according to the literature on occupations, the occupational project of recycling coordinators would largely be seen as a failure, as the occupation largely disappeared after two decades of work, and for the most part the individuals in recycling coordinator positions did not come to fill the newly-created higher-status roles of sustainability coordinators. We uncover the processes by which these outcomes were reached. Through our findings, we argue that in a way the recycling coordinators were successful – they were able to achieve their societal-level goals by embedding an environmental ethos inside the organizations where they worked. Our findings therefore challenge and expand upon the literature on occupations – where success has been traditionally seen as corralling up tasks, establishing expertise, building clear boundaries between occupational groups, persisting, and upgrading the occupational group’s status.