Increasing Friendlier container returns at Seneca: making reusable containers the default choice on campus

Presented by:
Fei Ling Lee
Ana Calero
Thi My Trinh Nguyen
Thi Tuyet Nhung Nguyen

March 9, 2026

Seneca can increase container returns to 65% by making the Friendlier program clearer, easier, and more visible through a low-cost awareness campaign.

- Although reusable containers and a 50-cent deposit incentive exist, many students remain unaware or confused about how the system works.
- The main barrier is behavioural friction, not lack of sustainability interest.
- A campaign focused on visual instructions, cafeteria visibility, and digital reminders can normalize container returns and drive participation.



Seneca's Friendlier program is underperforming because students lack awareness and clarity about how to return containers.

- Current container return rates are around 40%, significantly below the 65% goal.
- Many users do not know where to return containers or assume they must rinse them first.
- Without stronger participation, single-use packaging waste will remain high, limiting the program's environmental impact.



The campaign must increase awareness, improve understanding, and drive container return behaviour.

- **Increase awareness:** Ensure students and staff recognize the Friendlier program and its purpose.
- **Improve understanding:** Clearly communicate the simple return process (Empty → Scan → Return).
- **Drive behaviour change:** Increase container return rates from 40% to 65% by encouraging routine participation.



Seneca students are the primary drivers of container return behaviour because they are the largest cafeteria users.

- **Primary Audience:** Seneca Students (18–30+)

Heavy users of campus cafeterias and frequent mobile and social media users. Value convenience, affordability, and quick processes. Support sustainability but will only participate if the action is easy and visible.

- **Secondary Audience:** Staff and Faculty

Regular cafeteria users with more routine schedules. Often supportive of sustainability initiatives and can model responsible behaviour on campus. Require clear reminders and convenient return points to participate consistently.



The Friendlier system already exists at Seneca, but behavioural and communication barriers limit participation.

- **Company:** Seneca already has the Friendlier system and multiple communication channels (digital screens, social media, events), but program visibility and clarity remain low.
- **Customers:** Students support sustainability but prioritize speed and convenience, meaning participation drops when the process feels unclear or inconvenient.
- **Competitors:** The real competitor is habitual disposal behaviour, as throwing containers away is often faster than returning them.
- **Collaborators:** Partners such as Friendlier, cafeteria vendors, sustainability teams, and student ambassadors can help promote and normalize container returns.
- **Context:** Sustainability is a priority for universities and students, but participation increases when the sustainable action is simple and easy to complete.

Several promotional strategies could increase awareness and participation in the Friendlier program.

Alternative 1: Clear Return Bin Signage

- Large visual signage, arrows, and floor decals guide students to return bins.
- Simple messaging like “Finished? Return your container here.”
- Focuses on influencing behaviour at the moment students finish eating.

Alternative 2: Friendlier App Rewards Promotion

- Promote app features and highlight environmental impact metrics.
- Messages such as “Containers returned this week: 2,300.”
- Builds collective sustainability pride and engagement.

Alternative 3: “Friendlier Challenge Week”

- Temporary campus challenge with pop-up booths, demonstrations, and giveaways.
- Creates short-term excitement around the program.
- Increases awareness but may not produce long-term behaviour change.

Alternative 4: “Digital Awareness Campaign”

- short videos or carousels explaining the process:“Eat → Empty → Scan → Return.”
- Shown on campus screens and shared on social media.
- Makes the process easier to understand through quick visual learning.

Alternatives Evaluation

Evaluation of Alternatives

Questions	Alt1- **Signage**	Alt 2- **App Rewards**	Alt 3- **Ambassadors**	Alt 4- **Digital Campaign**
Is the solution low-cost and easy to implement?	Yes	Moderate	Yes	Yes
Does it help students clearly understand how to return containers?	Yes	No	Yes	Moderate
Can it influence students at the moment they finish eating	Yes	No	Yes	No
Does it increase awareness of the program?	Moderate	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can it be implemented using Seneca's existing resources?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Signage and student ambassadors are the most effective for influencing behaviour at the moment students finish eating, while digital promotion helps increase awareness. A combined approach using cafeteria signage, digital communication, and ambassador engagement best supports both awareness and behaviour change.

A convenience-focused awareness campaign will increase container returns by making the Friendlier process simple, visible, and routine.

- Promote the program through Seneca's existing channels (digital screens, social media, newsletters, student portal) to increase awareness and repeated exposure.

- Use clear visual instructions and in-cafeteria materials (posters, table cards, return-bin signage with arrows/icons) to simplify the process and guide behaviour at the moment of disposal.

- Support the campaign with short explainer videos, social media reminders, and student ambassador demonstrations during sustainability events, such as posting during "Sustainability Week" at Seneca, reinforcing container returns as a normal campus habit and helping reach the 65% return target.

