NACUFS (2026)
Waste Reduction

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Essay:

> Waste reduction at the University of Pittsburgh is not a single initiative — it is a comprehensive, multi-stream strategy embedded into the culture and daily operations of Pitt Eats. Over the past several years, the program has built a layered system that addresses waste at every stage: from the moment ingredients arrive in the back of house to the take-out container a student carries out the front door to the food that might never reach a guest's plate.
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> The most visible element of this strategy is the campus-wide partnership with USEFULL, a provider of plastic-free, double-walled stainless steel reusable containers. Reusable containers are now the only way to receive to-go food at the two residential dining halls on campus — there is no single-use fallback. Pitt Eats anticipates surpassing 15,000 checkouts of USEFULL containers in the program's first full year, diverting an estimated 1,000 pounds of trash from the landfill and generating approximately $1,600 in savings on paper products. The USEFULL program launched in February 2025 at these two residential dining halls on campus and in September 2025, expanded to offer stainless steel coffee cups at more than a dozen coffee locations across campus.
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> Beyond containers, Pitt is committed to reducing landfill waste by 25% by 2030 from a 2017 baseline. Progress is tracked continuously through multiple sources of data, including a publicly accessible composting dashboard — the Campus-Wide Food Systems & Compostables Dashboard — which visualizes composting volume across buildings with compost collection.

Aligned with Pittsburgh's citywide single-use plastic bag ban, Pitt Eats has eliminated single-use plastic bags across all campus dining locations, offering $5 Pitt-branded reusable bags as an alternative; 10 cents from every bag sold goes to the Pitt Green Fund. Since fall 2025, more than 260 reusable bags have been sold across dining locations and the campus Just Walk Out market. For guests who need a paper bag, more than 4,000 were distributed across all of 2025 — a fraction of the 15,000 single-use plastic bags used each week before the campus policy was implemented in 2014.

Pitt Eats' food recovery program has seen equally dramatic growth. In fall 2025, Pitt Eats recovered 21,890 pounds of surplus food from campus dining establishments — nearly double the 10,976 pounds recovered in fall 2024. Pitt was the first in the ACC to earn the Food Recovery Verified designation in 2014 and has since developed a multi-faceted program to redistribute surplus food on campus and off.

Meals recovered, repackaged, and donated to the Pitt Pantry, the university's on-campus food pantry, grew from 733 in fall 2024 to 1,584 in fall 2025. The Pantry also reached a meaningful milestone in summer 2025 with the first-ever summer recovery cycle: 24 recoveries totaling 4,400 pounds of food redirected to neighbors in need during months when the University's food pantry typically reduces campus operations. Across more than a decade of partnership with the Food Recovery Heroes student group, Pitt Eats has recovered and donated more than 283,826 pounds of food or 236,521 meals to the Pitt Pantry and local hunger-fighting agencies through partnerships with 412 Food Rescue and the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. Evidence of Environmental Sustainability.

Pitt Eats also partners with Babylon Micro-Farms to grow fresh produce hydroponically across three on-campus locations. These on-site systems, which yield herbs, lettuces, and microgreens that are incorporated directly into house-made salads, pizzas, pastas, and botanical beverages, have conserved an estimated 685,937 gallons of water in 2025 alone. At the same time, Pitt Eats reduces landfill waste through a "harvest-as-needed" model, which aligns production closely with demand.

Annual dining hall waste audits provide a granular view of progress. Waste audits are conducted on a regular basis across campus dining and, since 2016, show a picture of gradual progress towards reducing food waste. At The Eatery, the largest residential dining facility on campus, serving more than 6,000 meals each day, the September 2025 waste audit revealed a significant achievement: a 34% decrease in plate waste following a major 18-month renovation of the facility. A service model shift from self-serve to staff-portioned plates helped drive the reduction, as well as major improvements to the dining environment, including improved lighting and a colorful modern design that earned the dining hall a certificate of merit from the Pittsburgh chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 2025.

The impact of this reduction can be estimated by comparing it to the university's broader sustainability goals. With a 34% decrease in plate waste at the Eatery, this location is already outperforming the university's overall landfill reduction goal of 25% reduction in landfill waste by 2030.

Waste reduction at Pitt is tied to community care and supporting students' basic needs. Partnering with the Food Recovery Heroes and 412 Food Rescue, surplus food is redirected to Pitt students and Pittsburgh residents experiencing food insecurity, rather than entering the waste stream. The two-fold increase in total pounds of food recovered and donated from 2024 to 2025 reflects an actively growing commitment. The Pitt Pantry partnership brings food recovery directly to students: food is repackaged by Food Recovery Heroes into balanced meals containing a protein, a vegetable, and a starch, then distributed through temperature-controlled Pitt Food Security Lockers that allow students to order and pick up recovered meals confidentially, Monday through Friday.

Community engagement extends beyond ongoing operations. In partnership with the Student Government Board and the Pitt Pantry, Pitt Eats supported a fall 2025 food drive that collected 1,092 items — including perishable and hygiene goods — weighing 459 pounds, all donated to the Pitt Pantry. Through the Pitt Winter Express, held in partnership with several University departments, the donated food from the food drive complemented donations from key local food businesses including Giant Eagle, Schwebel's Bread, Breadworks, and Turner's Dairy. Over the course of a day at the end of winter finals, when few students remained on campus, nearly 100 students with families "shopped" through the distribution event to receive essential food items to help them through winter break.

Each of these local partners is Pittsburgh-based, reinforcing regional economic and social value alongside environmental goals.

The structural decision to make reusable containers the only to-go option in residential dining — not an “alternative” — is one of the most consequential choices in campus dining sustainability. It removes the choice architecture problem entirely: students participate by default. The phased evolution from plastic to stainless steel containers, and then to reusable coffee cups, demonstrates that innovation is ongoing, not static.

That same philosophy of designing systems where participation is built in extends beyond operations and into student engagement. Students are diners but also constant collaborators in efforts to make Pitt Eats more sustainable. New ideas from students like the Waste Shadow Box initiative, a proposal for educational signage in the waste area at the new Recreation and Wellness Center designed in collaboration with a GEOL 0333 course in fall 2025, grew from student research into contamination in dining spaces. The collaboration between Pitt Eats’ sustainability team and courses like GEOL 0333 is a model for an academic-operational partnership that amplifies impact through curriculum.

Another collaborative student event, "Reuse Fest,” was co-organized with the Student Office of Sustainability (SOOS). Student leaders invited attendees to use USEFULL containers or bring their own cups in exchange for free cider or hot cocoa. At the same time, a cooking demonstration with Dr. Corey Flynn (Office of Sustainability in the Health Sciences) taught students how to transform pumpkin scraps into edible energy bites and trail mix — making waste reduction tangible, engaging, and delicious.

To further engage students in campus waste reduction initiatives, Teaching Kitchens are periodically hosted within the dining halls, offering hands-on opportunities to prepare meals and treats with little to no waste. A recent session featured zero-waste pumpkin spice energy bites, highlighting a recipe designed to use precisely measured ingredients, eliminating excess and ensuring nothing is left over to discard.

The financial case for Pitt’s waste reduction strategy is compelling. The USEFULL program generated $1,600 in paper product savings in its first year while simultaneously diverting 1,000 pounds of waste from the landfill. As the program scales toward 15,000+ annual checkouts, savings will grow proportionally. Project risks — including container loss, student participation rates, and operational complexity — have been proactively managed through phased rollouts, staff training, and upgrades to container durability.

Waste audits are a low-cost, high-value tool: the 34% reduction in plate waste translates to smaller plate costs. Information collected during the audits is shared with culinary and management teams to make adjustments to menus and the serving environment.

Every component of Pitt’s waste reduction strategy is replicable. The USEFULL reusable container model is a scalable, vendor-supported program available to institutions of any size. The decision to make reusables the only option is a policy choice any operation can adopt. The waste audit methodology is low-tech and produces actionable, comparable data across any campus dining environment. The food recovery partnership model — working with a Food Recovery Network-affiliated student group, a local recovery organization, and a campus food pantry — can be replicated wherever dining surplus and community need intersect. The composting dashboard represents a transparency investment any sustainability-minded institution can pursue to build trust, drive engagement, and sustain programs over time.

Pitt Eats’ waste measurement framework is multi-layered and improving. Key quantitative metrics include plate waste per guest at The Eatery (a 34% reduction); food recovery volume (10,976 lbs. in fall 2024 vs. 21,890 lbs. in fall 2025); total meals donated through Food Recovery Heroes (13,000+); USEFULL checkouts (tracking toward 15,000+ in year one); and estimated landfill waste diverted through reusables (1,000 lbs.).

Waste audits at multiple locations using the manual tracking method produce detailed, comparable snapshots that enable year-over-year trend analysis. Together, these tools give Pitt Eats one of the most comprehensive waste measurement frameworks in campus dining — and a clear foundation for continued progress toward the university’s 2030 landfill reduction goal.

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Food Recovery ... 40 KiB

Food Recovery ... 85 KiB

Food Recovery ... 58 KiB

USEFULL.jpg 159 KiB

Waste Audit.jpg 229 KiB

Food Recovery ... 238 KiB

Waste Audit.jpeg 3.7 MiB

Pitt Pantry - Wi... 88 KiB

Pitt Pantry - Wi... 113 KiB

Coffee Shop US... 209 KiB

Babylon Micro-... 4.8 MiB

Babylon Micro-... 4.2 MiB

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Food Recovery ... 1,000 KiB

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Behind the Scenes of a ...

https://youtube.com/sh...

Attachment name
USEFULL: How to Use

https://youtube.com/sh...

Attachment name
Sustainability at The Re...

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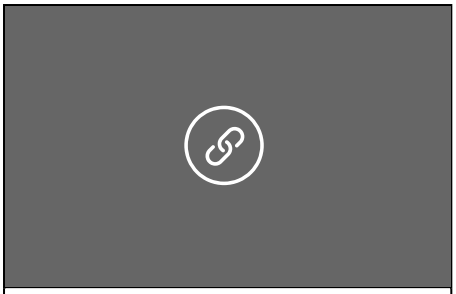

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How Babylon Works

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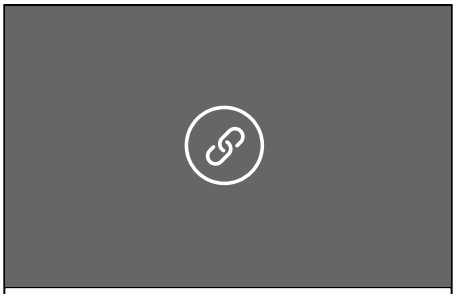

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