



Macalester College

2026 Campus Race to Zero Waste Case Study

Contact info

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Focus of Case study:

The Macalester Reuse program has expanded over time. We discuss the changes we made to more effectively re-distribute donations and encourage re-use.

Detailed description of campaign or effort:

The Macalester Reuse program (the Free Swap) redistributes thousands of items every year, reduces textile waste and creates a culture of re-use on campus. The program began in 2009 with a table of clothing in the Sustainability Office. Over time, the program has grown. In 2019 the garage behind the Sustainability Office became the Free Swap. In May of 2022, the program expanded into a large basement space in a campus building called the Free Swap Outlet. Over the past four years, the Macalester Sustainability Office has learned how to make our expanded reuse space more accessible and more organized. We did this by focusing on the following improvements:

1. Reorganizing the Space to Look like a Thrift Shop

Over time we began to organize the space to look like a thrift store where students could shop for free. The space was furnished with standing racks like those that would be found in a department store. Old flag poles were also used to create spaces to hang clothing on the walls of the space.

2. Increasing Advertising and Events around Reuse

The Free Swap hosts events like block printing that use clothes from the free swap. These events help students feel more comfortable using the Free Swap. Student workers advertise the Free Swap through posting on Instagram about open hours.

3. Maintaining Consistent Open Hours to improve access to the reuse space

We began holding open hours consistently once a week for three hours and encouraging people to come and “shop.”

4. Implementing working shifts for student workers

We implemented shifts throughout the week for student workers to sort donations. During each shift, students are able to work together to sort and make improvements to the space.

5. Organizing donation collection at Move out

Donation bins are placed outside of residence halls for about two weeks of move out, and students are able to sort their donations into categories. Those donations are then put into plastic bags and taken to the reuse space.

6. Prioritizing access for high-need students

Winter clothing and dorm essentials are set aside and saved for international students and first year students with high needs so that they can take items they need when they first arrive on campus in the fall.

7. Improving Data collection

Everything that enters the Reuse space is weighed using large rolling bins. Student workers then sort all donations including clothing, household items, and bedding.

Planning steps & timeline to implement

- *2008: The Sustainability Office created a listing service on 1600 Grand for free items*
- *2009: The Free Swap began as a table*
- *2019: The Free Swap expanded to a garage behind the Sustainability Office*
- *May 2022: The free swap space expanded to include a larger basement area on campus*
- *Fall 2023/2024: The large basement space began offering open hours*
- *Spring 2024: took down fabric dressers, and added metal racks*
- *July 2024: First inventory of 1550 was performed by Blake Olson*
- *Summer 2025: Free Swap Outlet began hosting summer open hours*

Resources and stakeholders involved

The Free Swap is organized by student workers and volunteers. The student workers are employed by the Macalester Sustainability Office. Sustainability Office staff host open hours and coordinate student workers and volunteers working in the space.

Community Partners are an important part of our reuse program. Community organizations frequently take hundreds of pounds of clothing and bedding from the free swap. They are able to take items that would otherwise not be taken by students. For example, some community partners will take undergarments that we would not otherwise be able to display.

Results of this campaign component

a. General results

Over the years we have had more visitors coming to open hours at the Free Swap Outlet. As well as having more visitors, we have had more pounds of intake as more students are aware of the Free Swap program. A more organized free swap makes it easier for volunteers and student workers to sort donations. Clear labeling also makes the shopping experience easier for free swap customers. Donated items that can not fit in the reuse space are sorted and stored in labeled bags and used to restock the space as needed. Adding simple infrastructure improvements like standing racks and hanging flag poles along the walls have made the space feel more like a store compared to having clothing in bins on the floor.

b. Specific measurable impact figures, if applicable

We have improved our data collection over time at our reuse centers. Improved data collection has helped us to more accurately show the positive impact that our reuse space has on our community. For example, we count the number of people who come to 1550 open hours. In the school year of 2023/24 we counted 235 visitors to 1550 Summit. In the school year 2024/25 we counted 352 visitors to 1550 Summit. In the school year 2025/26 we counted 1176 visitors to 1550 Summit. In 2024 we counted 188.5 lbs of intake in the fall and 450.5 lbs in the spring of 2025. At move out in 2025 we had a total intake of 5411 lbs. At the end of May we had collected 8027.5 in total. Through weighing donations with bins we were able to gain a more accurate measurement of intake.

What would you do differently in the future?

We have started using re-usable bags instead of plastic bags for move out, but in the future we would like to use all reusable bags for move out to reduce waste. This would require more planning so that we can empty the bags in time to fill more donations from the Free Swap Garage. We can also improve our engagement by hosting recurring events to encourage student use throughout the school year. For example, block printing events where we take clothing items from the Free Swap and print on them encourage re-use and creativity while advertising the Free Swap. As well as engagement, expanding our open hours would allow for more students to access the Free Swap Outlet. Having more open hours throughout the day will allow students who have busy schedules to access the Free Swap.

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

I would advise that another college that wants to start a re-use program is that you can start your program in a small space like a table and grow the program over time. When your program has expanded to a big space, having staff focused on the reuse program is important to keep it functioning. Short shifts with multiple people or volunteers throughout the week allow for staff to stay engaged with the space, but not get burnt out sorting.