

On Campus Thrift Store

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ENVS 410: Appropriate Technology and Sustainability- The campus as a Living Laboratory

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## Executive Summary

In 2008, Western Michigan University President John Dunn set out to make this University a nationwide leader in campus sustainability. With his support and vision, Western Michigan University signed the *Talloires Declaration* and created the Universitywide Sustainability Committee (PUSC). The steps he took did not go unnoticed. In 2010 the Sustainable Endowments Institute came out with their annual College Sustainability Report Card. The report card gave WMU an overall grade of B in sustainability. Although this was a good start there is more to be done.

Every year, over 24,000 students call Western Michigan University home. During their time in college, students generate an enormous amount of waste. Included in this waste are many things that can be recycled or reused like furniture, clothes, appliances, etc. Instead, through either laziness or ignorance, students throw things into landfills that other students would love to have.

This waste could be avoided if students were afforded the opportunity to donate their items to an on-campus thrift store/re-use center. Although Western Michigan already has a similar program like this in “Trash to Treasures”, it is not enough. “Trash to Treasures” is a program that allows for dorm residents to donate their unwanted goods to local charities. Unfortunately, this program is geared only towards dorm residents and a vast majority of their donations come during move out week. Alternatively, an on campus thrift store would take donations all year and would be open to any student or staff member at our university. The store would provide students with an outlet to get rid of things they don’t want in an eco-friendly way, and it would allow other students a chance to purchase gently used items at a steep discount.

Because of this, I propose that Western Michigan University creates a student-run, on-campus thrift store. The thrift store will not only reduce the amount of reusable goods that are thrown away every day, it will also give back to the students and community, and it will provide a tangible, constant reminder that Western Michigan is committed to sustainability.

Through my research, I have found that starting an on campus thrift store requires little to no start up money. In fact, of all the schools I surveyed only two schools required start up money and both of these costs were inexpensive (\$250 and \$750). The benefits however, are enormous. Of the schools I’ve surveyed, almost all have reported that their establishments were met with

great enthusiasm from not just students but staff and faculty as well. Because of the large demand, most schools actually had to expand the size of their stores to meet the needs of their students. With a low-to-no start up cost, and a huge potential to reduce waste and promote a sustainable campus, this is a great project to implement at WMU.

### **Introduction**

To further advance sustainable practices at WMU, students need to be aware of the steps our school is taking to be a progressive, sustainable institution. One way to promote an eco-friendly university is creating an on-campus, student-run thrift shop.

The goal of my project was to research and discover the best ways to reduce waste at Western Michigan University. Through my research, I have come across ways other schools are doing their part to reduce the amount of things sent to the landfill. For example, at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, every year students participate in a “Take it or Leave it” program. This program has similar goals of a thrift store or our very own “Trash to Treasures”. It is a loosely organized one week event at the end of the school year. Ultimately, both programs and a thrift store both have the same goal- putting reusable items back in student’s hands.

When President Dunn signed his name to the *Talloires Declaration*, he was promising the school would do a number of things to promote a sustainable culture. With his signature came the promise to “set an example of environmental responsibility by establishing... practices of resource conservation, recycling, waste reduction and environmentally sound operations.” Based on what I have found, a thrift establishment is a good start to fulfill most if not all of that promise. Western Michigan would attach its name to an “environmentally sound operation” with the ultimate goal to reduce waste and recycle.

WMU prides itself on being a progressive leader in sustainability. The shop offers a very unique and practical way for Western Michigan to help fulfill its goals. The school could ignore the fact that everyday students throw away unnecessary things in landfills or WMU could chose to be different and provide their students with a great opportunity to recycle their unwanted items.

An on campus thrift store does more than recycle used goods back to students; it also serves as a way for our students to connect with our school. For example a store like this could be the face of sustainable efforts at Western Michigan. Although there are actions all over

campus reducing waste and promoting a sustainable atmosphere, a store, from just its size and enthusiasm alone would allow people to see that WMU is promoting a sustainable culture on campus.

In terms of dollars, the store will cost the school nothing. The only cost to the school would be space. However, there are some unused spaces on campus, like the Valley Three Dorms. This project could be proposed to the newly passed Sustainability Fund. If the allocations committee deems it worthy, they could finance the start up costs (again, a relatively inexpensive project) and the shop would then be able to sustain itself through its profits.

Another benefit of this establishment would be to allow students to gain class-room credit through work done with the store. Students would be able to apply their classroom knowledge to real world problems. A business major could get real life experience running a business; marketing majors could hone their skills promoting the shop. Students would be able to build on their strengths and explore their passions through the store.

This store also lessens the hassle of shopping to students with no off campus transportation. Students without off campus transportation could benefit from being able to walk to campus to shop. For those that do have transportation, the luxury of being able to stop into the store between classes, instead of going out of their way to the mall to buy clothing, would save them time and gas.

An on-campus thrift store could foster school spirit. For example, the shop could offer free clothes to students who donate their Western apparel or could give away any Western clothing they receive. This would put inexpensive, school merchandise back in student's hands. Another way this business could benefit our campus is that it could provide students who volunteer on campus with a thank-you gesture. For example, for every hour a student volunteers, they could earn a coupon for free merchandise from the store. Promotional events from the store could benefit charities. A fashion show by the Merchandising Opportunities Design Association (MODA) with donated clothing could raise environmental awareness with profits going to charity, and it would give students in fashion related majors another chance to utilize their classroom skills.

As I spoke to students about the creation of an on campus store, more than one suggested that art students should be allowed to sell their art there. Many art students end up spending their

own money on supplies (one student estimated she spent over 400 dollars this year for extra art supplies) and often throw out or give away the surplus jewelry or other art work they create. This would give students an outlet to make money selling something they love and it would allow our campus to see what is being created by our peers while giving us a chance to buy the things we like.

Finally, the store would give back to the students. Through my research, I came across a school that gave away business apparel to students in need. This could be implemented at WMU to Seita students. Seita students at WMU are those who have aged out of foster care. The program is designed to help make the transition from foster care to school easier. Any donated professional clothing could be given, at no charge, to students who are part of that program.

### **Methodology and Data**

To determine how Western Michigan University could create a student-run thrift business, I researched many colleges with on campus thrift stores. My methodology was straight forward. I contacted all schools I found with a thrift store and sent those in charge of said stores a questionnaire. Based on my research I was able to find nine schools across the country that have student-run thrift stores, or a closely related program<sup>1</sup>. Of the nine schools I came across and contacted, five of those schools filled out the comprehensive questionnaire I sent them<sup>2</sup>. The results of the questionnaire were all consistent and provided me with a good reference point<sup>3</sup>.

Based on the results of my questionnaire, I found many similarities to their answers. For example, most schools had a low start-up cost, were completely backed by their school, and almost all surveys indicated that student response to the businesses have been tremendous.

The most consistent thing I found during my research was the importance of location. Almost every school said that their two largest problems with the shops were not being

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<sup>1</sup> Of the nine schools I came across, one was a “floating” store that held sales at different locations throughout campus of items that were donated to them. Another store was just off campus (but catered to students and staff) and was run by a volunteer organization. Yet another school didn’t actually see anything at their store, everything was given away for free.

<sup>2</sup> One school (Santa Fe) had two people I contacted. Both people filled out surveys so I had six responses from five schools.

<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire and all the responses are included at the back of this report.

accessible enough to students (location) and not being large enough to accommodate the demand their establishments generate. In fact, almost every school said they have had to move their store based on the demand the students had for their items. With that being said, I think it would be a lot easier to start too big than too small. I recommend that the store start in a large, well-trafficked room, and if need be, could be scaled back depending on the response students have to it. To ensure this project is successful, it is imperative to have the right location, an area easily accessible to everyone on campus and a room with enough space to support the demand.

In addition to researching schools, I first contacted and met with Carolyn Noack, manager of recycling and waste reduction here at WMU. I also spoke with Steve Palmer, director of the residence halls at WMU. Both people were able to provide very useful information and were invaluable helping me complete my project.

### **Examples of Best Practice on Campus**

Although a thrift store is unique to Western Michigan's campus, there are things being done around here that relate to this topic. As noted earlier, Western Michigan University has a program in place that allows for dorm residents to recycle their unwanted goods. The three year old "Trash to Treasures" program has been very successful. During the time I spent corresponding with Mr. Palmer, he said "Trash to Treasures has been a tremendously successful program." In fact, the program has reduced dumpsters and waste going to the landfill by up to 40 percent. The busiest time of the year is during dorm move out. Three weeks before the move out, promotional posters are put up around campus and in the dorms, and RAs encourage participation.

Another example of a practice like this is a "free-free market" put on by Nola Wiersma. A "free-free market" is a market that takes any donation from anybody. People are then allowed to take anything they want, free of charge. During the 2009-2010 school year she held two markets. Through my correspondence with her, she said the market has had a great turn out and she is able to promote her through event through GoWMU, facebook events, talking with people about it, chalking, flyering, myspace, and using the ENVS listserv.

### **Best Practices on Other Campuses**

For simplicity sake, I have outlined the best redeeming qualities of on campus thrift stores around the country. I have only included those schools that filled out questionnaires.

### **Saints ShareWear, Santa Fe College**

Saints ShareWear is a self funded establishment that is completely run by volunteers. Since its inception in December 2008, demand has caused it to move its location into a 1083 sq. ft. area. The store only takes used men's, women's and children's clothes, shoes and purses. Everything in the store is sold for a dollar. The shop is opened every Wednesday for two hours during lunch and the first Tuesday and last Thursday of the month. The store averages 20-30 people each week, making about \$100 dollars during that time. It has sold roughly 8,000 items since it opened. All profits are split three ways:

- Book scholarships for career service employees or their dependents pursuing their education.
- Needy family fund.
- Career Service general fund.

It took the school a month and \$200 to get the store running.

### **ReCellar, St. Lawrence University**

ReCellar started in 2008 as a way to "prevent usable items from ending up in the dumpsters when students move out of their dorms at the end of the year." The business is completely self funded but is run by student employees. The store is open six hours during the week, and four on the weekend. It sells clothes for \$0.25, or a \$1.00 a bag, shoes and coats for \$0.50-\$1.00, and kitchenware and school supplies for \$0.10-\$0.50. Electronics range from \$0.50-\$5.00, and furniture is sold for \$5.00-\$10.00. Donation boxes are placed in dorms during move out specifically for the store. The school is home to 2,300 students and their shop averages around 30 people a week. All profits go to maintaining the store. The store was made possible by volunteers (no start up cost) and took about a month.

### **First Impressions, Northampton Community College**

Not technically a thrift store, First Impressions opened a year ago and offers men's and women's suits, sport coats, dresses and accessories for free to financially strapped students who



need business attire for job and college admission interviews. Over 32,000 students attend NCC<sup>4</sup>. This store is opened the first Monday and Tuesday of the month and is run completely by volunteers. This was started in a month's time with around \$250 in start up costs. It has anywhere from 200-250 items in the store at a single time and averages 10-15 students a week<sup>5</sup>. Unlike any other place I surveyed, this store offers a chance for students to earn class-room credit through student learning projects. Majors in business, marketing, sociology, etc. can earn school credit through the store.

### **SmiTHrift, Smith College**

Still in its planning stages, SmiTHrift is currently a “floating” thrift store that holds sales of student donated clothing semi-regularly. The idea of the store is four years in the making. Currently, students are trying to secure a permanent home for their store. Their plan is to be a volunteer based, student run thrift store. All profits from their other sales have gone to local charities. SmiTHrift plans to hold an annual fashion show from items donated to them. They would then auction off the clothes with all profits going to charity.

### **The Sacred Heart Thrift Store, Sacred Heart University**

Sacred Heart Thrift Store is non-profit student run thrift store. The store is open over 40 hours each week selling gently used clothing, electronics, books, kitchen and dorm supplies, appliances, furniture, and other college essentials. The store was started through a grant and employees seven students. The store has been very profitable, making over \$2,000 since it opened five months ago. Almost 6,000 students go to SHU. The store donates its earnings to a different charity each month. Most items are priced 50 cents-\$3. Students can earn discounts though volunteering. Any student who volunteers at the school can earn coupons (each hour volunteered is a worth a coupon for a dollar off) that can be redeemed at the store. Sacred Heart estimates it gets 80 percent of its donations for the year during dorm move out.

## **Discussion**

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<sup>4</sup> This includes many part time students and students who take their full curriculum online, never venturing to campus

<sup>5</sup> The store attracts most kids by appointment and is only open to the public for a few hours every month.

The results of my research show just how easy starting a second hand store on campus can be. With the passing of Western Michigan's Sustainability Fund Initiative, securing any funds to start this store up is now practical. This store is very inexpensive way to raise campus awareness about WMUs sustainability goals.

This store is not intended to take away from charities that already benefit from WMUs "Trash to Treasures program." In fact, many schools I came across donate any unwanted goods in their stores to local charities to make room for all the donations they receive. The store could easily put a time limit on their merchandise; anything that has stayed for over a certain amount of time could then be donated to those in need.

The responses to the surveys I sent out provided a thorough stepping stone to creating a successful campus thrift store. The common answers between the surveys helped me develop an outline that would hopefully lead to the creation of a second hand establishment here at WMU.

### **Limitations of Analysis and Future Work**

One noticeable gap in my research is the lack of a student response survey. I may have gotten ahead of myself when I started this project and due to my enthusiasm, forgot to consider how responsive the campus would be to this idea. I have a strong feeling that students would like this on campus but a survey should be done to get a realistic number about students desire to have this.

Unfortunately, I forgot to consider CampusTrends as I did my research. I would have liked to have talked with them to discuss what the creation of a thrift store would do to their business. Although they aren't necessarily competing for the same customers, I could see how they might object to a second hand shop.

Another thing worth noting is I don't have a possible location for this store. I know space is valuable so I would have to meet and discuss with the university to see if and where this store could be put in.

### **Recommendations**

Based on my research, I strongly urge WMU to consider the creation of an on campus thrift store. President Dunn has already expressed his desire to make Western Michigan

University as sustainable as possible. As mentioned earlier, he signed the *Talloires Declaration*. Among the many goals that the signing of the *Talloires Declaration* established for WMU was the “Urgent need to move toward an environmentally sustainable future.” The time to live up to that commitment is now. Below I have a basic outline about store implementation. This outline is highly subject to change but could serve as a future reference to any student who would like to continue this work, or could be used as a blueprint for the store.

First and foremost, this should be run by volunteers. I would like to think that people are committed to the store, not a pay check. This would also greatly reduce the cost of operations and would put more money back into the community. If it’s found that students aren’t willing to volunteer, this project could be proposed to the new SFI fund for start up money and students could be given jobs once the store makes money. This would only be in its infancy stages because the store should be able to break even. The store could also be run like a student organization. It could have a voted on board of directors that oversee and make decisions based on the good of the store.

Through my research and survey of schools with on-campus thrift shops, all have been non-profit. No school has lost money by creating a store and all but one school puts their proceeds back into the community, either through donations to charities or to scholarships for students. Here at Western, I propose that any profits be split evenly between scholarships, donations to nonprofits and education. The first way is scholarships, ideally, but not restricted to Environmental Studies students or students concerned with sustainability. One way to decide the recipient of the scholarship would be to have students design, or volunteer with sustainability efforts, not just on campus but off campus as well. The second portion of the money should be donated to nonprofits; again I would prefer this money to go to those concerned with the environment but any charity would be considered. Like Sacred Heart’s store, the money could be rotated between charities. The third sum of money could go to educate future generations about how to be more eco-friendly. An example is, the store could hire a few students each semester (and with permission from local schools) go around local elementary and middle schools to talk with classes about how to live a more sustainable life.

To ensure student awareness, it is crucial to promote the business. Most schools I talked to found that students were enthusiastic about an on-campus thrift store and were able to promote

their store through minimal advertising. The most efficient ways schools found to advertise were through the internet (Facebook pages and announcements online) and through posters on campus. Western Michigan could prominently display the store on its main webpage and make it a focal point of tours given to prospective students.

All the schools I surveyed were unanimous about their student's willingness to donate used items. The schools were overwhelmed with the amount of things they received and had to start being picky about what they took. The school has to make it easy for students to donate. Aside from actually bringing their clothing or other items to the store, the school must set up collection bins around campus. An easy way to target a large number of students would be to have collection bins in every dorm. Volunteers could collect the bins periodically. The bins would not only be for donation collections, they would also be a constant reminder to students that Western Michigan cares about recycling and is giving students easy access to donate.

One event on campus that could work in conjunction with a student run thrift store is MODA. At Smith College, their student-run thrift store puts on a fashion show with donated items every year. The proceeds from this show are donated to charity. Those students with majors in fashion design could use this store as an opportunity to work with the store.

Based on my research, I've found that most schools have limited open hours. The store should be open at least one day a week and one day a weekend. I have found that the most successful stores were open during lunch anywhere from 11-2 and surprisingly generated most of their sales on the weekends. The weekend hours would be roughly the same, opening an hour earlier and closing an hour later.

One of the hardest things I found when putting my project together, was deciding what the store should accept for donations, either strictly clothing or larger items like beds and desks. Because sustainability is the main goal, I think the store should take in all gently used items. This can be modified depending on the size of the store, or the demand of such large items.

Affordability and sustainability are the main criteria's of the store. We want to give students the lowest prices we can. One school prices all clothing for a dollar. Other schools have clothing for a quarter or fifty cents or sell anything you can put in a bag for a dollar. Other schools sell bigger items (beds, electronics, etc.) for up to twenty dollars. Depending on the direction of where Western takes, they can determine their own prices. I think it would be much

easier to have standardized prices across the board. Clothing and accessories a dollar, furniture could be priced at five dollars. This would greatly reduce the hassle of figuring out prices for the items in the store.

The creation of an on campus thrift store at Western Michigan serves two purposes; 1) sustainability, and 2) raising awareness. Because of this, the central theme of this store would be on reducing waste and educating everyone that walks through its doors on how to do that. It could show students just how much of an impact they personally have on landfills. The store could and would make mention that everything in the store would have probably ended up in the landfill if not for the store. Based on data from other schools, the sheer number of donations they receive is amazing. If students were forced to recognize that their donations prevented things from going into a landfill, it would definitely make them think about their actions. [can take pictures of landfills—do illustrations to bring the point home]

Lastly, the store has to appeal to students living off campus as well. Based on the sustainability efforts, I think the store should offer, free of charge, a service to pick up unwanted goods from student housing. The school would hopefully be able to donate the use of a school van to pick up the items. Because this could encompass a lot of items, and start to get expensive, the pickups could occur three times a year, at the end of each semester and during the month of August. August is generally when the leases to most off campus housing and apartments end and I know firsthand the amount of goods students throw away during this time.

Our school has committed itself to sustainability. The goal of this project was to help Western Michigan realize its goal in becoming a nationwide leader in sustainable projects. This project has outlined a potential way for any future student to help create a more sustainable campus. The project doesn't have to be followed exactly, nor should it be. But hopefully it has stimulated enough interest and ideas that one day it can be put in place.

## References

Carolyn Noack, Facilities Management, Western Michigan University.

[carolyn.noack@wmich.edu](mailto:carolyn.noack@wmich.edu)

Steve Palmer, Residence Life Office, Western Michigan University. [steven.palmer@wmich.edu](mailto:steven.palmer@wmich.edu)

Nola Wiersma, Coordinator “Free-free market”, Western Michigan University

[nola.c.wiersma@wmich.edu](mailto:nola.c.wiersma@wmich.edu)

### **The Sacred Heart Thrift Store, Sacred Heart University**

[http://www.sacredheart.edu/pages/29778\\_new\\_thrift\\_store\\_on\\_campus\\_offers\\_college\\_essentials\\_at\\_discounted\\_prices.cfm](http://www.sacredheart.edu/pages/29778_new_thrift_store_on_campus_offers_college_essentials_at_discounted_prices.cfm) Contacted [fazzinom1381@sacredheart.edu](mailto:fazzinom1381@sacredheart.edu) for information

### **First Impressions, Northampton Community College**

[http://articles.mcall.com/2010-03-23/news/all-a5\\_5thrift1.72133971mar23\\_1\\_first-impressions-thrift-store-thrift-shop](http://articles.mcall.com/2010-03-23/news/all-a5_5thrift1.72133971mar23_1_first-impressions-thrift-store-thrift-shop) Contacted [krooney@northampton.edu](mailto:krooney@northampton.edu) for information

### **ReCellar, St. Lawrence University**

<http://www.stlawu.edu/green/reuse>. Contacted [dmros109@stlawu.edu](mailto:dmros109@stlawu.edu) for information

### **SmiTHrift, Smith College**

<http://media.www.smithsophian.com/media/storage/paper587/news/2005/09/22/News/Thrift.Store.Set.To.Open.On.Campus-993603.shtml> Contacted [smiththrift@smith.edu](mailto:smiththrift@smith.edu) for information

### **Saints ShareWear, Santa Fe College**

[http://www.alligator.org/news/sfcc/article\\_2773d9b8-8df1-5af1-885a-c290f92cd232.html](http://www.alligator.org/news/sfcc/article_2773d9b8-8df1-5af1-885a-c290f92cd232.html)  
Contacted [debi.mcelroy@sfcollge.edu](mailto:debi.mcelroy@sfcollge.edu) and [lynn.speer@sfcollge.edu](mailto:lynn.speer@sfcollge.edu) for information

These schools didn't respond to my survey but they also have on campus thrift stores.

### **Ohio State**

[http://www.uwc-osu.org/Buckeye\\_Bargains/Buckeye\\_Bargains.htm](http://www.uwc-osu.org/Buckeye_Bargains/Buckeye_Bargains.htm)

**Mott Community College**

<http://www.league.org/blog/post.cfm/workplace-wardrobes-ellen-s-closet-readies-students-for-new-careers>

**Illinois Wesleyan University**

[http://www.iwu.edu/CurrentNews/newsrelease07/news\\_IWUGreen\\_907.shtml](http://www.iwu.edu/CurrentNews/newsrelease07/news_IWUGreen_907.shtml)

**College of the Siskiyous**

<http://www.siskiyous.edu/publicrelations/foundation/eaglesnest.htm>

Integrate, quality of life, challenge we face every day. Commitment to sustainability, championed, unprecedented, adamant, time to act is now Our generation faces an unprecedented time in human history.

Each fall close to 4,500 kids move in to WMU's dorm halls. In the spring, almost all of those kids will move out for the summer. With this

- Volunteer, western pick up items.
- Reduce waste thrown out
- Trash to treasures
- RSO, executive board to make decisions
- Of course, this project could only exist if it is supported by the school. There
- Funding from the school/start up costs.
- Volunteer/coupons
- Comparing cost of advertising to running store
- Donating things back
- Trade ins
- Internships/business mgmt./ marketing/social worker/accounting

[include a copy of the survey and the compiled answers?]

work on the wording of those last two paragraphs

Student involvement?

The store would show that Western Michigan is serious about sustainable efforts

