



UNC Charlotte 2026 Campus Race to Zero Waste Case Study

Contact info

Shannon Caveny-Cox, Zero Waste Coordinator, sccaveny@charlotte.edu, 704-687-0604
Office of Sustainability, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Focus of Case study

Growing UNC Charlotte's zero-waste stadium initiative and leveraging collaboration and people-power to achieve an 84% diversion rate for the 2025 football season.

Detailed description of campaign or effort

When UNC Charlotte broke ground on a new football stadium in April 2011, the Student Government Association (SGA) passed a resolution that the University would manage it as a "Zero Waste" facility.

Initially, the Recycling Office led the zero waste efforts, including monitoring and servicing the bins and sorting all materials at the end of each game. Despite efforts to recruit volunteers to help with these efforts, the recycling staff ended up taking on all game day and sorting day tasks due to limited capacity to recruit and manage volunteers.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Sustainability took over the zero waste stadium program in 2022. Game days and sorting days were staffed by full-time Office of Sustainability staff, student employees (EcoReps at that time), with additional support from Recycling staff.

Volunteer recruitment also began to expand in 2022. The Office of Sustainability reached out to multiple groups on campus that incorporated volunteer and service activities into their program requirements. The only campus group that expressed interest during the first year was the University Honors Program (UHP). The Office of Sustainability has built upon this relationship with UHP over the past several years, and they are now a consistent partner that provides volunteers for each sorting day during the football season.

Since 2022, the zero waste football program has gained campus-wide attention, expanded campus partnerships, and increased volunteer recruitment. In 2025, the Office of Sustainability hired six students to become the first Zero Waste Stewards. The Zero Waste Stewards work directly with the Zero Waste Coordinator to help with football and other zero waste efforts on campus. This change has alleviated pressure from Office of Sustainability staff by providing consistent student staffing for games and sorting days.

Additionally, student volunteers participating in the sorting efforts significantly increased in the 2025 season. The Office of Sustainability partnered with a faculty member in the Earth, Environmental, and Geographical Sciences (EEGS) department who teaches a climate-related freshman seminar class and required all students in this class to participate in a zero waste football sorting day. These students and the UHP volunteers resulted in 20-30 student volunteers at each sorting day.

Planning steps & timeline to implement

- **2011:** Jerry Richardson Football Stadium was deemed a zero waste facility by a Student Government Association resolution.
- **2013 - 2021:** Recycling staff managed the zero waste efforts at the football stadium
- **January - July 2022:** Office of Sustainability took responsibility for the zero waste program at the football stadium, including expanding volunteer recruitment, purchasing and securing funding for new bins, and working closely with Chartwells to identify food packaging as recyclable or compostable.
- **August - December 2022:** Implemented new procedures for sorting efforts and identified staff and hired student workers to staff the set-up, games, and sorting days.
- **2023-2024:** Added a weighing station to sorting events to improve data collection and show volunteers the results of their efforts. Also updated the signage and bins to improve the user experience and increase proper material sorting. Chartwells hired a sustainability coordinator who began attending games and sorting days.
- **Spring 2025:** Women's lacrosse games began to be hosted at the football stadium, which were also operated as zero waste. Other smaller events hosted at the stadium, such as movie nights, were also operated as zero waste, mostly run by Office of Sustainability student staff.
- **August - December 2025**
 - a. **August:** Hired six Zero Waste Stewards (student employees) specifically to staff football games and sorting days
 - b. **August:** Purchased a platform scale (we had used luggage scales previously) for the weighing station.
 - c. **August:** Updated bin signage and added a QR code, which leads to a [webpage](#) detailing how items should be properly disposed of.
 - d. **August - November:** Partnered with EEGS faculty to recruit student volunteers for sorting days
 - e. Increased media coverage of efforts, including a feature article and video created by University Communications highlighting the Zero Waste Stewards. Creative Services also made a video shown at the beginning of each home game explaining "zero waste" (linked below).
- **Fall 2025:** Expanded zero waste efforts at campus athletic facilities. Began zero waste sorting after soccer games (different athletic facility, but similar procedures to football sorting).
- **Spring 2026:** Began zero waste sorting after baseball games

Resources and stakeholders involved

Funding and financial support for the zero waste initiative have come from various sources across the university since the beginning of the program in 2013. For the 2025 season, funding sources included:

- The Office of Sustainability paid for staffing, student employees, consumables (t-shirts, gloves, bags, snacks), and printing.
- Facilities Management funded overtime pay for recycling staff.
- Chartwells funded meal vouchers for our paid workers on football game days, refreshments for volunteers, and staff time (their sustainability coordinator) for setup, gameday, and the sorting event.
- Athletics provided bags and supplies and space for storage and sorting
- UNC Charlotte's student green fund, the Charlotte Green Initiative (CGI) awarded the Office of Sustainability a \$35,000 grant in Spring 2022 to replace all the stadium bins and signage systems.

In addition to the recycling staff, Chartwells, and Athletics, multiple campus groups supported the zero waste efforts in 2025. The University Honors Program provided student volunteers for four sorting days, students enrolled in ESCI 1501 (the freshman seminar mentioned earlier) attended four sorting days, and members of the SERVE Team with the university's Leadership and Community Engagement office attended three sorting days. Additionally, a few employees who had participated in the Sustainability Ambassadors program also volunteered during the sorting days.

Results of this campaign component

a. General results

In both the fall 2024 and 2025 seasons, the zero-waste efforts received media attention from UNC Charlotte and Charlotte-area outlets. In fall 2024, WSOC-TV produced a [news story](#) about the zero waste initiative, which aired on local television.

In fall 2025, University Communications worked with Office of Sustainability staff to create a [90-second video](#) shown before each home game explaining zero waste efforts in the stadium. Additionally, the University Communications team also wrote a [feature article](#), created a [video](#), and shared social media posts (pictured below) highlighting the Zero Waste Stewards, student volunteers, and staff working behind the scenes to sort the waste generated at the stadium.



Social media post shared on UNC Charlotte’s main Facebook page. This was a reel showing the process of the football game day and sort day. Credit: Alex Reynolds

Additionally, concessions staff during the games properly sorted food and packaging materials. The Chartwells sustainability coordinator played a large role in improving sorting practices by consistently checking on them throughout the games.

Lastly, we had the most volunteers and interest from the campus community in the 2025 season compared to any other football season, with 113 total volunteers during the season. Volunteers were primarily from the University Honors Program, EEGS 1501, staff Sustainability Ambassadors, and members of organizations participating in the [Adopt-a-Spot campus clean up program](#) managed by the Office of Sustainability.

b. Specific measurable impact figures

The following are statistics from the fall 2025 football season:

- i. Average diversion rate: 84%
 1. 87% diversion for one game
- ii. 8,580 pounds of material were recycled
- iii. 8,260 pounds of material were composted
- iv. 3,060 pounds of material were sent to the landfill
 1. Most of this was plastic bags that couldn’t be diverted due to liquid residue
- v. 113 total volunteers attended the sorting days

- vi. 6 Zero Waste Stewards and 4 EcoReps (student employees with the Office of Sustainability) helped with stadium set up, game day tasks, and sorting days
 - 1. *Note:* The EcoReps are hired to primarily do outreach-focused tasks for the Office of Sustainability. However, they are expected to help with zero waste football efforts during the fall semester, but are not as involved as the Zero Waste Stewards.
- vii. 783 hours total staff hours
 - 1. Zero Waste Stewards: 408 hours
 - 2. EcoReps: 180 hours
 - 3. Office of Sustainability staff: 150 hours
 - 4. Recycling staff: 45 hours
- viii. Media coverage (October 2025 article & video)
 - 1. UNC Charlotte-produced news article picked up by 5 local radio stations
 - 2. Accompanying UNC Charlotte social media posts on Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, and YouTube received 832 total clicks. All videos shared for this campaign were viewed a total of 40,102 times.

What would you do differently in the future?

In the future, we will continue to identify faculty members to promote the sorting days to their students for extra credit or as part of the course curriculum. We have found that this is one of the most effective strategies for securing student volunteers who will actually attend. We plan to identify faculty members through networks such as the Sustainability Ambassador alumni, participants of a curriculum development faculty workshop that the Office of Sustainability hosts, and other faculty champions for sustainability.

Most of the items we are sending to the landfill are plastic bags used to transport waste from inside the stadium. We would like to identify a way to minimize the use of single-use trash bags during future football games. Additionally, we would like to find ways to decrease waste from catering services on game day to reduce the use of non-compostable plates and utensils.

Additionally, we would like to find a way to prevent items from being placed into the empty dumpsters used for sorted items after the games. These dumpsters are behind the stadium in the commissary area, and certain groups on campus will use them to put items such as used furniture and equipment, unwanted clothing, and leftover food. We have begun putting tarps over the tops of these dumpsters when not in use, and placing signage saying “Zero Waste Use Only,” “Bottles and Cans Only,” or “Compost Only,” which somewhat deters dumping. However, having dumpsters placed in an area closed off to others would be optimal to prevent this in the future.

Finally, since the stadium was initially designed without zero waste in mind, there is limited space for sorting day operations and material storage. The stadium is currently under renovation, and we have requested additional space for these activities.

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

First, planning and preparation for a season-long effort require significant time, primarily from the zero waste coordinator. Discussions about securing student volunteers, purchasing supplies, updating signage, and staffing begin in April. By late July, the coordinator is spending at least 30 hours per week on preparation work.

Identify key campus partners and champions who will commit to the effort throughout the football season. For UNC Charlotte, this is UHP and EEGS for volunteers and Chartwells/Auxiliary Services for ensuring food packaging is acceptable.

Hire students specifically for zero waste events and efforts on campus if you have the resources and funding. There is quite a bit of training at the beginning to ensure they understand the processes, equipment, and how to work with each other on a team, but this will save the full-time staff coordinating this effort a great amount of time and labor.

Know what the waste stream will be. This requires planning and coordination with the concessions providers. Talk to these providers early to understand the type of packaging being used and how the packaging can be changed to a more sustainable option. Simplify the materials as much as possible! For example, if you can say, “If you drink out of it, recycle it; if you eat out of it, compost it,” this allows the user to initially sort their materials correctly.

Have a way to weigh sorted materials yourself. Campus waste haulers can often produce inaccurate data, so it is easiest to collect the information initially to maintain accuracy and consistency. This also allows you to give immediate and tangible feedback to the volunteers helping with sorting efforts.

Finally, don’t be afraid to promote what you are doing! While Athletics and Dining might not see zero waste efforts as a top-priority initiative to promote and focus on, general campus support can hold these groups accountable. Partner with University Communications, Alumni Engagement, and other groups on campus that reach large audiences. This will amplify your messaging and help reach people who might not otherwise pay attention to or seek out information about waste management and sustainability efforts on campus.



Bin set at football stadium. Credit: Jenny Washam



Zero Waste Steward wheels a bin set through the concourse. Credit: Kat Lawrence



Student volunteers sort materials after a football game. Credit: Kat Lawrence



A student weighs compost after sorting. Credit: Kat Lawrence



Students dump cans and bottles into the dumpster. Credit: Kat Lawrence



Roll off dumpsters with sorted materials after the football game. Credit: Shannon Caveny-Cox



Office of Sustainability student employees and full time staff at a football game. Credit: Kat Lawrence