



Break Free from Plastic Plan for Emory University



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Acknowledgments

Emory University acknowledges the Muscogee (Creek) people who lived, worked, produced knowledge on, and nurtured the land where Emory's Oxford and Atlanta campuses are now located. In 1821, fifteen years before Emory's founding, the Muscogee were forced to relinquish this land. We recognize the sustained oppression, land dispossession, and involuntary removals of the Muscogee and Cherokee peoples from Georgia and the Southeast. Emory seeks to honor the Muscogee Nation and other Indigenous caretakers of this land by humbly seeking knowledge of their histories and committing to respectful stewardship of the land.

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Glossary

Plastic is a lightweight, durable, and moldable man-made material composed of long, chain-like molecules, made from fossil fuels like oil and natural gas combined with chemical additives. Most conventional plastic does not fully biodegrade in nature.

Single-use plastics (SUPs) are plastic products designed to be used only one time before disposal (e.g., plastic drinking straws, plastic grocery bags, plastic cutlery sets).

Reusable products are durable items designed to be used multiple or many times before disposal. Reusable products may be made of metal, glass, silicon, fabric, or sturdy plastic.

Recyclable plastic products can be processed and reformed into the same product or a different product after disposal.

Compostable bioplastic is a plastic material derived from renewable plant feedstocks like corn or sugar cane that, unlike conventional plastic, can break down in a commercial compost facility (e.g., Polylactic Acid).

Circularity is a model for economic systems and resource use that prioritizes the reuse and conservation of existing resources, the regeneration of nature, and the elimination of waste and environmental degradation.

“My time with Plastic Free Emory has been a whirlwind—of small wins and larger-than-life triumphs, but also of hard calls and accepting redirection on the march toward a plastic-free campus. I look at the Break Free From Plastic Plan as an amalgamation of those moments, proof of the time, energy, and perseverance of so many students and staff along this journey. From introducing reusable to-go bowls to the Dobbs Common Table to handing out zero-waste detergent sheets to hundreds of students, we’ve turned sustainability into a core value at Emory, and this plan will keep that value alive for years to come.”



- Ashritha Kalakuntla, Class of 2028, Co-President of Plastic Free Emory

Forward by Madelyn Hill and Ashritha Kalakuntla, Co-Presidents of Plastic Free Emory

CJ O'Brien (21G) and Nithya Narayanaswamy (21Ox 23C 25PH) founded the student-led movement Plastic Free Emory (PFE) in 2020 in response to student concerns over the prevalence of single-use plastics (SUPs) across Emory's campuses. Because harmful, petroleum-based SUPs contribute to climate change, contaminate the environment, and worsen health outcomes, the PFE team advocated that Emory reduce its use of SUPs on campus.

Following the guidance of the Post-Landfill Action Network (PLAN), a non-profit that supports students in waste reduction initiatives, PFE championed the adoption of a Break Free from Plastic Pledge. After months of outreach and advocacy, PFE successfully supported "Break Free from Plastic" Student Government Resolutions on the Oxford College and Atlanta Campuses (Resolutions 54s14 and 210xR07), signaling to the university that the student body was earnest in its fight for action on plastics. In response to this widespread support, on June 15, 2021, then-President Gregory L. Fenves met with PFE and signed a Break Free from Plastic Pledge, committing Emory to reducing unnecessary single-use plastic on Atlanta and Oxford campuses.

Since the pledge, considerable improvements have been made to the state of SUP on campus: Dobbs Common Table implemented a reusable to-go bowl program, and compostable alternatives have been widely adopted. In the 2025-2026 academic year, a Break Free from Plastic Task Force of student, faculty, and staff representatives convened to implement the Break Free from Plastic Pledge. The Task Force has worked to develop the following document, a phase-out action plan to achieve the goals outlined in the pledge. Simultaneously, Plastic Free Emory remains active under a new leadership team, advancing plastic education and regulations around campus.

Despite this progress, unnecessary SUP persists at Emory in dining locations, laboratories, offices, and retail stores, as Emory's community continues to struggle with waste-sorting guidelines. Thus, it is essential that the Break Free from Plastic Pledge is fully realized, and that this new action plan is implemented promptly. By creating a standardized system for the reduction of unnecessary single-use plastics, our campus will foster an environment where all community members can make sustainable, plastic free choices every day.

Introduction

Reading The Plan

This document, Emory's Break Free from Plastic (BFFP) Plan, was developed by Emory's Office of Sustainability Initiatives and BFFP Task Force to serve as a framework and provide recommendations for the University's year-by-year SUP reduction strategy. This introductory section of the Plan provides background information on Emory's BFFP Pledge, the environmental and public health concerns associated with plastic, and the current state of single-use plastic (SUP) use at Emory. The recommendations that follow are organized by action area (e.g., Food and Dining, Research and Healthcare) and are intended to guide the plastic reduction efforts of students, faculty, staff, and community members across Emory's campuses. The pledge concludes with a Call to Action, which provides SUP reduction recommendations that are actionable by any reader.

This plan is a dynamic document with recommendations that will evolve as best practices and regional infrastructure develop. Implementation of the plan will be approached with an adaptive management framework, and the plan will be evaluated at least annually and updated as needed.

Emory's Break Free from Plastic Pledge

Emory's Break Free from Plastic (BFFP) Pledge, which can be read in full in the Appendix, commits Emory University and Oxford College to reduce the on-campus use of unnecessary SUP by:

- establishing a task force to carry out a year-by-year strategy for SUP reduction;
- continuing to use viable alternatives to SUP and implementing purchasing guidelines to eliminate the future procurement of unnecessary SUP;
- further investing in education, resources, and infrastructure to reduce SUP;
- and increasing efforts to eliminate the SUPs identified in a [City of Atlanta Ordinance](#): plastic bags, plastic straws, and Styrofoam.

The BFFP Pledge calls for the reduction of unnecessary SUP and outlines several use cases in which SUPs are deemed necessary to Emory's mission, including the use of SUPs to avoid the spread of disease, and the use of SUPs by community members who are reliant on them due to a physical disability, medical condition, financial limitation, or for teaching and research purposes. In these cases, the availability of SUPs should be maintained. The BFFP Pledge does not formally extend to Emory Healthcare facilities, but this plan contains aspirational recommendations for healthcare leaders and employees who may wish to engage in the BFFP Initiative.

The Problem with Plastic

Plastic is a lightweight and durable man-made material that can be molded into the many different single or multi-use products people around the world use each day, from plastic water bottles and straws to car tires and medical equipment. Plastic production has skyrocketed since its popularization—from 2 million metric tons produced in 1950 to over 450 million tons produced annually today.¹ Despite the popularity and convenience of plastic, the Emory community and wider world of scientists and consumers are increasingly alarmed by the environmental and health impacts of its widespread use.

Early public concern about plastic focused on the impacts of plastic on natural ecosystems. Images of sea turtles entangled in plastic litter point to a problem with plastic pollution that is also confirmed by data: since humans began manufacturing plastic, 109 million tons of plastic have accumulated in rivers while 30 million tons of plastic have accumulated in the oceans.² Because plastic can take up to 1,000 years to break down in nature, and may never fully biodegrade, the accumulation of plastic waste in waterways and other habitats could harm wildlife far into the future. Beyond local ecosystems, the lifecycle of plastic has global climate impacts, accounting for an estimated 3.4% of atmosphere-warming greenhouse gas emissions.³ For these reasons and more, SUP reduction is essential to Emory's sustainability goals.



Over 3,000 bottle caps were removed from coastline during a 2016 cleanup in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (Photo Credit: NOAA CREP)



Image of microplastics under a microscope (Photo Credit: USGS Environmental Health Program)

Plastic production and use are also increasingly linked to negative human health impacts. Both the chemical additives in plastic products (like per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances or “forever chemicals”) and microscopic plastic particles (micro- and nanoplastics) are nearly ubiquitous in the environment and human bodies.^{4,5} While the full impacts of plastic exposure are not fully understood, evidence suggests that every stage of plastic’s lifecycle, from the extraction of fossil fuels to the disposal of plastic products, poses risks to human health, including linkages to increased risk of cardiovascular disease, respiratory conditions, mental health impacts, cancer, obesity, diabetes, metabolic diseases, infertility, and developmental disorders.⁶ As a leading institution of public health, Emory has a duty to respond to these findings by limiting its community’s exposure to potentially unsafe materials.

There are also economic incentives to phasing out single-use plastic in Emory’s operations. Products intended to be used only once, like plastic and paper plates, cups, and cutlery, must be purchased, repurchased, and recycled at scale and cost. If these products can be replaced by sturdy, reusable products, Emory could save significantly over the lifecycles of certain products.

How can the plastic problem be solved? A wide variety of potential solutions to the problem of plastic waste and environmental contamination are practiced with mixed results. While many plastics are marked and marketed as recyclable, less than 5% of plastic waste produced in the United States is ever recycled.⁷ Compostable bioplastics, which are derived from renewable plant feedstock and can biodegrade in commercial composting operations, may appear to be an ideal replacement, but can only be composted in very particular conditions and contain the same potentially harmful additives and plasticizing chemicals as petroleum-based plastic. Furthermore, in the context of landfill diversion programs like Emory’s, these plastics are virtually indistinguishable from conventional plastics and are likely to be improperly sorted and processed.

While this Break Free from Plastic Plan recommends increased plastic recycling and continued use of compostable bioplastics as interim strategies for plastic reduction, Emory’s Break Free from Plastic Task Force supports Emory taking steps toward a circular system, in which resources are reused, conserved, and repaired to limit the production of new plastics and plastic waste.

SUP Use on Campus

In preparation for implementation of the BFFP Pledge, Emory's OSI conducted a landscape assessment of SUP use at Emory, which included key stakeholder interviews, site inspections, a community survey, a review of existing published guidance and policies on plastic and zero-waste systems, and an analysis of select procurement data. The key findings of this assessment, summarized here, informed the recommendations in this plan.

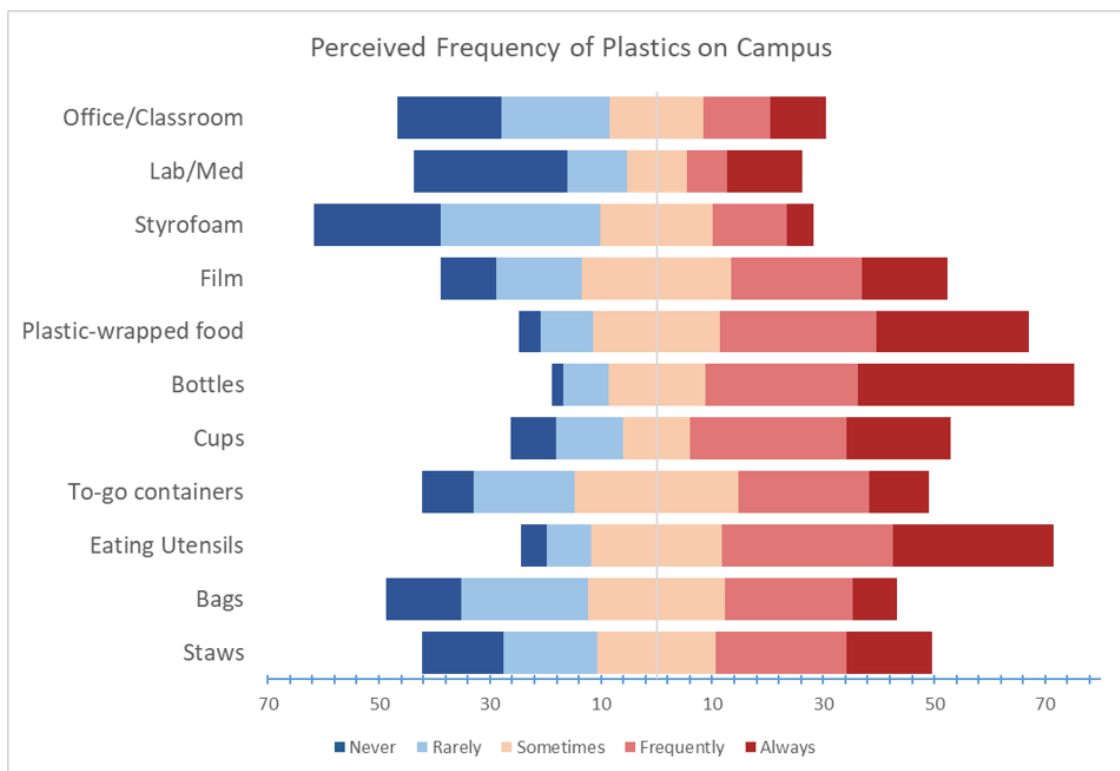
The Emory community is supportive of SUP reduction.

Results from a community survey⁸ taken by Emory students, faculty, and staff indicate that while the Emory community values convenience and affordability, it also supports the reduction of SUP on campus. Over 90% of survey respondents indicate that they are supportive of the reduction of SUP on campus and that they are concerned about the impacts of SUP on ecosystems, human health, and the global climate. Over half of survey respondents report already using reusable plastic replacements like reusable bags, to-go cups, and utensils at least frequently. These results suggest that the Emory community would respond positively to a phase out of SUP and increased access to non-plastic alternatives on campus.

Emory has already made progress toward the reduction of certain SUPs on campus.

The SUP Landscape Assessment shows that several types of SUP are already relatively rare on campus. Two items named in the BFFP Pledge, Styrofoam and plastic grocery bags, were rarely reported in community survey responses, key stakeholder interviews, or dining site visits. While plastic cutlery and to-go boxes are still frequently used and seen on campus, many of these items used in Emory-managed dining locations are made of compostable bioplastic.

There are already many programs and practices focused on SUP reduction to celebrate and continue to support at Emory. At Commencement, for example, graduates were offered aluminum water bottles instead of plastic in 2026, and, for the past few years, the graduation gowns have been made from recycled plastic water bottles. Compostable plastic products and bulk purchased food and condiments are the norm at many Emory Dining locations, and campus coffee shops offer a small discount to students who bring their own reusable cup. Hydration stations are common in Emory buildings and events. Though there is no historical baseline data to refer to, it is clear that, since adopting its Sustainability Vision in 2005, Emory has already made significant strides toward plastic reduction and circularity.



The chart shows the proportion of survey respondents who reported encountering each type of plastic "rarely," "sometimes," "frequently," "always," or "never."

Collaboration with external partners and vendors is key to achieving SUP reduction.

Emory's purchasing landscape is complex; a wide variety of Emory community members, external vendors, and partners make or contribute to purchasing decisions that may bring SUP onto Emory's campus.

The SUP Landscape Assessment indicates that Emory community members most often notice SUP on campus provided by off-campus vendors (takeout brought onto campus, Amazon packages, etc.), at catered meetings or events, and on-campus locations managed by non-Emory employees (e.g., coffee shops, restaurants). Common types of plastic noticed on campus include items such as non-compostable SUP straws and cups at cafes and soda bottles and snack wrappers in vending machines and at retail stores. Often, these items are selected and procured by partnering vendors or other third-parties. These findings were corroborated through key stakeholder interviews and site inspections and suggest that Emory must work with external vendors and suppliers to reduce the amount of SUP coming onto campus.

“As a Zero Waste Ambassador who has worked at different campus events to help Emory community members sort their trash correctly, I am always struck by how much single-use plastic comprises the total amount of waste, which then gets me thinking about what our efforts would look like if this plastic were removed from the waste stream. What a difference it would make! The Break Free from Plastic Pledge represents yet another important step for Emory in solidifying its place among US universities as a leader in sustainable practices and in educating the community about effective waste reduction practices so that they can spread the word beyond Emory.”



- Dr. Hiram Maxim, Professor of German Studies and Linguistics and Zero Waste Ambassador



Emory Zero Waste Ambassadors

BFFP Recommendations

The BFFP Pledge calls on Emory and the BFFP Task Force to implement a year-by-year SUP reduction strategy. The recommendations that follow are strategies to achieve the high-level goals outlined in the BFFP Pledge: the continued use of viable plastic alternatives; the implementation of purchasing guidelines to eliminate the procurement of unnecessary SUP; further investment in education, resources, and infrastructure to reduce SUP use at individual and institutional levels; and increased effort to eliminate plastic bags, straws, and Styrofoam.

The recommended strategies are organized by action area: the area of Emory's operations where the action could be implemented. These areas include Purchasing and Vendor Collaboration, Dining and Catering, Facilities and Infrastructure, Campus Life and Events, Healthcare and Research, Communication and Education, Progress Tracking, and Exploration.

Since all Emory community members serve in a variety of roles and engage in diverse activities on campus, many students, faculty, and staff readers will find relevant recommendations across multiple sections. For example, a student organization president who plans events might be interested in reading "Campus Life and Events," and "Communication and Education," while a procurement specialist may be most interested in "Purchasing and Vendor Collaboration," and "Progress Tracking." There are many recommended strategies that could fit under multiple action areas, so readers are encouraged to explore the whole plan and seek out the strategies most relevant to their work and life on campus.

Each recommendation is also tagged with the SUP most likely to be impacted by the strategy and the types of stakeholders (students, faculty, and/or staff) that are most likely to implement the strategy. "Named SUPs" denotes the priority plastics identified in the BFFP Pledge: straws, bags, and Styrofoam. The recommendations conclude with a Call to Action, which recommends SUP reduction actions that any Emory community member can take.

Note on "Necessary" and "Unnecessary" SUPs: "Necessary" SUPs are deemed essential to Emory's mission. These include SUPs used to avoid the spread of disease and SUPs used by community members who are reliant on them due to a physical disability, medical condition, financial limitation, or for teaching and research purposes. In these cases, the availability of SUPs should be maintained.

Purchasing and Vendor Collaboration

The BFFP Pledge calls on the Emory community to reduce the purchase and use of SUP through implementing purchasing guidelines and substituting viable alternatives to SUP.

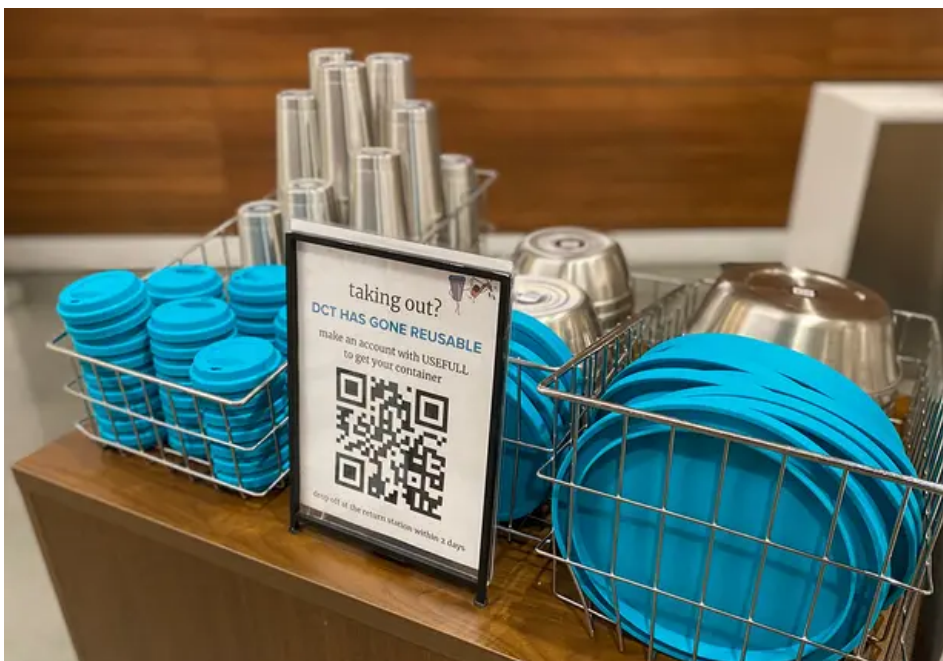
Key stakeholders: Emory community members who manage budgets, make purchases using Emory speedtypes, or negotiate vendor contracts

Recommended Strategy	SUP	Stakeholder
Adopt a commitment that disallows the purchase of unnecessary SUP straws, bags, and Styrofoam with Emory funds within each unit, division, or office. Such purchases will not be reimbursed or will not be approved in the Emory system.	Named SUPs	Faculty and staff
Adopt in all future requests for proposals and vendor contracts language that disallows the sale or distribution of unnecessary SUPs mirroring the City of Atlanta's plastic reduction ordinance: SUP bags, cutlery, straws, and Styrofoam.	Named SUPs	Staff
Pilot exclusively aluminum water and soda cans in on-campus retail locations and vending machines.	Bottles	Staff
Contractually establish take-back programs with Emory's primary vendors that allow Emory to return product packaging and select used products to the vendor for reuse, repair, or recycling.	Packaging	Staff
Collaborate with peers in the Sustainable Purchasing Leadership Council, Post-Landfill Action Network, and similar coalitions to advocate for affordable plastic-free purchasing options from common vendors.	All unnecessary SUPs	All
Develop plastic-free purchasing guidelines for Emory offices, laboratories, and event planners and publish them widely, including in Emory's purchasing platforms.	All unnecessary SUPs	Staff

Dining and Catering

The BFFP Pledge calls on the Emory community to reduce its use of unnecessary SUP, particularly straws, bags, and Styrofoam, in its Dining operations, including those managed by Emory Dining, Emory's Dining vendors, and other on-campus restaurants and food trucks.

Key Stakeholders: Emory Dining Staff; Emory's dining services vendor (currently Bon Appetit); staff members who manage contracts with dining and food service vendors



Reusable to-go bowls and cups are available for check-out in Emory's Dobbs Common Table through a partnership with USEFULL.

Recommended Strategy	SUP	Stakeholder
Expand Emory's USEFULL reusable to-go program to be present in most dining locations (e.g., Cox Hall, Rollins Dining Hall) and to provide expanded dishware options.	To-go boxes, cutlery, cups	Staff
Adopt a commitment that disallows purchase of all unnecessary SUP bags, straws, and Styrofoam in all Emory-operated dining locations.	Named SUPs	Staff
In all Emory Dining operations, retail stores, and catering operations, identify several plastic-alternative serviceware back-up products to ensure that SUP, non-compostable plastic products are never purchased or distributed, even when first-choice plastic-alternative items are unavailable, except when necessary for a medical accommodation.	To-go boxes, cutlery, cups	Staff
Purchase only compostable plastic serviceware that can be successfully composted by Emory's composting partners and is clearly marked as compostable.	Compostable SUPS	Staff
Replace the mini plastic water bottles typically used in Emory Catering boxed lunches with an aluminum alternative.	Bottles	Staff
Increase the customer discount offered for using a reusable cup at on-campus coffee shops and ensure that the discount is honored and well-advertised.	Coffee Cups	Staff
Replace standard lidded fountain drink cups in Emory Dining locations with fully compostable paper or reusable to-go options.	Cups, straws, lids	Staff
Replace SUP cups for iced drinks with clearly marked as compostable options wherever possible in campus coffee shops and cafes.	Cups, lids	Staff

Facilities and Infrastructure

The BFFP Pledge calls on the Emory community to invest in infrastructure that facilitates the reduction of unnecessary SUP use on campus.

Key Stakeholders: Emory Facilities Management; Residence Life staff; office managers; decision makers who oversee Emory's buildings, grounds, and operations

Recommended Strategy	SUP	Stakeholder
Invest in and maintain water bottle refill stations throughout all Emory buildings.	Bottles	Staff
Identify funding opportunities to cover the upfront costs of transitioning to plastic-free products and infrastructure in Emory's facilities and operations.	All unnecessary SUPs	Staff
Install clearly marked umbrella racks in Emory buildings to reduce the use of plastic umbrella bags.	Bags	Staff
Replace the plastic laundry supplies distributed in Emory's residence halls with non-plastic options.	Laundry supplies	Staff
Increase the presence of hard-to-recycle stations and associated educational signage on campus to maximize the recycling of unavoidable Styrofoam packaging on campus.	Styrofoam	Staff
Invest in water and energy-efficient dishwashers in Emory offices and residence halls where reusable serveware is commonly used.	Dishes, cups, cutlery	Staff



“Participating in Emory’s Break Free from Plastic Task Force was important to me as a student leader to see administrative support for eliminating single-use plastic use across campus. Creating comprehensive expectations surrounding plastic use on campus was an essential first step in eliminating single-use plastics and encouraging environmentally conscious practices campus wide. Conversations with administrators during Break Free from Plastic Task Force meetings helped me see an initiative I cared deeply about to completion: providing an umbrella rack outside of the dining hall to reduce the need for single-use umbrella bags.”

- Caitlin Williams, Class of 2027, RHA Sustainability Chair

Campus Life and Events

The BFFP Pledge calls on the Emory community to reduce its use of unnecessary SUP at student, faculty, and staff events and in day-to-day campus settings like offices, residence halls, and classrooms.

Key Stakeholders: student, faculty, and staff event planners; Campus Life staff

Recommended Strategy	SUP	Stakeholder
Purchase canned aluminum beverages or use bulk water dispensers at all events instead of plastic bottled water and soda.	Bottles	Students, faculty, staff
Leverage the Emory Events Exchange to identify and share best practices for plastic-free events.	All unnecessary SUPs	Staff
Develop a program through which student organizations can check out and return USEFULL dishware or similar products for meetings and events.	To-go boxes, cutlery, cups	Staff
Adopt a commitment that disallows the use of single-use Mylar balloons at Emory events.	SUP balloons	Students, faculty, staff
Maximize the deployment of a mobile Emory Card credential to reduce the production and disposal of plastic identification cards.	Cards	Students, faculty, staff

Laboratories and Healthcare

While laboratory and healthcare uses of SUP fall outside the scope of the BFFP Pledge, Emory community members in laboratory and healthcare settings can reduce their use of unnecessary SUP where feasible, with the understanding that patient health and research are critical to Emory's mission.

Key Stakeholders: leaders, purchasers, and sustainability champions in healthcare and laboratory settings

Recommended Strategy	SUP	Stakeholder
Explore opportunities for expanding infrastructure that facilitates the use of reusable supplies in Emory laboratories (i.e., washing or autoclaving infrastructure).	SUP labware	Faculty, staff
Develop and share best practices for avoiding or recycling common SUP supplies, such as plastic pipettes and gloves.	SUP labware	Faculty, staff
Explore and follow best practices from Practice Greenhealth, Joint Commission, Healthcare Without Harm, and others to reduce unnecessary SUP use in patient care.	SUP healthcare supplies	Healthcare staff



While some research processes require single-use plastics, there are still many opportunities for unnecessary single-use plastic reduction in Emory's laboratories.

“I’m proud to support Emory’s Break Free from Plastic Initiative. I believe we all have a responsibility to care for our common home. Healthcare settings are among the heaviest users of single-use plastics, and that reality comes with a responsibility to lead change. Emory’s commitment in signing the Break Free from Plastic Pledge reflects an understanding that we need to work together to tackle the challenges of our day. Clearly this is a great step in demonstrating that a world-class health system can deliver exceptional care while being a responsible steward of our environment. This initiative is an important example of aligning the work in supply chain with our broader mission to advance health and wellbeing — for our patients, our community, and our planet.”

- Noah Dunlap, Chief Supply Chain Officer at Emory Healthcare



Communications, Education, and Resources

The BFFP Pledge calls on the Emory community to develop educational materials and resources for the campus to encourage the reduction of unnecessary SUP and the use of plastic alternatives.

Key Stakeholders: student leaders; communicators; educators; and engagement staff, including but not limited to the Office of Sustainability Initiatives, Procurement, Human Resources, Orientation staff, and student plastic-reduction organizations



Emory students and the Office of Sustainability Initiatives tabling at Plastival, an event planned by Plastic Free Emory to celebrate the signature of the Break Free from Plastic Pledge, in 2021.

Recommended Strategy	SUP	Stakeholder
Identify and clearly mark plastic-free products, vendors, and caterers in America-to-go and Emory Express platforms.	All SUPs	Staff
Provide reusable utensils and water bottles to all students, faculty, and staff during orientation and onboarding.	Cutlery, bottles	Staff
Expand the BFFP Campaign into the wider community by developing a Break Free from Plastic Pledge for local businesses.	Named SUPs	Students
Develop plastic-free purchasing and plastic-free event planning training videos.	All SUPs	Students, faculty, staff
Ensure that onboarding Emory employees and student organization leaders, particularly those who will make frequent purchases in their roles, receive plastic-free purchasing training and guidance.	All SUPs	Students, faculty, staff
Develop and frequently update a list of recommended, affordable BPI-Certified compostable, paper-based, or reusable product recommendations.	All SUPs	Students, faculty, staff
Where compostable SUPs are used as a conventional SUP alternative on campus, ensure that users are educated on proper disposal in composting collection bins.	All SUPs	Staff
Work with vendors to provide plastic reduction and waste sorting training to employees in Emory's retail stores and restaurants.	All SUPs	Staff
Hold an annual BFFP Event and Campaign to continue to educate the campus on single-use plastic reduction.	All SUPs	Students, faculty, staff
Create customer-facing educational materials for Emory retail and restaurant locations that encourage plastic reduction and proper composting and recycling.	All SUPs	Staff
Train all incoming students and employees on proper waste sorting during orientation and onboarding.	All SUPs	Staff

Progress Tracking

The BFFP Pledge calls on the Emory community to mark the achievement of year-by-year SUP reduction by tracking its use of unnecessary SUP.

Key Stakeholders: staff including but not limited to the Office of Sustainability Initiatives and Procurement

Recommended Strategy	SUP	Stakeholder
Include in all future requests for proposal and vendor contracts language that requires tracking and disclosure of plastic and Styrofoam product packaging.	SUP packaging	Staff
Develop a template for data collection of unnecessary SUP reduction and alternatives to SUP adoption and adopt quantitative reduction goals.	All unnecessary SUPs	Staff
Conduct triennial SUP landscape assessments and publish results.	All unnecessary SUPs	Staff
Track the purchase of single-use plastic straws, bags, and Styrofoam and select other single-use plastics through central Procurement.	Named SUPs	Staff
Hold annual check-ins between SUP-reduction stakeholders and solicit SUP purchasing reports from key stakeholders (e.g., Emory Dining, Emory Events, etc.).	All unnecessary SUPs	Students, faculty, staff
Continue to track annual landfill diversion and recycling and compost stream contamination rates and conduct additional waste audits to assess progress.	All unnecessary SUPs	Staff

Exploration

Emory can continue to grow toward a safer and more sustainable future by exploring emerging opportunities in SUP reduction beyond the scope of the BFFP Pledge.

Key Stakeholders: Emory student, faculty, and staff researchers and thought leaders

Recommended Strategy	SUP	Stakeholder
Investigate purchasing options for snacks with less plastic packaging for sale in campus vending machines, retail locations and via online product providers (e.g. through Emory Express).	SUP packaged snacks	Students, faculty, staff
Explore opportunities to reduce reliance on compostable bioplastics over time.	Compostable SUPs	Students, faculty, staff
Expand research into the human health impacts of plastic exposure.	All SUPs	Students, faculty, staff

“Our lab is conducting research in Guatemala, assessing the impacts of plastic burning on human health. In many Global South countries, where waste management infrastructure is limited, plastics are often burned. Through this work, we have found that burning plastics releases toxic chemicals and greenhouse gases, exposing communities to harmful air pollution and exacerbating climate change.

Plastic pollution is not only a waste management issue but also a public health, air quality, and climate issue. I strongly support efforts, such as Break Free from Plastic and the forthcoming Break Free from Plastic plan, which promote sustainable alternatives and greater accountability for reducing plastic waste. By reducing our reliance on single-use plastics, we can help create a healthier and more sustainable future.”

- Dr. Eri Saikawa, Professor of Environmental Science and Director of the Emory Climate Hub



Call to Action

All Emory community members can take steps to reduce their use of SUP and implement the BFFP Pledge.

Key Stakeholders: all community members

Recommended Strategy	SUP	Stakeholder
Use reusable items like metal water bottles, fabric shopping bags, and reusable glass to-go containers in place of SUP whenever possible.	All SUPs	Emory community
Refuse unnecessary single-use plastic, like SUP grocery bags and straws, when it is offered to you.	Named SUPs	Emory community
Learn more about the Office of Sustainability Initiatives' Green Offices, Green Labs, and Sustainable Events certifications to provide guidance on SUP reduction in your office, laboratory, or on-campus event.	All SUPs	Emory community
Learn how to properly sort your waste into Emory's multi-stream system.	All SUPs	Emory community
Share the BFFP Plan and accompanying resources with your peers and colleagues.	All SUPs	Emory community

Appendix



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“Break Free From Plastic” Pledge

Emory University is ranked among the top research universities for sustainability performance, and together with Oxford College, the Emory enterprise has a long-term commitment to sustainability practices. Our community already has a robust waste diversion system, formal sustainability courses, and a [Sustainability Vision & Strategic Plan, 2025](#) that is shared by administrators, faculty, staff, and students alike. Yet, there is nothing that directly acknowledges the need to reduce unnecessary single-use plastic (SUP) consumption. Now is an opportune time to further Emory’s commitments because the City of Atlanta recently enacted [Ordinance 19-O-1418](#) to eliminate plastic bags, plastic straws and styrofoam. Emory should align with this ordinance and identify ways to reduce other unnecessary SUP as well.

Single-use plastics are known to be a source of greenhouse gas emissions, to perpetuate environmental injustices experienced mostly by marginalized communities who live close to landfills and factories where plastics are made, and to threaten wildlife and overall environmental health of our communities and ecosystems. Unfortunately, the current rate of plastic production far outweighs our ability to recycle it.

We recognize that our society relies heavily on plastic due to its disposability, durability, and convenience which makes some SUP difficult to replace entirely. The healthcare industry recommends some single-use plastic for preventing the spread of bacteria and disease. Additionally, community members with physical disabilities, medical conditions, financial limitations, or those teaching or conducting research may rely on SUP items. Therefore, we see opportunities to make progress to reduce the consumption of unnecessary SUP that does not compromise the use of plastic for these needs. Through our institutional and individual choices, SUP reduction is possible.

This pledge furthers Emory’s commitment to divert 95% of its waste from municipal landfills, support culture change towards a “reduce, repair, restore, and reuse” mentality, “cradle to cradle” purchasing, reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 45% by 2030, and reach net zero emissions by 2050 by setting out a roadmap for elimination of unnecessary SUP in our community.

By 2025, Emory University and Oxford College pledge to:

- Establish a “Plastic Free Task Force” to engage stakeholders to enact this Pledge
- Implement a year-by-year SUP reduction strategy
- Continue to use viable alternatives and implement purchasing guidelines to eliminate the procurement of unnecessary SUP in the future
- Further invest in education, resources, and infrastructure to reduce SUP use on individual and institutional levels
- Increase effort to eliminate plastic bags, plastic straws, and styrofoam in accordance with Atlanta’s Ordinance 19-O-1418

Dated here: *June 28, 2021*

By: President Fenves



Endnotes

1 OECD (2022), Global Plastics Outlook: Economic Drivers, Environmental Impacts and Policy Options, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/de747aef-en>.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Shearer JJ, Callahan CL, Calafat AM, Huang WY, Jones RR, Sabbisetti VS, Freedman ND, Sampson JN, Silverman DT, Purdue MP, Hofmann JN. Serum Concentrations of Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances and Risk of Renal Cell Carcinoma. *J Natl Cancer Inst.* 2021 May 4;113(5):580-587. doi: 10.1093/jnci/djaa143. PMID: 32944748; PMCID: PMC8096365.

5 Balch, Bridget (2024). Microplastics are inside us all. What does that mean for our health?, AAMC News, <https://www.aamc.org/news/microplastics-are-inside-us-all-what-does-mean-our-health>

6 David Azoulay et al (2019). Plastic & Health: The Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet. Center for International Environmental Law.

7 OECD (2023) – processed by Our World in Data. “Recycled” [dataset]. OECD, “Global Plastics Outlook - Plastics waste by region and end-of-life fate” [original data].

8 The SUP Landscape Assessment community survey had a small sample size of approximately 150 students, faculty, and staff. The survey was distributed through an email campaign, on-campus flyers, and OSI’s social media channels. Notably, Emory Healthcare employees were underrepresented in survey responses. While useful for pointing to trends and gathering the ideas of the Emory community, the survey may not be fully representative of the Emory community.

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