

Waste Reduction Tips for NY Colleges & Universities



Approximately 40% of the food produced in the United States goes uneaten. Meanwhile, an estimated 2.8 million New Yorkers are food insecure. Colleges and universities in New York can take a stand to make the most of their food by redirecting wholesome edible food to those in need and food scraps to organics recycling facilities where they will be recycled into a product beneficial to our environment. Included in this document are resources, best practices, and guidance for implementing an effective waste reduction program at your college or university campus.

Donating Surplus Edible Food

Donating uneaten, wholesome food to local food relief organizations can help serve those in need and reduce the amount of waste produced on campus. There are numerous resources and tools available to colleges and universities wishing to donate, such as [Food Donation Made Easy](#). Food relief organizations, such as your local [Feeding NYS Member Food Bank](#) can help serve those in need.

Diverting Food Scraps From Disposal

Colleges and universities in New York that want to divert food scraps will need to develop a plan for food scrap separation based on their campus' available space, layout, and hauler requirements. Collecting food scraps from prep stations and using designated and frequently emptied containers helps to reduce contamination and prevent pests and odors. In self-service cafes and dining facilities, or locations where patrons dispose of their own waste, offering consumers separate receptacles for solid organic waste, liquid waste (such as leftover drinks), recyclables (such as cans and bottles), and trash (such as plastic straws or wrappers) helps empower them to become part of the solution to wasted food.



Available Assistance & Other Resources

[Rethink Food Waste New York](#) is a free assistance program that helps businesses and institutions reduce food waste, and maximize recycling, reuse, donation, and composting opportunities. Contact Rethink Food Waste NY for no-cost customized assistance for your college or university, including how to:

- Start or improve surplus food donation and food scrap recycling
- Save money on waste removal
- Find haulers and processors of recyclable materials
- Provide employee training and waste bin signage
- Comply with New York food waste regulations

Food Waste Diversion Tips

Get to Know Your Waste

It may be challenging to guess how much food is thrown away on your campus. Start by using the [NY State Pollution Prevention Institute's Food Waste Estimator](#) to estimate how much food waste your institution generates and consider conducting a waste audit in your cafeteria(s) and kitchen(s) to gain a better understanding of where food waste is generated on campus and what it is made up of. Colleges and universities can cut food waste by tracking and adjusting their food service operations. Many have already reduced waste by over 50%! See our [Source Reduction Guidance](#) for tips to get started.

Communicate With Your Hauler

Talk to your waste hauler to find out options for adjusting your service for optimal food scraps separation on campus. Establishing or enhancing your food scraps recycling program may allow you to reduce trash container size or pickup frequency. Work with your hauler to clarify accepted materials and common contaminants such as non-certified compostables, plastics, glass, and produce stickers. Request prompt feedback on observed contaminants in organics containers. This [Guidance for Businesses Contracting Waste Services](#) elaborates on best practices.

Education & Training

Consistently train staff on how to separate surplus food for donation and food scraps for recycling. Check out this [Source Separation Guidance](#) for tips on training your dining and custodial staff on how to collect food scraps separately from trash. It is also critical to educate and engage your student body, faculty, and other campus community members about your waste diversion program.

Display Clear Signage

Clearly label all trash, recycling, and food scraps containers. Customize these signs to include your campus' specific waste materials and separation needs. Rethink Food Waste NY can customize and translate signage for front and back-of-house waste stations to reduce contamination in addition to addressing any confusion staff and/or students may have with sorting their waste. Contact our hotline at 866-306-0911 or email RethinkFoodWasteNY@cetonline.org to receive free signage!

Success Stories

Many colleges and universities have found that diverting their traditional recyclables and food scraps is either cost-neutral or helps save money by reducing disposal costs.

Our work with [Colgate University](#) and [The University at Buffalo](#) demonstrates how recycling and diverting food scraps can help campuses improve operations, meet sustainability goals, and potentially save money.



Colgate University collects compostable materials in 5-gallon buckets weekly (right) to be taken to their Community Garden. This becomes a soil amendment that saves 4,000 tons of food from disposal each year.

Pro tip:

Be sure to create a contingency plan for academic breaks to account for limited student volunteers.

The University of Buffalo, with support from Rethink Food Waste NY, established a program that diverts around 32,000 lbs of food for composting yearly. They have expanded collection to all dining halls on campus, donating to multiple food rescue organizations and recycling inedible scraps. They emphasize the importance of communication between staff, students, and volunteers.

Other Materials To Consider Recycling

Cardboard & Paper

Paper, cardboard, and paperboard are easily recyclable with well-established markets for processing. Colleges often save money on disposal fees when collecting cardboard separately. Materials that are contaminated with food waste or have waxed coatings should not be recycled. Institutions composting food scraps should consult their hauler to see if they can combine soiled paper, paperboard, cardboard, and waxed cardboard with their food waste collection.

Bottles & Cans

Next to paper, bottles and cans are some of the most commonly recycled materials in the United States. These valuable materials are often collected as part of single-stream recycling on college and university campuses. Colleges can also consider hosting separate collections for redeemable bottles to collect deposit money. All recyclables must be free of contamination from materials such as food waste, or "tangles" such as plastic bags.

Textiles & Mattresses

Many colleges and universities also have programs to promote reuse during move-in/move-out, such as [Grad Bag](#). For textiles like clothes and linens, New York State Association for Reduction, Reuse, and Recycling (NYSAR3) has a searchable database of [Textile Recovery Locations](#). Because of their bulky size, mattresses can be challenging for haulers and disposal sites to manage, but working with a mattress recycler can streamline the move-out process.



Construction & Demolition (C&D) Materials

Colleges and universities frequently undertake construction and renovation projects to improve campus facilities, generating C&D materials like asphalt, brick and concrete, clean wood, metal, and clean gypsum wallboard. Stage and separate collection containers for materials like gypsum wallboard that can be challenging to process at C&D facilities when collected with other C&D materials. For more information and resources for building material reuse, visit [CrOwd](#).

Complying With The New York State Food Donation and Food Recycling Law

Since it was passed in 2022, the New York State Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Law has required businesses and institutions, including many colleges and universities, that generate an average of ≥ 2 tons of wasted food per week to donate excess edible food and recycle all remaining food scraps if they are within 25 miles of an organics recycling facility. The resource [Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Law Guidance for New York State Businesses](#) offers a broad overview of best practices and resources for those seeking to develop organics management programs.

Free Technical Assistance Available

Rethink Food Waste NY provides easy, practical wasted food solutions for New York businesses and institutions.

Receive Customized Recommendations | Become More Sustainable | Save Money | Implement Solutions with Continued Free Support

To learn more or get started, contact our hotline at (866) 306-0911 or email RethinkFoodWasteNY@cetonline.org.