

Boston Higher Education Move-Out Waste Management

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This report examines how colleges and universities in the Greater Boston area manage waste during student move-out periods. I conducted the study by contacting 44 institutions, with 12 (27%) responding. The responses revealed a range of waste management practices, highlighting both innovative and standard approaches. College students are estimated to generate approximately 640 pounds of waste annually per person, nearly 96 million pounds across Boston's 35 higher education institutions¹. A significant proportion of this waste is produced during move-out periods. Of the 44 institutions contacted, 12 provided information on their programs, with seven employing efficient waste management strategies. Three schools rely primarily on open-top dumpsters for waste disposal, while one, the University of Massachusetts Boston, has no formal program.

Summary of Institutional Programs

Bentley University operates the "Give N' Go" program, which combines donation opportunities with a swap component for students. In spring 2024, the initiative diverted 5.52 tons of material, including items made available through an online portal. While the waste disposal budget helps offset the program's costs, Bentley estimates that the program's total expenses exceed the cost of simply disposing of the items.²

Bentley University's "Give N' Go" program encourages students to donate or swap items during move-out periods instead of discarding them. Established in 2010, the program aims to reduce waste and promote community reuse. Students can donate various items, including clothing, furniture, electronics, books, and non-perishable food, at multiple drop-off locations on campus. Items in good condition can be swapped by students or donated to local charities.

The program incorporates creative elements to engage students, such as a swap feature where participants can exchange items with peers. Partnerships with local nonprofits and waste management organizations like Casella Waste Systems have supported its implementation.

¹ According to Dump and Run, Inc. the average college student produces 640 pounds of solid waste each year

² Information provided by Natalie Hayes, Director of Sustainability at Bentley University

Bentley has publicly stated its goal to reduce landfill contributions by 25% over the next decade, and the “Give N’ Go” program is a key element of achieving that goal.

Boston University manages one of the largest programs, “Goodwill, Not Landfill,” which diverted 113 tons of material during Spring 2024. The items collected included 99 tons donated to Goodwill, 7.6 tons of textiles recycled, and smaller quantities of food, toiletries, and other goods. The program uses student labor and outside contractors for logistics, costing approximately \$140 per ton³.

Established in 2009, the program involves extensive collaboration with Morgan Memorial Goodwill Industries and the BU community to collect and donate gently used items, such as clothing, household goods, kitchenware, and small appliances. Donation stations are located throughout 16 major residence halls on campus. A student team, the Goodwill Operations Assistance Team (GOAT), assists in sorting materials and educating other members of the Boston University community about the program. Their efforts enhance operational efficiency and promote a culture of sustainability on campus.

Endicott College operates the “College Cleanse” program, which manages approximately 8,000 pounds of donated material per move-out period⁴. The program collects clothing, dorm supplies, and nonperishable food items. These materials are donated to local organizations, aiding community members in need. While the program has been able to eliminate waste, it is labor-intensive, requiring significant staff time to sort and transport items. Endicott’s sustainability plan includes goals to increase material diversion rates by 15% over the next five years, aligning with its community sustainability efforts.

Harvard University manages move-out waste through its centralized Recycling and Surplus Center in Allston, Massachusetts⁵. Donations from residence halls are brought to the center, where they are either resold during the “Stuff Sale” or distributed for free at open events. The program successfully recovers various materials, including clothing, furniture, and small appliances. However, managing foam mattress pads and glassware remains a persistent

³ Information provided by Sarah Healey, Zero Waste Manager at Boston University

⁴ More information can be found on the Endicott College website

⁵ Every Thursday from 10 a.m. - 1 p.m. Harvard's Recycling and Surplus Center makes furniture, supplies, equipment, textiles, and a wide-variety of other items available free to anyone on a first-come, first-served basis.

challenge. Harvard's Office for Sustainability reports that these efforts contribute to its institutional goal of achieving zero waste by 2035⁶.

University of Massachusetts Lowell has a recycling program that collected over 2,000 pounds of clothing during Spring 2024. It also collaborates with a nonprofit organization to sanitize and repack donated materials into dorm starter kits⁷. These kits are then redistributed to incoming students, creating a circular economy within the campus.

Wellesley College employs a unique color-coded barrel system placed in residence halls to streamline donation efforts. Students can donate items such as clothing, household goods, and school supplies or retrieve items for reuse. Collected materials are stored on campus during the summer and sold in a thrift sale the following semester. Despite its ability to eliminate excess waste on campus, the process is costly, requiring significant labor, storage resources, and facility expenses, estimated at around \$10,000 to \$15,000 annually⁸. The initiative fosters a culture of reuse but continues to face challenges in managing its operational costs.

Berklee College of Music implements the "Drop, Shop + Donate" initiative, which collects and repurposes approximately 750 pounds of materials annually⁹. Items such as clothing, school supplies, and small electronics are donated to local organizations. The program is run with active involvement from the Berklee community, emphasizing waste reduction and supporting sustainability education. While the initiative achieves modest success in removing waste, its limited scale highlights opportunities for expansion to increase impact.

Challenges and Trends

Institutions consistently reported challenges managing bulky items such as mattresses, furniture, and foam mattress toppers. The most easily diverted materials included clothing, nonperishable food, and small household goods. Programs often require substantial workforce and financial investment. However, they usually yield savings by reducing landfill fees and creating positive community impacts.

⁶ For more information see, Sustainability, Harvard Office For. "Zero Waste - Harvard Office for Sustainability." *Harvard Office for Sustainability*, 7 Oct. 2024, sustainable.harvard.edu/our-plan/how-we-operate/waste.

⁷ gently used linens, blankets, towels and clothes hangers

⁸ Information provided by Jenn Garvin, Office of Sustainability's manager at Wellesley College

⁹ Information provided by Noe Iraheta-Carrillo at Berklee College of Music

Innovative Practices

Innovative approaches to waste reduction included Bentley University's swap element, which incentivized student participation, and Wellesley College's thrift sale, which repurposed donated items for resale to students. Harvard's use of a surplus center also stands out for its ability to redistribute materials within the campus community.

Ideal Program Recommendations

An ideal move-out waste management program would incorporate the following elements:

1. **Comprehensive Donation and Reuse Systems:** Programs like BU's "Goodwill, Not Landfill" and Wellesley's thrift sale demonstrate the effectiveness of diverting significant material for reuse. Institutions should partner with local organizations to streamline donation efforts and redistribute usable materials.
2. **Student Engagement and Incentives:** Programs that involve student labor, such as BU's GOAT team, or incentivize participation through swaps, like Bentley's program, have proven successful. Creating a culture of sustainability on campus can improve program outcomes.
3. **Circular Economy Initiatives:** Programs like UMass Lowell's dorm starter kits highlight the potential to create circular economies within campuses, where materials are reused or redistributed to incoming students.
4. **Sustainability Leadership and Education:** Institutions can be leaders by publicly committing to waste reduction goals, such as Harvard's zero waste by 2035. Implementing move-out programs can serve as a tangible demonstration of sustainability leadership, attracting eco-conscious students and fostering community partnerships.

Conclusion

The findings highlight the diversity of waste management strategies among Boston's colleges and universities. While some institutions have established comprehensive programs that divert significant amounts of waste, others rely on less structured methods or lack formal

systems. By implementing ideal practices such as comprehensive donation systems, circular economy models, and student engagement strategies, institutions can achieve measurable cost savings and contribute meaningfully to sustainability goals. Moving forward, campuses that adopt these approaches will reduce environmental impact and position themselves as leaders in sustainability education and practice.

Citation

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