

# CSULB's Path to a Zero-Waste Future

On a sunny Tuesday afternoon, dozens of students head out of the University Student Union(USU) food court, with snack wrappers and coffee cups in their hands. Many just want a snack between classes or on their way home. As they leave, they may need to throw some trash away. As they approach the trash cans, they notice a set of color-coded waste bins. These bins are for recycling and the landfill. Many pause and take a second to read the pictures provided to see where their trash goes.

Scenes like this have become part of daily life at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). At CSULB, waste reduction is no longer just a side project, it's a priority.

Intending to achieve "zero waste" by 2030, CSULB is one of many college campuses that are pushing for a more sustainable future. CSULB plans on achieving this goal by enforcing a combination of things, for example, policies, education on waste to students, infrastructure, and student action. The university hopes to reduce waste by diverting material from landfills, and hopefully building long-term habits that extend beyond campus.

"When we say 'zero waste,' we're talking about diverting at least 90% of our solid waste away from landfills through recycling, composting, and reusing," said Amanda Morgan, waste diversion coordinator at CSULB. "It's a major cultural shift, and we're still in the early stages, but we're making progress."

## The Waste Not Program: More Than Just Bins

One of CSULB's biggest zero-waste efforts is the Waste Not program. This program is a waste diversion and education initiative that is run by the Office of Sustainability at CSULB. Waste Not was launched in 2020, and the main goal of the program is to reduce the amount of waste produced on campus and improve how it's sorted.

"We realized that the bin system wasn't enough if people didn't know how to use it," Morgan explained. "So we created the program to help educate the campus community about sorting waste properly and reducing single-use items overall."

The Waste Not program places trained student educators around campus, usually at peak hours, to help people sort correctly. This program is also known to host workshops and zero-waste events.

"A lot of people think their trash is going to be recycled just because they toss it in the blue bin," said Jazmin Strickland, a student at CSULB and a Waste Not volunteer. "But if there's food or liquid in their trash, the entire bin can get rejected."

As of spring 2025, CSULB diverts around 55% of its waste. As a very active college campus, 55% is a solid number, but still far from the 90% goal the school wants to reach.

## **Banishing Single-Use Plastics**

Another huge policy CSULB has placed in favor of supporting a zero-waste future is the California State University (CSU) Single-Use Plastics Policy. This policy was adopted in 2021 and has been implemented across all 23 California State University campuses. The CSU policy restricts the sale and distribution of single-use plastic straws, bags, cutlery, and water bottles on campus.

To help incoming students adjust to this policy, CSULB offers reusable water bottles at orientation and sometimes even reusable utensils during zero-waste events. Also, a part of their efforts, Hydration stations are located on the campus. CSULB hopes that this encourages students to refill rather than repurchase bottled drinks.

Still, unfortunately, it isn't this easy, and not everyone's on board. Some off-campus food vendors or student groups hosting events sometimes bring in plastic utensils and packaging, either unaware of the policy or out of convenience.

“I think it is great that the campus is doing this,” said Steven Lopez, a student at CSULB. “But if we are working towards this goal, the food vendors that come on campus should follow it too.”

## **Sustainability in the Classroom and Beyond**

Zero waste isn't just a facilities issue, it's becoming a part of CSULB's culture. The university offers sustainability-focused classes. These classes are offered in departments from Environmental Science and Policy to Journalism and Design. It is also good to note that professors are even incorporating waste topics into their syllabi to help students think critically about consumption and climate.

“It's crazy because I would have never thought that I would be learning about sustainability efforts in a Journalism class,” said Enrique Blanco, who is a second-year student at CSULB.

These sustainability efforts don't just play a role on campus and inside the classrooms. Outside the classrooms, student organizations also play a key role in advancing the university's green goals. Student groups like Green Campus, Environmental Science and Policy Club, and Beach Pride Events' Sustainability Committee organize everything from electronic waste drives to clothing swaps to educational tabling.

“There's a lot of enthusiasm among students,” said Kaia Bradbury, a student who is a part of the Green Campus group. “We've hosted picnics, we also helped plan Earth Week events, and have even distributed reusable tote bags at the farmers market. That way, students want to be part of the solution and know how to be.”

## **The Roadblocks to Zero Waste**

Despite all the improvements the campus has had, achieving zero waste by 2030 won't be easy. It is easier said than done.

One of the biggest challenges CSULB faces is **contamination**. When students or even staff throw food waste into recycling bins or place plastic wrappers into compost bins, entire loads may be unusable and be rejected.

CSULB also faces the challenge of changing habits in a large and always-changing population. With over 38,000 students and thousands of faculty and staff, ongoing education of sustainable efforts is crucial.

“Every year, new students come to campus. These students may have never recycled in their” said Vicki Lee, who is a student at CSULB. “ I remember when I first came to campus, the bins were so confusing, but I eventually learned and now I understand why we do it. We have to keep repeating the message in creative ways so the newer and younger classes understand.”

Still, CSULB is optimistic. New waste stations are being installed with clearer signage, and more compost bins are being added to residence halls and academic buildings. CSULB is doing everything it can to achieve its goal, but nothing can be achieved if the community doesn't step up as well. If you would like to learn more about the Waste Not program, you can find more information at <https://www.csulb.edu/sustainability/wastenot>.

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