

ASU's new AI-powered 'Oscar Sort' devices help with recycling decisions

Interactive screens on all 4 campuses will reduce 'wish cycling' and increase diversion

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Have you ever held your empty coffee cup, confused by the choice of waste bins in front of you? Is it recyclable? Compostable? Headed to the landfill?

Arizona State University has installed five new AI-powered "Oscar Sort" devices on its four campuses to help community members figure out their trash. The screens are hung above bins at these locations:

Downtown Phoenix campus: Student Center @ the Post Office

Polytechnic campus: Student Union

Tempe campus: Memorial Union and Student Pavilion

West Valley campus: University Center

The interactive screens scan each waste item and identify whether it belongs in a compost, recycling or landfill bin. Users also can play a trivia game and find out more about recycling.

The devices are meant to do two things: reduce the bad recycling and increase the good.

“People were doing what's called ‘wish cycling’ — putting things in the recycling bin that they were just hoping would get recycled,” said Alana Levine, director of [Zero Waste at ASU](#), who coordinated the installation.

Two common items that people “wish cycle” are plastic forks and plastic straws.

“All of the stuff that we recycle at ASU goes to a materials recovery facility where it goes through mechanical separation using different technologies,” Levine said. “But the straws and the forks and things like the lids from soda cups become contamination in the paper-recycling stream because the mechanical separation just doesn't recognize them the right way. So this is trying to prevent that.”

Oscar Sort is also intended to keep recyclable items like water bottles from being thrown in the landfill bin along with actual trash.

ASU did not pay for the Oscar Sorts, which were placed on campus through a partnership between the manufacturer, Intuitive AI, and Coca-Cola, which advertises on the device screens.

Oscar Sort stations can be programmed for each location and the technology “learns” the more it is used.

The devices collect data on the items scanned — but not on people. So far, the data shows that coffee cups are the most commonly scanned items, which will help the university promote reusable alternatives and come up with better waste management strategies.

“So maybe we can do some education where coffee cups are being sold so that people can more intuitively understand where they go, whether they have the Oscar Sort to help them or not,” Levine said.

ASU acquired an early version of the technology in 2021, but it was glitchy and unreliable. Intuitive AI describes the newer Oscar Sorts as “centralized zero-touch, zero-waste stations that gamify recycling and boost diversion.”

Oscar Sorts are being used at arenas, universities and airports, and the company is beta-testing Oscar Pocket, a personal version of Oscar Sort.

The name seems to be a cheeky nod to Oscar the Grouch, the garbage-can-dwelling denizen of “Sesame Street,” but the [company has said](#) that Oscar is an acronym for “object scanner and recognition.”

The new devices are just one way that ASU is working toward its sustainability goals through institutional, community and personal actions. Zero Waste will soon start a campaign to promote reusable containers.

“We have a goal of reducing single-use plastics by 90% by 2027, like water bottles, straws and those darn plastic forks that I mentioned,” Levine said.

“We're working closely with our dining services provider because a lot of those single-use plastics come through food service. So we're working on the contractual end of things.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU's new AI-powered recycling bin, called Oscar Sort (as seen here in the La Sala Ballroom building on the West Valley campus), not only offers real-time guidance but also acts as an interactive learning tool. There are five Oscar Sort devices across the four ASU campuses. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)

From June 1 to Aug. 9, Oscar has helped 1,402 people who approached for guidance.

Some of the common items Oscar has identified and helped people sort include:



571

coffee cups

373

bottles

371

food boxes

361

cans

No caption