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College campuses attract organizations and companies that are eager to recruit the fresh, young minds of college students. As a senior studying Environmental and Sustainability Sciences, I've experienced my fair share of informational talks and meet & greets, often with environmental groups and conservation organizations. Their work all centers around saving our land and resources from those that don't have its best interests at heart. Given my course of study, I had decided that working for these types of organizations that emphasize activism were where I wanted to end up. My aim was, and still is, to work for an organization where my passion for sustainable operations is not tolerated, but rather encouraged.

Therefore, I initially found my decision to work for Casella this summer as a Sustainability Intern unusual. People hold a preconceived notion about the kind of work waste management companies do, and I believed this notion clashed with my environmental conservation beliefs; I had created an internal line that separated those who embraced environmental responsibility and justice and those who did not. The question I grappled with was: "Did I choose to work for the wrong side?"

During my first week, Casella immersed me in the company's operations, where I explored the intricacies of every branch. Through this learning, I discovered that Casella's work didn't necessarily align with my expectations of waste disposal sites. Instead, I experienced a cautious, systematic, and environmentally conscious process that prioritized safe land management. Every decision included an intense series of reports, permits, and data tracking measures, ensuring that every potential hazard had been accounted for. Not only is environmental safety a priority for Casella, but engagement through community participation is becoming an increasingly important aspect of the company's work. Community projects are popping up at landfills all across the Northeast; greenhouses for elementary school kids, bee hives, community gardens for hands-on learning. For me, the most astonishing aspect is the integration of landfill processes into those projects. For example, heat generated from anaerobic processes of decomposing materials is used to warm the greenhouse to help facilitate teaching horticulture to young students. Another project involves building an industrial park powered by landfill gas to energy that could be used as both office and community space; in this park, the output of each building or piece would be recycled as an input elsewhere. I even had the opportunity to get an up close view of the bee hives being kept on site at the landfill, being rewarded afterwards with some fresh honeycomb to try.

Why, then, is there an inherent distaste for anything associated with waste management companies? The community backlash and protests that the companies receive when trying to expand operations is nothing short of incredible. What usually comes to mind is the "not in my backyard" phenomenon: sure, landfills and waste disposal sites are necessary but surely not in my county. This mentality is seen time and time again in areas all across the country. People respond by pushing for other options such as incinerators, which are commonplace in some areas. The truth is, however, that sometimes, landfills might not be just the only option, they might even be the more sustainable one. Due to existing infrastructure, towns may not be able to set up a waste to energy system, rendering incinerators ineffective. Other times, it might make more sense to use the gas to energy system that landfills bring with them. The unfortunate truth is, there isn't a one-way option when it comes to waste disposal.

Another source of the backlash could come from how we choose to characterize the companies associated with and running these operations. We yell “no more landfills”, but then where do we direct our waste to instead? We know that waste is bad, but should we also be demonizing those who dispose of it? With all the environmental problems plaguing the world, it’s easy to point the finger at a corporation and say shame on you. It’s much harder to acknowledge that each of our actions are what keep driving the need for them to continue.

This is why my experience working for Casella was so unique. I understand now why field experience outside of classroom learning is so important. Seeing firsthand how Landfills, Materials Recovery Facilities, and Composting Sites operated gave me a new perspective in seeing what actually happens to waste after it leaves our properties. I feel more grounded, as my work helped me understand the setbacks and restrictions that often befall sustainability efforts. I now recognize that there are limits to what we can ultimately accomplish for the environment. This is why we need to work with, not against, companies like Casella to reach a balance between environmental responsibility and societal needs.