



## **2024 Campus Race to Zero Waste Case Study**

### **University of Ottawa: Food rescue and Waste reduction during the 91<sup>st</sup> annual ACFAS conference**

#### **Contact info.**

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

The Green Team group of volunteers prevented food and plastic containers from going to the landfill during the 91<sup>st</sup> annual Association francophone pour le savoir (Acfas) conference hosted by the University of Ottawa. The University of Ottawa's reusable container program, Friendlier, was used during the conference to reduce the quantity of single-use plastic containers from entering the landfill. The Green Team collected the reusable containers, donated leftover food from the conference, and sorted garbage in the recycling stations.

#### **Detailed description of campaign component.**

The 91<sup>st</sup> Acfas conference aspired to be an environmentally responsible conference in which there would be no swag, they would reduce the amount of waste generated and asked the Office of Campus Sustainability to create a Green Team volunteer group to help achieve their environmental goals.

The University of Ottawa's catering service Chartwells, served 2300 lunches with its Friendlier reusable container program during the Acfas conference. The purpose of this effort was to reduce the number of disposable containers going to the landfill, to save resources, and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Green Team volunteers educated the participants on the purpose of these reusable containers, collected the containers, composted the leftover food, and returned the containers to our various collection bins.

The Green Team played a vital role in the return rate of the Friendlier containers and the collection of leftover food. Untouched, leftover food from the conference was collected, weighed, and donated to staff, students, and local charities rather than it being composted. The Green Team also re-sorted and diverted waste in the recycling

stations near the conference locations to prevent the Friendlier containers from entering the landfill thereby reducing our landfill emissions generated from the conference.

#### **Planning steps and timeline to implement.**

- **June 2023** Pre-conference planning meetings every 3 months.
  - Discussed improvements from the last Acfas conference hosted by the University of Ottawa in 2009.
  - Heavily pushed having no swag given during the conference.
- **February 2024** Monthly meetings with Congrès Reservation and the Acfas committee.
- **April 2024** Weekly meetings with Congrès Reservation
  - Encouraged Congrès Reservation to give tickets to the zero-waste dining all to participants.
  - Asked for Friendlier containers be used as an exception for those who did not eat at the dining hall.
- **April 2024** Hosted three training sessions for all Green Team volunteers.
  - Explanation of the recycling streams at the University of Ottawa
  - Common items that are mistakenly put in the landfill.
  - How the Friendlier program works at the University of Ottawa
- **May 2024** Weekly meetings with Team leads.
- **May 2024** Collected T-shirts to loan to Green Team volunteers to distinguish this volunteering team.
- **May 2024** Distributed Friendlier collection bins in common food areas.
- **May 2024** Placed signage on all recycling bins and Friendlier collection bins.

#### **Resources and stakeholders involved.**

The University of Ottawa's catering service, Chartwells, implemented the reusable container program, Friendlier, in all cafes on campus in 2023 and expanded during the Acfas conference. The Office of Campus Sustainability worked with the Acfas planning committee to create the Green Team and to train its members.

#### **Describe the Results of this campaign component.**

##### ● **General results:**

The visibility of the Green Team volunteers during the Acfas conference attracted attention to the efforts of making events environmentally responsible. Recycling bins are not permitted in classrooms at the University of Ottawa to encourage staff and students to properly recycle in the designated recycling stations outside of classrooms. During the conference, less than 10% of classrooms used were provided with recycling bins. These classrooms were only provided with one compost bin and one metal, plastic, glass bin. Since there were no items provided that were non-recyclable, landfill bins were not allowed in classrooms. Guests were more inclined to recycle properly after seeing the Green Team volunteers sorting through recycling stations, which improved diversion rates throughout the week. Friendlier containers educated guests on the environmental benefits of reducing plastic going to landfills and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by creating single-use plastic containers.

This year, a vegetarian option was available for lunch which gave guests the choice to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions created by animal products. The Acfas planning committee decided not to provide promotional attire or gifts to guests which reduced the chance of these items going to the landfill. The Acfas volunteers received vests that can be reused for future conferences, and the Green Team used T-shirts from the "Green Reps" program on campus.

The University of Ottawa is a plastic water bottle free campus, so participants were encouraged to bring their own reusable water bottles, which promoted having a zero-waste campus.

Students, volunteers, staff, and St Joe's Supper Table received leftover food which would otherwise be composted. Conferences often order more food than what is consumed, so the Green Team collected leftovers, weighed them, and donated them to reduce food waste generated from the conference. By weighing the leftover food collected, volunteers and staff were exposed to the excess amount of food that is ordered during events. Furthermore, an external group of conference participants were inspired by the Green Team's efforts and donated their leftover food to students. This food was not weighed, but it can be assumed that a third of the total amount of food we rescued was donated by this external party.

**Specific measurable impact:**

The University of Ottawa hosted a total of 6000 attendees during the Acfas conference. Most participants ate at the zero-waste dining hall, which does not use any single-use plastics such as: cutlery, plates, straws or takeout containers. This effort was heavily pushed by the Office of Campus Sustainability to ensure that the guests are producing very little food and plastic waste. Out of the 6000 participants, 2300 Friendlier reusable containers were offered as an exception for those who could not eat at the dining hall. The total amount of food saved from the Acfas conference was 144.77kg of food. This food was donated to the University of Ottawa staff, students, volunteers, and St Joe's Supper Table.

There were 15 Friendlier collection bins located on campus and 2300 containers were used during the conference. The number of returned containers during the conference was 1447, which is equivalent to 83kg of plastic diverted from the landfill. This prevented 243kg of greenhouse gas emissions and 11576 litres of water was saved.

The return rate of the Friendlier containers during the conference was 64%. This return rate is likely due to the lack of communication to participants about the Friendlier reusable container program. The Green Team collected many reusable containers in the recycling bins on campus, however many participants kept their containers and left the campus. The containers that were either taken by participants, or recycled off campus were not able to be collected by the Green Team or the catering staff, which explains the low return rate.

These results were achieved thanks to the week-long effort of our Green Team volunteers. This would not have been possible without their hard work and support.

**What would you do differently in the future?**

After obtaining the results of our efforts, and discussing our results with the members of the Office of Campus Sustainability, we compiled a list of improvements and recommendations for future conferences and events:

- **Improve communications and planning with Congrès Reservation and Chartwells.**
  - Ask Chartwells to send an email to the conference members that ordered the food about the Friendlier program, and to ask that all conference members be eco-responsible.

- Plan to use the reusable container program at least two months prior to the conference to meet with the organizers, send out emails to conference attendees, and give training to staff and volunteers.
- **Guests were not given enough information on the reusable container program, Friendlier.**
  - Have more signage around food areas on Friendlier.
  - Obtain statistics on the plastic saved from the reusable containers at the end of the conference to share with the participants and express gratitude.
  - The signage must be bigger and more visible.
  - Have better communication with participants about Friendlier before the conference.
- **Other vendors and sponsors of Acfas were giving out plastic containers, plastic cutlery, cards, and stationery supplies.**
  - Ask that sponsors follow the Acfas guidelines by not giving gifts, or promotional materials.
  - Ask food truck vendors to provide compostable containers and cutlery.
  - Lanyards should not have sponsor labels on them, to be reusable for future events.
- **Being an environmentally responsible conference should have been promoted further.**
  - Collaborate with the Acfas committee in incorporating sustainability messages in presentations and symposiums.
  - Help advertise the conference as being zero-waste.
  - Improve communication with the caterer, Chartwells, on food recovery.
- **Further training could have been done with all volunteers, staff, and participants.**
  - The University of Ottawa does not permit lone bins in the classrooms, and this should be reminded to volunteers that there is no exception during events.
  - Volunteers and staff should advertise that all coffee served during the conference is Fairtrade certified.
  - The Green Team volunteers should not need to clean each conference room to ensure proper waste diversion, instead the cleaning staff should be further trained.
  - Create a sign on coffee stations that says “Coffee cups, stir sticks, and napkins all go into the compost. Thank you!”
  - Have a “Lost and Found” area with the volunteers for lost objects.
  - Remind St Joe’s Supper Table, staff, students, and volunteers that those who received food donations in a reusable container must return the container to the collection bins on campus.

**What advice would you give to another college that wanted to do a similar effort?**

The most crucial factor to succeeding in making the Acfas conference an environmentally responsible event is having volunteers who are interested in sustainability and want to help form a Green Team. Some tasks can be done beforehand to be more efficient and organized before the conference begins.

1. Label bins with visible signage before the conference begins. It’s best to know what kinds of recycling/compost bins should go where before the conference starts to ensure that signage can be placed so that it is visible to all participants. Common eating areas are suitable places to put compost bins and signage during the event.

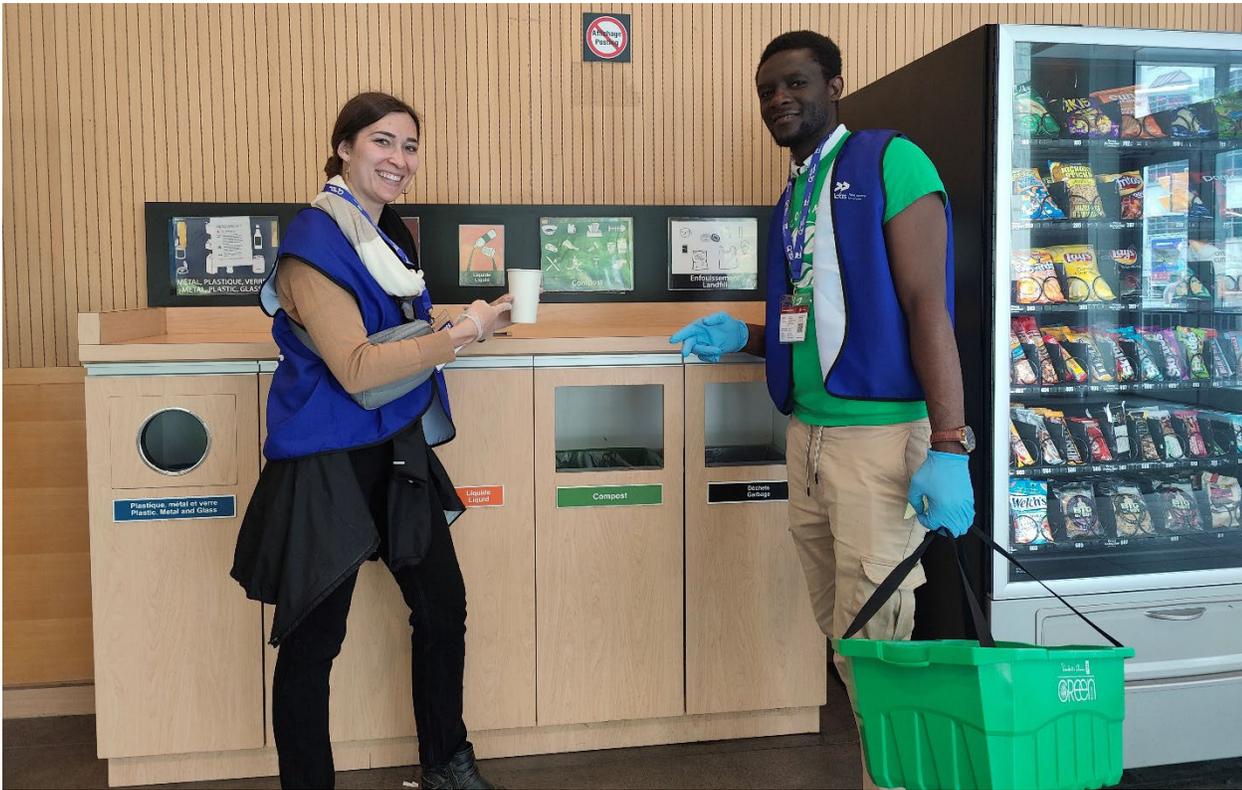
2. Train volunteers well before the event has started to give them time to ask questions and do further research. Create a detailed list of tasks that volunteers can do during the event. Contact the event organizers to find out when the lunch hour will be during the event to schedule when to pickup leftover food.
3. Set up an easy communication method for the volunteers while they separate on campus. Applications can often cause issues during the event, so it is easier to use basic text messages or phone calls to communicate.
4. Communicate with the catering service and let them know that untouched leftover food will be donated. Have a donation plan to know which charities you will donate food to. A fridge that can be used to store leftover food throughout the week is needed as well. Ask the catering service to keep the desserts in separate containers/plates since they are commonly not eaten or thrown out. Lastly, have extra containers for food that will be donated.

Organization and planning are key to successfully run a volunteering team during a conference. It is essential to have effective communication with the event organizers, and for both the event organizers and the volunteering team to understand the goal of making an event environmentally responsible.

### **Photos and Graphics**



A recycling station on campus with four streams: Landfill, Compost, Paper/Compost and Metal, Plastic, Glass.



Our volunteers sorting waste in our recycling stations. Coffee cups were the most common object that were diverted from the landfill and put into the compost.



The Friendlier reusable container collection bins in the Social Science building on campus.



The lunches served during the ACFAS conference in the Friendlier containers.



The Friendlier reusable container collection bin signage. Users must scan the bar code on the container, or on the sign to earn their money back in the mobile application.



One of our amazing volunteers preparing a cart of leftover food from the conference to donate to St Joe's Supper Table.



The University of Ottawa's community fridge used to store leftover food from the conference.

*\*photos taken by Keyi Wang*