



## 2021 Campus Race to Zero Waste Case Study Competition

### *Lehigh University*

#### 1. **Contact info (name, department, school, email, phone)**

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#### 2. **Focus of Case study**

Reduce the use of, and waste from, disposable clamshell take out containers on Lehigh University's campus.

#### 3. **Detailed description of campaign or effort:**

Lehigh University's Reusable Eco-Container program is designed for students who don't have time to dine in student restaurants and offers students the opportunity to eat more sustainably while on the go. The reusable containers minimize waste by reducing the number of disposal clamshell products that are used on campus. In the fall 2021 semester, even with reduced occupancy on campus, 83,250 disposable clamshell containers were used. For marketing purposes, this number was broken down to more tangible metrics. For example:

- "This waste would stretch the length of Goodman Stadium football field 173 times."
- "The average student used between 69-83 disposable clamshell containers last semester."
- "Cost \$26K. This would buy roughly 5,300 milkshakes at Hawk's Nest!"

Although the program was established in 2013-2014, 2021 was the first year that students with a meal plan were automatically enrolled in the program and given two reusable containers. Students enrolled in the program receive a sticker on the back of their student ID. Once used, the containers are returned to Lehigh Dining for sanitation. It is expected that all containers are returned at the end of the academic year. Students will be charged \$10.00 per unreturned container.

#### 4. **Planning steps & timeline to implement:**

- Analyze amount of physical waste and financial impact of disposables generated during fall semester and develop a financial and operations plan for conversion to all reusables was completed in December 2020
- Present proposal and get approval to make change for spring semester was done in early January 2021
- Purchase additional reusable containers immediately after approval given
- Develop marketing strategy and related graphics in mid-January 2021
- Implement marketing plan at the beginning of spring semester
- Distribute containers to all students with a meal plan upon arrival into all-you-care-to-eat dining facilities
- Ongoing education and reminders throughout semester

## 5. Resources and stakeholders involved

### **Budget and in-kind resources:**

- Cost of disposable take out containers for fall semester was approximately \$26,000 therefore the budget was determined based on that amount.
  - NOTE: With the expectation that the financial impact would be an investment instead of disposable waste, money savings was an added incentive instead of the primary goal.
- Budget/cost for additional Eco Containers required for full conversion was \$15,784.
- Actual cost, including the disposables still necessary due to students “forgetting” their containers, for the spring semester was approximately \$19,600, a financial savings of approximately \$6,400.

### **Campus Partners:**

Lehigh Communications & Public Affairs  
 Lehigh University Dining  
 Office of Sustainability  
 Student Auxiliary Services

- Lehigh University Dining and Student Auxiliary Services sponsored and ran the program.
- The Office of Sustainability provided general support with communications, marketing, and graphics.
- Lehigh Communications & Public Affairs provided support by hosting an Eco Container photo shoot and promoting the program on social media.

## 6. Describe the Results of this campaign component

### **a. General results (ex: attracted attention of campus president, campus paper did a news story on the event, etc.)**

- i. The Brown & White (campus newspaper) covered the program. [View article.](#)
- ii. Educated the university student body regarding disposable waste through our decision to prioritize waste reduction in this challenging time
- iii. Two universities contacted us to learn about our program as many schools increased use of disposables during the pandemic.
- iv. Gave two presentations, as part of a panel, about Lehigh’s Eco-Container program to other schools.

### **b. Specific measurable impact figures, if applicable (Ex: Reduced contamination rate 13%, Gathered 316 pledges to recycle more, etc., 250 people engaged, etc.)**

- i. Increased participation in reusable ecotainer program from 337 voluntary enrollments to 1,454 automatic enrollments resulting in an increase of 431%.

- ii. 72% reduction in compostable containers from 83,250 in the fall to 14,985 in the spring.
- iii. Although the decision was to offer additional reusable containers if a student needed one, there was still a reduction in cost of \$6,432, with a large amount of the financial impact now in reusable containers instead of disposables.
- iv. 1 out of 3 students “forget” container - not currently enforceable
  - Compostable or additional reusable containers were given

## 7. What would you do differently in the future?

- Continue automatically signing students up for the program when they purchase a meal plan.
- Only offer one container at a time, not two (once things return to normal).
- No longer have compostable containers as a fall back option.
- Bring back the reusable mug discount program and reusable dishware program for events.
- Expand the program to more dining locations over the next couple of years.

## 8. What advice would you give to another college that wanted to do a similar effort?

- Start with small goals like raising awareness of the program (especially if it is currently new or somewhat static or dormant) and reducing waste.
- Don't expect to have super high retention initially - this takes time to get the full desired behavior change you are looking for.
- Determine if an enforcement mechanism is possible, this helps - it was not possible for us during the pandemic - understanding and leniency were key.

## 9. Photos and Graphics

[Fall vs. Spring impact \(photos\)](#) by Lauren Sleeper

Lehigh Sustainability August 2020 Newsletter: [“Keep Lehigh Safe, Healthy, and Sustainable”](#)

Lehigh Sustainability February 2021 Newsletter: [“Eco Containers: The Added Perk to Student Meal Plans”](#)

YouTube Video: [“Eco-Containers at Lehigh University”](#)

Folder: [“What the Fork?” Graphics](#)

- social media posts and stories
- flyers and posters
- digital information boards

Folder: [Eco-Container Photo Shoot](#) by Lehigh Communications & Public Affairs Intern, Jessica Mellon '21

**Social Media Post Examples**

- Lehigh Communications & Public Affairs (@lehighu accounts). View [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#) posts.
- Lehigh University Dining (@LehighDining). View Instagram posts [1](#) and [2](#).
- Lehigh Sustainability (@lehighsustainability accounts). View [Instagram](#) post.