



## 2024 Campus Race to Zero Waste Case Study University of Pittsburgh

### Contacts

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### Focus of Case Study

University of Pittsburgh's Food Security Lockers, innovatively recovering surplus food from campus dining and distributing it to food insecure students.

### Detailed Description of Campaign or Effort

In 2014, University of Pittsburgh students started [Food Recovery Heroes](#), a student organization that is also an official chapter of the [Food Recovery Network](#) (FRN unites students at colleges and universities to fight food waste and hunger by recovering surplus food from campus dining halls and donating it to local hunger-fighting agencies). Since 2014, Food Recovery Heroes has helped to recover more than 188,000 pounds of surplus food from campus, fighting hunger while keeping leftovers out of landfills – and winning [local](#) and [national](#) awards.

To help alleviate campus food insecurity, the University has offered a free food pantry since 2015 – [The Pitt Pantry](#). In 2020, the University of Pittsburgh's #RealCollege Survey [results](#) (via the Hope Center at Temple University) revealed that 18% of Pitt students identified as food insecure.

Building on this legacy, the University expanded free food services to students in Fall 2023 by leveraging campus food recovery and new temperature-controlled Food Lockers, which were funded by a [Pennsylvania Hunger Free Campus grant](#).

The Pitt Food Security Lockers safely and confidentially distribute recovered food from campus dining facilities. During both the Fall 2023 and Spring 2024 semesters, Food Recovery Heroes worked with campus Dining to recover surplus food (that would otherwise be discarded) from The Eatery (the University's primary all-you-care-to-eat dining hall). Food Recovery Heroes re-packaged the recovered food into balanced meals containing a protein, vegetable, and starch. Pitt Pantry shoppers and other self-identified students with food insecurity were provided special app access to order free, recovered meals. Meals were placed in the temperature-controlled

lockers for students to pick-up Monday through Friday. On Mondays through Thursdays, students could order one (1) meal daily. To ensure food security over weekends, students can order two (2) meals on Fridays.

Because the Pitt Pantry is only open 2 to 3 days weekly, student access to free food was previously limited. With the Food Locker addition, University is now able to offer recovered food to students 5 days a week in a centralized campus location. The Food Security Lockers have increased Pitt's ability to reduce food waste while simultaneously helping feed students struggling with food insecurity.

Along with students using Pitt's Food Lockers for meals to help combat food insecurity, the lockers are used by paying Pitt Eats customers across the full campus community for both food and grocery delivery; this combined system provides user confidentiality and reduces stigma surrounding receiving a free meal (because everyone uses the lockers, regardless of food source). Overall, the Pitt Food Security Lockers provide free nutritious meals that reduce food waste, reduce barriers to fresh meals, reduce stigma, and reduce hunger at the University of Pittsburgh.

### **Planning Steps & Timeline to Implement**

#### **1) Ideation - November 2021**

- Dining Sustainability Director mentions food recovery locker system to University team during a Quarterly Program Review (QPR)
- University team loved the idea, so Dining team added concept to annual programming roadmap and started their research and strategy

#### **2) Preliminary Research – November 2021 through Spring 2022**

- Researched locker systems and made informational calls to vendors
- Evaluated locker options via research, vendor quotes, specifications, hardware features, etc.
- Considered expanding existing campus locker systems
- Determined locker hardware needs, which instigated shift to a new locker system with cooling and heating capabilities
- Dining team presented research to University team at Spring QPR presentation

#### **3) Strategy Plan - Summer 2022**

- Developed operational strategy including logistics, marketing, partnerships, costs, and possible program launch windows
- University team joined Dining team on informational calls to help determine locker system compatibility with campus needs
- Dining and University teams coordinated internal program support from Assistant Vice Chancellor for Auxiliary Services, Director of Dining Services, Manager of Dining Services, and Associate Dean for Student Wellness
- Decided on locker vendor [Hello ONDO](#)

#### **4) Funding Review – Summer 2022**

- Final program plans presented at Summer 2022 QPR meeting
- The Associate Dean for Student Wellness supported project and agreed to submit PA Hunger Free Campus grant application

- Dining team's Regional Vice President of Operations wrote a Chartwells Higher Education letter of support for grant submission

#### **5) Proposal – November 2022**

- Official proposal presented at the November QPR meeting, including operational plan addressing launch phases, partners, locker intentions, campus food collection locations, use frequency, who will be filling the lockers and preparing the meals, how students will access the lockers, and who will generally have access to each program. A backup operational plan was also included.
- A cost summary included the Hello ONDO locker quote pricing
- Campus location recommendations were discussed, including installation and student accessibility optimization
- The university team was on board with the program and ready to support planning and logistics

#### **6) Approval + Initiation – Fall 2022 through Spring 2023**

- PA Hunger Free Campus Grant approved for \$60,000 in January 2023
- Dining and University teams ordered lockers and identified supporting hardware installations at determined location (e.g., networking, AC outlets, power output capacities, venting/cooling, and other supplemental space renovations)
- Dining marketing team designed locker branding wrap to reflect University brand and look; order was placed early so lockers could be delivered already wrapped

#### **7) Delivery – August 2023**

- Lockers delivered to campus already wrapped
- ONDO team on site for delivery to ensure lockers were properly installed, hardware was operational, and software was optimized
- Dining Sustainability Director began designing implementation plan for the food insecurity portions of lockers, including team training, communications plans, and operational logistics for all teams involved (University leadership, Pitt Pantry, Food Rescue Heroes student group, and Dining team)
- University IT and Dining team collaborated to ensure proper integration with campus-wide ordering system (Transact Campus)

#### **8) Operational Logistics – September & October 2023**

- Dining Sustainability Director scheduled calls and training with student volunteers assisting with meal packaging and order fulfillment
- Dining team operators worked on logistics to launch the two other locker programs (retail and grocery deliveries)
- Pitt Pantry compiled list of students needing access to the food security offerings and worked with Pitt IT to test ordering system
- Dining team prepared for program launch by holding onsite training and checking systems (hardware and software) to ensure food safety, developed communications plans, and created signage
- Dining team worked closely with ONDO locker team to ensure hardware and software was optimized with Transact integration in time for program launch

#### **9) Launch – November 2023**

- Pitt Pantry launched communications to students already benefiting from Pantry services
- Dining Sustainability Director actively available to efficiently settle any technical issues, including maintaining communication with ONDO locker team

#### **10) Post-Launch Logistics – December 2023 to present**

- Dining Sustainability Director owned locker data tracking (including number of users, orders, and waste trends) and facilitated communication between Pitt Pantry and ONDO Lockers teams
- Dining Sustainability Director managed partnership with Food Recovery Heroes student organization
- University IT and Facilities teams were on standby for possible hardware issues (i.e., power outages, networking troubleshooting, overheating/cooling concerns with refrigeration units, and room in which lockers are located)
- Dining and University teams maintained consistent communication including use trends and user feedback to evaluate program impact and need

## **Resources & Stakeholders Involved**

In 2022, the University of Pittsburgh was designated a [Hunger Free Campus](#) and awarded a \$60,000 [Hunger Free Campus Grant](#) to support the purchase of a 61-unit Food Locker. From conception to implementation, the Pitt Food Lockers program was a collaborative effort including Pitt Eats by Chartwells Higher Education and the University Student Affairs Division and Office of Business, Hospitality, & Auxiliary Services. An operating plan and coordinated outreach to eligible students was developed by staff from Pitt Eats dining facilities (powered by Chartwells Higher Education), the Office of the Vice Provost, Student Affairs' Care and Resource Support Office, and the Pitt Pantry. Student organization Food Recovery Heroes provided substantial daily volunteer support to recover food and stock the lockers.

## **Results of Campaign**

The University of Pittsburgh's Food Lockers program enabled an innovative Food Security Locker system that combats food insecurity while simultaneously helping ensure surplus food stays out of the landfill. Pitt's Food Security Lockers provide students and employees a new opportunity to stay food secure while enjoying prepared, nutritious meals from dining hall leftovers -- without being stigmatized. By combining the program with two (2) other food delivery programs (retail food mobile ordering and grocery delivery), more users were encouraged to participate, making campus efforts to reducing food insecurity more successful.

### **From November 2023 through April 2024:**

- **86 active users of Food Security Lockers**
- **1,023 pounds of food diverted from landfill**
- 1,000 meals prepared with food rescued from dining hall
- **850 meals picked up by students**

Due to food safety protocols, any meals not picked up by users require disposal after 4 hours. While the food would have inevitably otherwise become waste previously, additional educational efforts encourage users to pick up their orders to avoid waste. In Fall 2023, 25% of meals were not picked up. In Spring 2024, only 15% of meals were not picked up.

**Media Coverage & Inquiries**– The Pitt Food Recovery Locker project did receive some local media coverage (below), as well as regular inquiries from other higher education institutions about the program:

- 1) **“How University of Pittsburgh is Helping Students Who Are ‘Silently Hungry’,”** *Pittsburgh Magazine*, November 2023, <https://www.pittsburghmagazine.com/how-university-of-pittsburgh-is-helping-students-who-are-silently-hungry/>
- 2) **“University of Pittsburgh moves to address food insecurity by installing food lockers,”** *Food Service Director*, November 2023, <https://www.foodservicedirector.com/menu/university-pittsburgh-moves-address-food-insecurity-installing-food-lockers>
- 3) **“Pittsburgh nonprofits, universities try pop-ups and food lockers to combat student food insecurity,”** WESA, December 2023, <https://www.wesa.fm/education/2023-12-15/pittsburgh-student-food-insecurity>

### **What Would You Do Differently in the Future?**

While the University of Pittsburgh is very happy with the Food Locker programs, select changes for future implementations are recommend.

- 1) EDUCATION - Soon after the official locker launch, the team realized better education about recovered meals was needed. Many students had never heard of recovered food -- and did not understand that it was leftover and surplus food from Pitt dining halls.
- 2) DIETARY RESTRICTIONS - Many students have dietary restrictions (vegan, vegetarian, Halal, dairy free, etc.) -- and recovered meals are not always conducive to diverse diets. We adapted our outreach approach to include better education about program limitations relating to dietary restrictions. We also began referring students with dietary restrictions to apply for the University’s Emergency Meal Assistance program instead, which allows students to self-identify as food insecure and explain their dietary needs. Students are then awarded 15 meal swipes to use at campus dining facilities to obtain a safe meal meeting their dietary needs.

### **What Advice Would You Give to Another College That Wanted to Do a Similar Effort?**

Every strong project needs a designated strong project lead / manager who will help ensure steady progress throughout the entire planning and implementation process. The Manager should also develop a strong relationship with the locker technology company, including designating external and internal points of contact for technical issues.

Additionally, paid student workers and/or multiple campus volunteer groups are essential to assisting with food recovery and loading lockers. The Pitt Food Locker program grew quickly, increasing demand for meals and work at a level we did not anticipate. Having multiple student workers and volunteer groups will help ensure food recovery and package shifts are filled Monday through Friday, especially during busy semester periods like midterms and finals.

The Pitt Food Locker program is currently closed over Winter and Summer breaks; we are currently strategizing staffing solutions to ensure we can remain accessible in Summer 2025.

**Photos & Graphics**



**University of Pittsburgh Food Locker System**



**University of Pittsburgh Food Locker Interior**



**University of Pittsburgh Food Recovery Heroes  
Student Organization Repackaging  
Dining Hall Surplus for Food Security Lockers**



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