



Auburn University

Weigh the Waste: Engaging Students to Understand and Reduce Food Waste in Campus Dining

Contact Information

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Focus of Case Study

Auburn University's Waste Reduction and Recycling Department (WRRD) focused on raising awareness about post-consumer food waste in dining halls through a Weigh the Waste campaign.

Detailed description of campaign/effort

Beginning Weigh the Waste

Auburn University's Campus Dining diverts and reduces food waste by partnering with the Campus Kitchen to repackage pre-consumer leftovers as meals for the community and composting some kitchen scraps. However, there has been a gap in addressing the substantial amounts of post-consumer waste from the dining halls. WRRD led a Weigh the Waste campaign to raise awareness about post-consumer food waste and address this gap.

Setup

The four-week Weigh the Waste campaign took place in the Tiger Zone dining hall. Week one included two "weighing nights" which served to collect baseline data and introduce the campaign. Weeks two and three consisted of outreach and educational efforts through social media, digital signage, and tabling. Week four concluded the campaign with two additional weighing nights to collect data for comparison and continue messaging.

Weighing Nights

Based on peak dining hours, weighing nights took place from 6-8 PM on Mondays and Wednesdays of weeks one and four. WRRD set up at the dish return station to reach every student possible. Four staff members managed the event: one instructed and engaged students, one counted participants with a clicker-counter, one collected food waste in a bucket and one documented the activity. Beverages were excluded.

Every 15 minutes, the food waste bucket was weighed, recorded, and displayed on a whiteboard facing the students. The weight of the bucket was subtracted to ensure accuracy. After the food was weighed and recorded, it was placed in clear containers as a visual display for students. This allowed for simultaneous data collection and student education.

Education and Outreach

During weeks two and three, WRRD tabled at various times in the Tiger Zone dining hall to raise student awareness about post-consumer food waste. They collaborated with the marketing team at Aramark to create flyers and digital signage that included practical tips on how to reduce food waste. Campus Dining agreed to host an ice cream sundae bar as an incentive if food waste was reduced by 10% in week four as compared to week one. WRRD promoted this incentive through tabling, signage, and posts on Instagram and Facebook encouraging students to make mindful food choices.

Planning steps & timeline to implement

- November 2025
 - WRRD discussed hosting a weigh the waste event with Campus Dining; dining agreed to provide a prize incentive if there was a reduction in post-consumer food waste
- January 2026
 - Created the schedule and workflow for the Weigh the Waste campaign and weighing nights
 - Set dates for initial and follow-up weighing in collaboration with Campus Dining
- February 2026
 - Communicated plans with Tiger Zone dining staff to ensure smooth workflow on weighing nights
 - Communicated with Aramark to create marketing materials (flyers and digital signage) for events
- March 2026
 - Hosted the initial weighing nights on March 16 and 18
 - WRRD began posting on social media during the week of March 16 to market the campaign and continued posting through April
 - Tabled during the weeks of March 23 and 30 at the Tiger Zone dining hall to educate students about food waste
- April 2026
 - Hosted follow-up weighing nights on April 6 and 8
 - Posted results of weighing nights and campaign on social media

Resources and stakeholders involved

Budget

- Materials were either owned or borrowed from other departments
 - Buckets, baking racks and sheet pans, scale, whiteboard and stand, clicker-counter

Stakeholders and Support

- Auburn University Waste Reduction and Recycling Department
 - Gathered food waste, collected data, tabling outreach and education
- Auburn University Campus Dining
 - Provided folding table, baking racks and sheet pans for dish return station, and Tiger Zone space
 - Offered ice cream sundae bar incentive for food waste reduction

- Aramark
 - Created flyers and digital signage for the Tiger Zone dining hall

Results of this campaign component

The *Weigh the Waste* campaign allowed WRRD to directly engage with students and raise awareness about post-consumer food waste. Across four weighing nights, WRRD interacted with over 1,900 students through either direct conversation or weighing their food waste. A total of 316 pounds of post-consumer food waste was collected.

The average amount of food waste per student was 2.53 ounces, and this average was consistent throughout the campaign. Although this did not meet the 10% reduction goal for the ice cream incentive, it successfully established a baseline for post-consumer waste in the Tiger Zone dining hall.

This campaign created significant student engagement and brought attention to the issue of food waste on campus. The data collected is currently being used by Campus Dining and Aramark to explore ways to reduce post-consumer food waste. Additionally, Auburn University Facilities Management highlighted the campaign in an employee news article, further expanding the impact.

What would you do differently in the future?

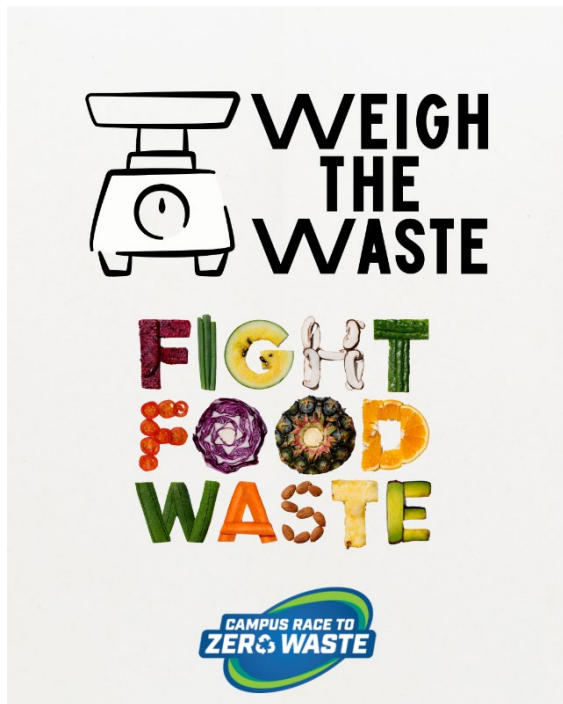
- Involve student staff from Campus Dining during weighing nights to further increase engagement and ability to speak with students
- Collect data on reasons for student food waste through a survey

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

- Communicate and maintain positive relations with Campus Dining
- Begin planning early and set clear roles for each person working during the weighing nights
- Set clear guidelines on what is considered food waste: for example, will inedible food waste (like a banana peel) or beverages be included?

Photos and graphics:

All photos and graphics courtesy of the Auburn University Waste Reduction and Recycling Department unless otherwise noted



Sample of social media posts for Weigh the Waste campaign



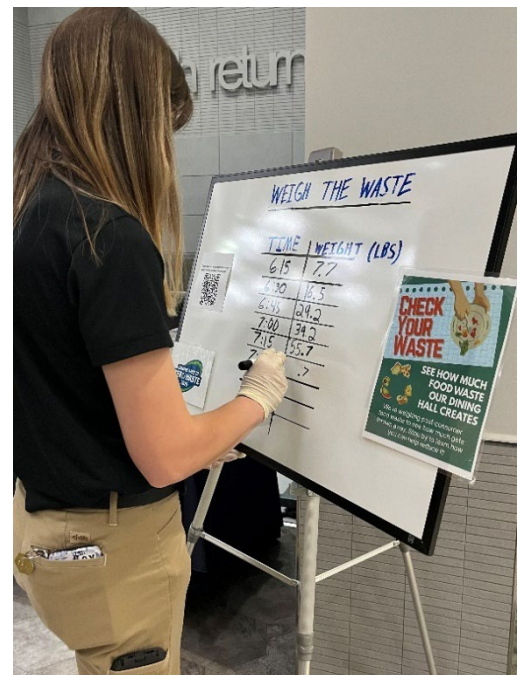
Students engaging during Weigh the Waste events



Weighing food waste



Display of food waste and recording times and weights for display





Flyers and digital signage (produced by Aramark)



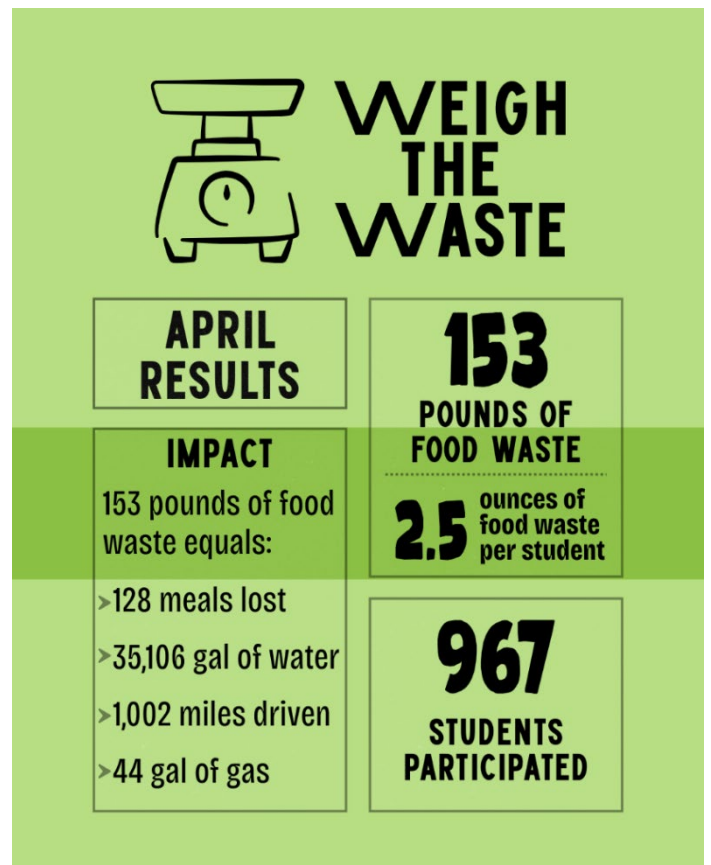
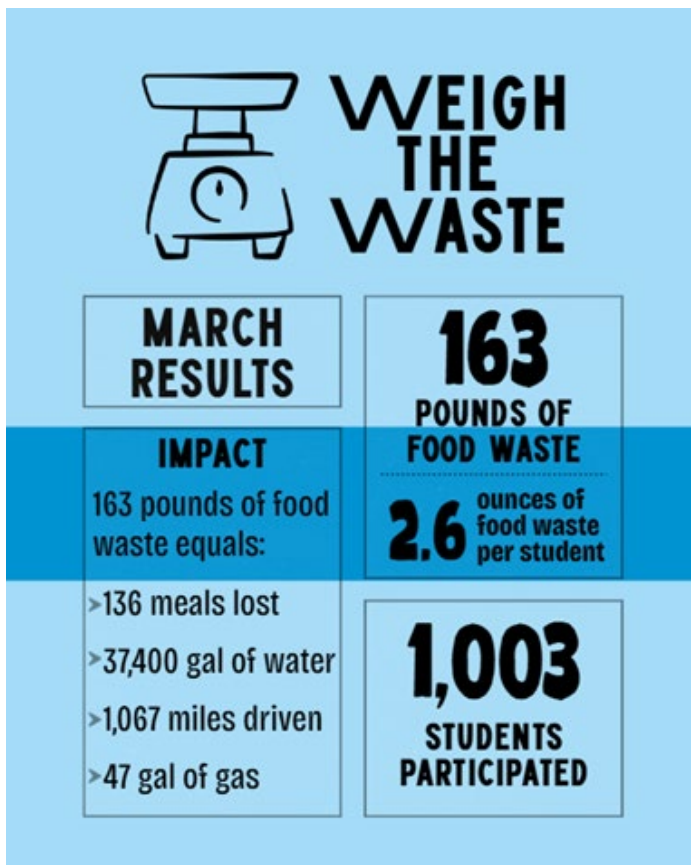
Tabling outreach during weeks two and three

WRRD helps students make sense of food waste

Waste Reduction and Recycling Department helped students see just how much food goes uneaten through two recent Weigh the Waste...

April 22, 2026





Samples of social media posts