

Universities banning bottled water on campus

Environmental, fair-access concerns are cited as reasons

By Jodi S. Cohen, May 08, 2012, Chicago Tribune

Loyola University Chicago began encouraging students to drink tap water by giving all freshmen reusable bottles last fall and installing more refill stations around campus throughout this past year.

Now it's planning to ban the sale of bottled water altogether.

Starting this fall, the university will stop selling bottled water in its cafeterias and retail locations. Then in 2013, bottled water will be removed from campus vending machines.

Campus leaders believe Loyola is the first Illinois college or university to eliminate the sale of bottled water, though student activists throughout the country have rallied behind the issue this past school year, citing environmental concerns about the use of plastic bottles as well as awareness about ensuring fair access to drinking water globally.

Some institutions, mostly smaller schools, have responded with full or partial bans. Other large institutions making the move include the University of Vermont, which will ban bottled water sales starting next year, and Harvard University's School of Public Health, which removed bottled water from its cafeteria earlier this year.

Several years ago, Cook County, Ill., banned county-funded purchases of bottled water, though it's still sold in vending machines located on county property.

At Loyola's two campuses in Rogers Park and downtown Chicago, about 8,500 bottles of water a month are sold in the dining halls. Many more bottles are bought through vending machines.

"We wanted to be one of the universities taking a stance on this issue of bottled water on campus," said Robert Kelly, Loyola's vice president for student development. "We have pictures with Lake Michigan behind the campus. We have one of the largest sources of fresh water in the area, in the world, and it seemed odd to keep doing the bottled water thing."

The university still will allow sales of bottled juice, soda and specialty waters. Energy drinks already are banned.

Some students have expressed concern about the university reducing their purchasing choices, Kelly acknowledged. And Tim Bramlet, of the Illinois Beverage Association, said his members are not happy with the move.

"Water is good for you, is the bottom line. In most cases, people would be encouraging others to drink water rather than making it harder for students and faculty to get their hands on it," said Bramlet, executive director of the group. "It is something we think is short sighted and won't solve anything."

The Loyola ban comes after a yearlong educational campaign called "UnCap Loyola," which focused on the environmental and social justice implications of bottling and selling community water. Students passed a referendum proposal in March saying they support the removal of bottled water, and university administrators announced the ban last week.

Alexandra Vecchio, a Loyola senior and incoming president of the Student Environmental Alliance, said she has seen students' attitudes change about bottled water. Indeed, when she moved into a dorm three years ago, she brought along a case of bottled water. Now she carries around a reusable bottle and fills it up at water stations before class and in the cafeteria.

She said she was convinced by the social justice arguments.

"Access to clean and safe water is a human right," Vecchio, 20, said. "When a corporation comes in and bottles that water and that water becomes privatized and is sold back to the people, then they lose access to the water. ... What happens to the people who can't afford it?"

Loyola administrators distributed stainless steel bottles to new students this fall and student groups have been handing them out throughout the year.

Loyola officials have so far installed about 35 water filling stations around campus at a cost of about \$2,000 each, Kelly said.

Loyola senior Julia Poirier, the student government president, said the group plans to distribute about 1,000 canteens with the phrase "Ramblers run on Chicago tap."

"There's been a behavioral and culture shift on campus," Poirier said. "It is kind of weird when I actually see bottled water again. If you go to any meeting with the administration, every person has a canteen."