

# Reusable To-Go Ware Options for HBS

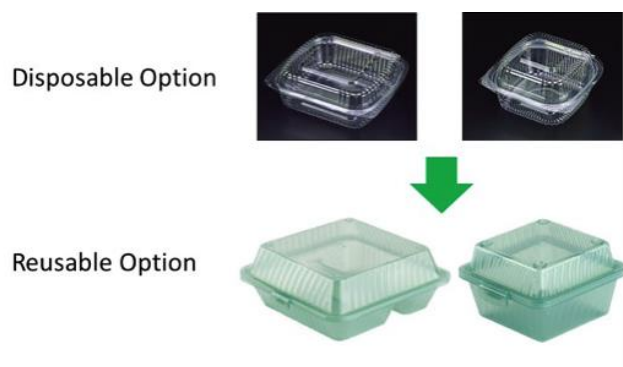
My project as a [Student Sustainability Associate](#) was to look for ways to either reduce or eliminate the impact of disposable to-go containers on Harvard Business School's waste metric.

## Background

Several observations stood out to me when I started looking into students' usage patterns with the current to-go containers. A large portion of students didn't realize that all of the to-go-ware was compostable. Many reported that containers with a recycled paper appearance were more evident, but most people didn't realize that the clear "plastic" clamshell containers were also compostable. The other SSAs and I made sure to reiterate this fact throughout the year to try and change people's behavior. When I followed up with students throughout the year many reported that they were indeed using the appropriate waste receptacle for the containers.

Disposing of material properly is important, but the ideal solution would reduce usage in the first place. More than 80% of students reported eating lunch in Spangler or Aldrich during the week. Approximately 70% of students eating in Spangler were observed using disposable to-go-ware despite not actually leaving the cafeteria. When asked why, the most common responses were:

- "I always get a container like this, I've never thought about using a china plate or bowl."
- "I like to have the optional to eat somewhere else if I can't find someone to eat with in Spangler."
- "I like to use a to-go container for my salad so I can mix in the salad dressing."



My solution to the unneeded use of disposable to-go containers is to replace them with reusable to-go-ware. The new containers would be aesthetically similar to the existing options, but they would actually be more resilient to leaks, all while still allowing people to eat lunch outside of Spangler.

Furthermore, the to-go containers have expected lifetimes of over 1000 uses and cost around \$4 each. Given the current price of the disposable options, these new containers would pay for themselves several times over during their lifetime.

The biggest challenge associated with the use of reusable containers is the logistics of collection. From benchmarking universities with reusable to-go-ware programs, I propose that HBS pursue one of the following three options.

## Option 1: The honor system

Students and staff would find the typical to-go-ware switched out for reusable containers. They would be able to take these free-of-charge on the assumption that they would return them to one of three drop-off locations in high traffic areas such as Spangler, Aldrich, or Morgan. The honor system would require a staff member to pick up containers from the non-Spangler locations after each meal, but no one would have to staff the areas full time. A downside is that Spangler isn't a closed dining area. Outside parties that pick lunch up here and then leave campus to eat would be able to take a container, reducing the likelihood that it would be returned. This problem could be averted by charging people without an HBS ID and charging them once they return the container to the cash register during their next visit.

## Option 2: The token system

Every student and staff member would receive a physical token at the start of the year. Diners from outside of HBS would have the option to purchase a token for \$5. The token could then be traded in at the cash register to wave the \$5 fee associated with use of the container. Once the user is finished with their meal they could bring the empty container to a pre-determined location within Spangler where a member of the dining team would give them back their token. While this method would help prevent the theft of containers it would require re-staffing the Restaurant Associate team to make sure containers could be easily returned throughout the day.

## Option 3: The [AGREENOZZI](#) system

This is an automated solution nearly identical to Option 2. The major difference is the price and the convenience for the HBS employees staffed on container collection. Bins would be returned to the [AGREENOZZI](#) machine(s) that would be located somewhere in Spangler and the customer would receive their token back. There is also the potential to have an electronic token placed on HBS IDs which would negate the need to remember the physical token each day. The downside is the price.

Each machine costs more than \$10,000. Each machine can only handle 125 bins before they need to be emptied so having only one would not be feasible.



## Conclusion

Each option has strengths and drawbacks. Furthermore, the downside to implementing a reusable to-go-ware program are the increased water use associated with more dishes to wash. It would be reasonable to expect at least 20,000 additional gallons of water to be used by the dishwasher each year. The return location(s) will also need to fit in with the aesthetic of HBS and it must be placed in a location that is convenient enough to encourage a quick return to reduce the number of containers in circulation at any given time. Lastly, determining whether HBS should switch entirely to reusable containers or whether the School should retain the option for disposables will also need to be addressed. Despite all of these unknowns, I am confident that the HBS community will be able to easily adopt the containers in the coming years. Enough schools and institutions have already done so for both the environmental and cost benefits, proving the viability of such an option.