



Central Michigan University 2025 Campus Race to Zero Waste Case Study

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Focus of Case study:

Central Sustainability promotes waste reduction through public waste audits, dining hall plate waste audits, and sustainable purchasing reviews for campus and community awareness.

Detailed description of campaign or effort:

Central Sustainability (CS) takes a three-pronged approach to promoting education and awareness of waste reduction habits on-campus and in the local community. Firstly, CS conducts waste audits in public spaces to show what can and cannot be diverted. Secondly, CS encourages people to be conscious of their food waste by conducting “plate waste audits” in dining spaces. Lastly, CS conducts audits on organization’s purchasing habits and offers research-based suggestions on steps they can take to be more sustainable.

CS conducted a total of seven waste audits in the spring of 2025. Several of these audits were conducted in classrooms at local k-12 schools, where students were encouraged to use the knowledge they learned from CS to decide what can and cannot be recycled or composted. Depending on the environment, CS has used waste from dumpsters and trashcans to conduct real-time exhibitions to educate students on proper waste disposal methods. An example of a waste audit conducted by CMU can be found [here](#).

Additionally, CS conducted four plate waste audits in the spring of 2025 in collaboration with Central Michigan University Dining services. This audit involves interacting with students in campus dining halls to talk about food waste, weighing food waste, and spread awareness of food waste reduction efforts. This collaboration between CS and CMU Dining has lasted more than two years and will continue with improvements in engagement efforts and signage material.

In the fall of 2024, CS conducted purchasing audits of Residence Life and the Leadership Institute, two large university departments at Central Michigan University. CS assessed the departments purchasing habits based on factors like carbon footprint, support for local economy, cultural and social consideration, and packaging waste generation. CS presented its findings through reports and presentations to the departments and provided them with recommendations on how to improve their purchasing habits in the future. An example of one of the reports can be viewed [here](#).

YouTube video of a traditional [Central Sustainability Waste Audit](#)

Planning steps & timeline to implement:

General Steps & Timeline for Waste Audits, Plate Waste Audits, and Purchasing Audits

- Contact person/group of interest to schedule an audit.
- Prep for audit by assigning tasks and securing necessary resources.
- Conduct audit.
- Follow up with person/group of interest to discuss takeaways.
- Share results with the larger community.

Resources and stakeholders involved:

Our waste audits require efforts and collaboration between various campus and community partnerships. For one, these projects are initiated by the student-led Central Sustainability, the office of sustainability at Central Michigan University. Additionally, most of the waste audits require assistance from CMU Facilities Management. CMU Dining has also gotten involved for plate-waste audits. Additionally, waste audits at elementary schools require collaboration with local schools and teachers as well as their students. In terms of resources, waste audits require some form of waste, and they often additionally require a scale to weigh the amount of waste generated and the required containers to properly dispose of the waste.

Describe the Results of this campaign component:

The audience for our waste audits varies depending on the location and scale of the audit conducted by CS. At Central Michigan University, for example, CS sets up a dumpster from one of the campus buildings in front of the University Center. While much of the work is coordinated through the campus sustainability office, the setup naturally draws the attention of passing students. Many stop to ask questions out of curiosity, making it an effective demonstration to raise awareness about recycling and the amount of waste generated at CMU. In contrast, waste audits conducted in local elementary schools are on a smaller scale to suit classroom settings. These audits use waste collected directly from classroom trash bins, which tends to engage students more personally. The younger students are typically enthusiastic and eager to learn about recycling and how they can reduce the amount of waste sent to landfills.

CS has also conducted plate waste audits in the university's dining halls to assess how much uneaten food is being thrown away. These audits not only help highlight patterns in food waste but also raise awareness among dining staff and students about portion sizes and consumption habits. Data gathered from these audits has been used to inform conversations around sustainability and food service operations.

In addition, purchasing habits related to waste generation have been reviewed and discussed during a Board of Trustees meeting. This has opened the door for institutional-level reflection and action on how procurement choices—such as packaging, disposable products, and food sourcing—can significantly impact campus waste streams. These discussions are helping to align sustainability goals with university policy and long-term planning.

Specific measurable impact figures:

Over the past year alone, CS has actively engaged more than 150 students across local K–12 schools, educating them on effective waste reduction practices through hands-on waste audits. These interactive experiences not only teach students how to sort and divert waste properly but also foster early awareness of environmental responsibility.

In addition to outreach in schools, CS conducts regular plate waste audits within the university's dining halls, tracking between 50 and 100 pounds of preventable food waste per audit. Since initiating these efforts, CS has observed a steady decline in food waste volumes, indicating growing awareness and improved behaviors among students and dining services.

Beyond direct waste audits, CS has taken on a broader advisory role at the institutional level. Through data collection, analysis, and sustainability research, CS has developed actionable recommendations aimed at improving the university's purchasing decisions. These insights have informed conversations about reducing waste at the source—such as minimizing single-use packaging and prioritizing bulk or reusable alternatives—helping the university align procurement practices with its sustainability goals.

What would you do differently in the future?

Looking ahead, CS plans to enhance on-campus waste audits by transforming them into more interactive events that actively engage a broader student audience. While these audits are currently conducted primarily as demonstrations with participation from the campus sustainability office and facilities management, increasing student involvement would strengthen outreach and education efforts. Additionally, partnering with the student newspaper to cover these events could help raise awareness and promote the university's commitment to sustainability. CS also aims to improve consistency in data collection and analysis for both waste and purchasing audits, ensuring that findings can more effectively inform future sustainability initiatives.

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

CS recommends clearly communicating that the primary purpose of waste audits is educational, aiming to raise awareness and encourage sustainable practices—not to assign blame or shame individuals for their disposal habits. It is also important to promote these events effectively to ensure that all individuals and groups interested in waste education are informed and have the opportunity to participate or observe.