

# Reusable Bags for the Western Michigan University Bookstore

April 20, 2012

## **Report Authors:**

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## **Project Synopsis:**

The goal of this project was to promote reusable bag usage at the WMU bookstore. Our overall aim was to decrease plastic bag use and waste. We began with a vision of a reusable bag program, which offered incentives when purchasing items from the bookstore. Although at this time, an incentive program is out of reach, we have started increasing campus awareness of the benefits of using reusable bags and their availability at the bookstore. We hope that our work will be continued in the future.

## **Methodology:**

We used many different methods in order to gather proper data to make this project a success. First, we looked into previous project proposals to find out if anyone had started researching this topic before us. Second, we started conducting interviews with key players involved with all aspects of the bookstore. Third, we studied best practice examples at WMU and on other campuses throughout the country.

After speaking with Dr. Glasser and Matt Hollander we were able to find out that there had previously been some work done on the topic of reusable bags at WMU bookstores. One study in particular caught our attention, a project by Andrew Furton in the spring of 2009. Andrew conducted interviews of 200 students throughout campus, asking them questions pertaining to reusable bag use. This survey was an integral part in getting our own research off the ground.

We also conducted multiple interviews with staff throughout the university. We met with Dr. Glasser and Matt Hollander from the Office of Sustainability, Judy Gipper - Director of Dining Services, Carolyn Noack – Solid Waste Reduction Manager, Tanya Wolfe – Supplies Purchasing, and Terry Hudson – WMU Bookstore Director. All of these meetings provided us with valuable information and insight, which was essential to making a successful project.

Our final method was to study what other campuses and WMU are doing in regards to reusable bags usage. We looked for Universities similar to WMU who were pioneering ways to reduce plastic bag use. Through our research we were able to find two schools, which fit the criteria we were looking for. These universities were the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Colorado at Boulder. When looking for best practices on campus we found that the WMU Dining Services does not provide plastic bags to students for carry out, and they have recently eliminated plastic bags in their department. All of these insights helped to guide our project in a positive direction.

## Conclusions:

While our vision of a reusable bag incentive program at the bookstore may have been yet out of reach, we found that currently for WMU, promoting awareness of the benefits and availability of these bags is most important. According to 2009 survey results, 83% of students surveyed did not know reusable bags were available for purchase at the bookstore. As a result, the bookstore has been unable to sell its supply of reusable bags. We believe that more suitable, cost-effective bags, possibly from our suggested options, should be ordered and made available for purchase. Then, an incentive program can be into place without fear of increasing costs to WMU. Slowly we can switch from plastic to reusable. The end goal should be to almost completely replace the plastic bags with reusable bags and maintain this practice without any extra incentive. We hope that one day the bookstores will be able to operate much like the dining services bag program, eliminating the need for plastic bags on campus.

## Recommendations:

In order to progress toward the goal of a campus free of plastic bags, we recommend the following:

- The bookstore must maintain the reusable bags display in an area that is highly visible to customers.
- Cashiers at the bookstore should ask if a bag is needed, and remind customers of the reusable bags available.
- Keep advertisements posted online and around campus, especially during the beginning and end of the semesters, when the bookstore is most busy.
- The bookstore should reduce the number of plastic bags purchased each year and consider the purchase of additional reusable bags.

## Contacts:

### Dining Services

- *Judy Gipper*, Director of Dining Services

### Waste Reduction

- *Carolyn Noack*, Solid Waste Reduction Manager

### Office of Sustainability

- *Harold Glasser*, Executive Director of Campus Sustainability

- *Matt Hollander*, Coordinator of Sustainability Projects

### WMU Bookstore

- *Terry Hudson*, Director of the WMU Bookstores

### Busters

- *Tanya Wolfe*, Supplies Purchasing – Busters