WMU Thrift Store: Bronco Throwbacks

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ENVS 4100 Appropriate Technology and Sustainability:
Campus as a Living, Learning Laboratory
Spring 2014
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I. Executive Summary

Every year at the end of the spring semester a peculiar phenomenon occurs. Huge giant waste containers are parked outside of dorms and apartment buildings across the city. Over about a two-week period students discard everything from pens and pencils to beds, desks and chairs. Our society has embraced a tradition of out of site out of mind when it comes to waste disposal. Western Michigan University is no different. Every year we throw away things that are still vastly useful. These items could benefit a student that is unable to get such things that would help them in the fulfillment of their college career. This presents an ambitious opportunity for the expansion of sustainability on Western’s campus. In order for the University to further it sustainable vision we need to address the growing waste problem presented every year by its own students. We propose that an on campus thrift store be implemented on main campus to provide a space that students may dispose of their unwanted items in a more sustainable form. Which would allow other students the opportunity to purchase these throwback items.

Western is truly ready for this project to break ground. We created a survey that was intended to gauge student interest in an on campus thrift store. The survey also presented an opportunity for students to give their input on location and items they would wish to see in the store. Upon analyzing the results we found that students are excited and ready for a thrift store that caters to the everyday needs of the broke and unprepared college student. We explored some already existing and successful on campus and student led thrift stores. These stores have been widely successful on their campuses and have demonstrated potential for a university of our standing to do the same. On our campus there exists a similar idea. The Bronco Share Space provides a small space in the basement of the Wesley foundation where students can donate or take items free of charge. Upon interviewing them they explained there purpose and long term goals. After interviewing the Bronco Share Space our next step was to research any possible attempts for an on campus thrift store on Westerns campus. When researching prior projects Nick Bennett’s project rose to the surface.

The thrift store, from our research, has proven that it is the appropriate solution to our campuses waste problem. The store offers a fun and exciting way for the university to
limit its waste disposal and convert some of the waste into usable items for its students to benefit from. Thrift stores enhance community interactions in a way that prevents excess waste. Since this store offers this outlet it is not only reducing waste on campus but it is helping to further the sustainable vision that WMU is trying to project. WMU would be helping its student body that comes to college without the everyday items, which make for a satisfying university lifestyle. With college expenses on the rise, a thrift store presents an opportunity for students that are generally unprepared financially, and otherwise, to purchase cheap and nearby necessities. If Western wants to open its own store, an acquisition of a space and some minor start up funding are all that is necessary.

In order for a thrift store to become successful on Western’s campus a few thing are required. First, a space that is appealing to students, that is both inviting and projects our desire to enhance sustainability is necessary. Second, we have found that a small start up fee would be essential in the establishment of a successful store. We also believe that either some sort of internship or work-study program would be highly beneficial, but not crucial to the development and running of the store. Western could be at the forefront of sustainability, with one of the largest campuses, to have a thrift store available for student and faculty use.

II. Introduction

The waste problem on campus is very noticeable. The Office for Sustainability works every year to try and document all of Westerns waste, to one day to reduce our massive carbon footprint we leave. Western’s focus on a sustainable campus could be furthered by the implementation of a thrift store. Besides the potential to reduce waste and increase sustainability on campus, a thrift store would increase the well being of our growing international students and/or low-income students by offering inexpensive goods at a convenient location. The store would also offer employment and volunteer opportunities. Opening a thrift store on campus has the potential to become a leverage point for future sustainable endeavors as its profits could be returned to University projects.

Every year the Office for Sustainability conducts a survey to evolve and evaluate sustainability on campus. The following is a response that a wise student submitted to the survey, "One of the most wasteful things I have ever witnessed in my whole life was when
students moved out of the dorms at the end of the year. Dumpsters full of furniture, TV, clothes... it was heartbreaking! Many locals actually know it to be ideal dumpster diving conditions and pulled up in trucks, but I was thinking, what if we had someone at each dumpster to prevent the discarding of good items (not broken) to either set aside for people to reuse or donate...I furnished an apartment with dumpster items because I was an orphan so I did not start college with everything that so many other students did, and threw away." Our waste issues are becoming more and more apparent to our students and because of this awareness we believe that a thrift store would entice our students to become more sustainable in their everyday practices, while WMU achieves greatness in sustainability accomplishments.

We conducted a survey to inquire about our peer’s interest for an on campus thrift store. We surveyed approximately 100 students outside of the environmental studies department to get a true idea of unbiased students thought. Of our 100 students surveyed, we got a resounding 80% positive response to the possibility of an on campus thrift store. Clearly demonstrating that there is a want for this thrift store by WMU students. Along with inquiring about interest in the store we asked about the students want to purchase or donate items to the thrift store to gage campus community participation. Those surveyed responded with an 81% majority saying they would like to donate or purchase items from the thrift store. With the survey we also explored the possibility of having students work or volunteer in the thrift store. With this we were not expecting a high response, but were pleasantly surprised. Once the survey data was analyzed we were amazed to find that 53% of those surveyed said they would want to work or volunteer in this student run thrift store. The survey was also useful because it offered students’ space to tell us what they would want to see sold at the store and where they believe a good location would be.

Other than the surveys, our project team researched best practices at other universities in the United States. Email communication was used to reach out to the Clark Community Thrift Store at Clark University in Massachusetts. They shared their success story, while offering us an opportunity to apply their practice to WMU. We also researched Syracuse University’s, 3Fifteen Thrift Store. Their website offers an insightful video of their successes. There is also a successful thrift store initiative-taking place all over the United
States through a traveling store called the Red Bus Project. Best practices were incredibly insightful to further progress our plan for WMU’s own store.

While our project aims at WMU opening a permanent thrift store that has employees and generates revenue, there is a successful enterprise in place that is similar to our vision. Our group met with the current overseer of the Bronco Share Space to discuss its image and future goals. While our future goals were not exactly the same, their insight was helpful and refreshing, seeing a similar enterprise in place. The future of the Share Space is questionable, with the school year 2014-15 being their last in the Wesley Foundation, as they are knocking it down. Their future is uncertain and our future undefined, so potential future collaboration might be desirable for both parties. Our intent is not to overshadow their already successful project, but build off of it, with potential to locate a space and cooperate to further WMU’s sustainability mission.

If this store initiative dies after our project is complete, WMU would be leaving unpicked fruit on low branches. This project aligns well with WMU goals and missions. It would add to the vision that the Office for Sustainability is trying to achieve. Bronco Throwbacks would drastically improve the WMU community and the environments wellbeing. Based off of our research opening a thrift store has been known to be feasible and attainable as long as there is a space and funding available.

III. Methodology and Data

Upon researching and reading Nick Bennett’s project he suggested that a survey would be beneficial to establishment of a store. We also agreed that the use of any information would either build the idea or show the lack of interest. Surveys are the easiest and quickest ways to get an answer to how students would feel about a thrift store on campus. This was also useful because we were able to get a better idea of what the students wanted to see in the store and also see where the store would be conducive to their daily routines.

The schools chosen were those that have had an on campus thrift store that had been both successful and been open for a few years. Clark University also provided a good opportunity to see how the thrift store on a smaller campus was saving waste. Upon
emailing them they told us that over their 4-year period they had saved 25 tons of waste. This is even more amazing to here when they have a school size of around 3000 students. The potential for WMU to save waste is massive. Syracuse also had some great advice to offer. Their thrift store incorporates a café for students. Both universities have very clearly demonstrated how a successful on campus thrift store could be possible. The Bronco Share space also presented a good opportunity to see what Western had already attempted. From talking to Maegan Dennis head of the Bronco share space we discovered that they have big hopes for the future. She told us that they are trying to become a registered RSO so they can have a better standing within the university community. They are also trying to partner with the possible student café that is currently trying to be implemented in campus. They have also shown that the Share space not only benefits the student base but it also benefits the community with a few non student residents regularly coming to the share space to donate and take some items within. The Bronco Share Space’s on campus consumer base is around 100-150 showing that there is general interest in it. They believe with a little more funding and a little more student exposure the share space will be an important part of the student life.

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IV. Example of Best Practice on Campus

There are several examples of best practices at WMU of similar idea. As previously mentioned, there is the Bronco Share Space. There is also a program called Trash to Treasures, and a business called WMU Surplus Sales. All three of these examples are in place to reduce waste going to landfills from WMU’s campus. Our idea to open a thrift store on campus incorporates all three into our plan in various ways.

The Bronco Share Space’s future plans are to secure another space, increase advertising, and potentially become an RSO to be able to gain some funding from WMU, according to our interview with operator, Magen Dennis. They rely solely on volunteers to run their space. They are also interested in partnering with the sustainability café and having their store share a location. All of their items are given away for free and many unwanted items are donated to local charities. Ms. Dennis stated that her free store serviced 100 to 150 students the past year; many of those were from volunteers or friends of volunteers. For their small-scale operation, that is an admirable amount.

Another similar idea on WMU’s campus is the Trash to Treasures program implemented by Residence Life. Trash to Treasures takes advantage of the tremendous waste produced during residence hall move out. Students are able to leave gently used clothes, books, household items, furniture and appliances that will then be donated to the Kalamazoo Deacons Conference. As it states on their webpage, “Trash to treasures not only lets Western students impact their community, but it also reduces the volume of usable but unwanted items going to the landfill” (Residence Life WMU, 2014). According to Nick Bennett’s previous project on a WMU thrift store, “the program has reduced dumpsters and waste going to the landfill by up to 40 percent” (Bennett, 2010). Our plan does not overshadow this initiative, because we are also willing to donate unwanted goods to local charities, including the Deacons Conference. Our store would also accept donations all year round and from students living off campus.

The last example of best practice on WMU’s campus is WMU Surplus Sales. This business is under WMU logistical services and decides the fate of excess university owned property, such as desks, bookshelves, tables, chairs, electronics, and furniture. Surplus Sales determines the method of disposal for these excess items, whether it be recycle, re-
use, sell, or dispose of (Logistical Services WMU, 2014). The items are sold on scheduled Wednesdays in the Activity Therapy Building. From this business, we gained insights about pricing, store management practices, and selling used goods.

V. Best Practices on Other Campuses

The three best practices on other campuses we researched were from Clark University, Syracuse University, and a university independent program called The Red Bus Project. The stores researched offered us a variety of data about implementing and running a university thrift store.

**Clark University**

Clark Community Thrift Store opened for business on August 22, 2010 after 2 undergraduates from Clark University thought of doing the project for their Entrepreneurship Capstone class. The students decided to collaborate with university faculty and administration in hopes that a permanent store could be opened at their institution. On Clark’s campus the girls noticed a problem similar to the problem WMU experiences, as well as college campuses across the U.S., when students move out of housing after the spring semester, tremendous useable waste. After they secured a subsidized building from the University and obtained $5,000 in start up funding, from an Innovation and Entrepreneurship university wide contest, they were able to start promoting their store and collect donations. The team of dedicated individuals began collecting donations in their store, mostly from students moving out of their current housing. As of this year, they have diverted over 25 tons of waste through their sales of donated items. The store is run as a not-for-profit so all of their earnings, after covering store expenses, are given back to the university to pursue other sustainability initiatives. Email communication with one of their managers, Jeffrey Stanmyer, as well as information from their website has proven very valuable to our project of Western opening a similar enterprise.
**Syracuse University**

This university opened their thrift store, 3fifteen, in 2012 and continues to offer students inexpensive, unique, student-relevant goods. Their profits then benefit their Rescue Mission’s efforts to end hunger and homelessness in their neighboring communities. Donations are accepted in their store and can include items such as clothing, accessories, and furniture. They share a location with a local coffee shop, Café Kubal, where shoppers are able to shop for trendy thrift store items and enjoy a soulful cup of coffee.

**Red Bus Project**

This thrift store is a traveling store that inhabits an old double-decker bus, traveling from college to college around the United States. All profits from the store go towards orphan advocacy and awareness spreading. The founder of this initiative was a student at Baylor University when she decided she wanted to make a difference in orphans lives in a creative, tangible, far-reaching way. So they purchased a retired double-decker bus from England and since Spring 2012 they have been traveling the country accepting clothing donations and selling clothing to students to promote their causes. They have reached more than 177,000 students through the mobile thrift store. They will be in Illinois and Indiana during April and May 2014, but have no scheduled stops in Michigan. This offers us a unique perspective on our project because of our difficulties locating a permanent space.

**VI. Discussion**

Western students have made it clear, through our survey results, that a thrift store on campus would interest them and more than half of them would work or volunteer. There is clear consensus from the student body that opening a thrift store is desired. The store would not only please students, it would also reduce waste, profit WMU, and broaden our sustainability horizons. Based off of our best practices, the schools that have successfully opened thrift stores, are proud of the difference they are making. Since Western already has a successful thrift store-like pilot going with the Bronco Share Space; the next meaningful step would be to facilitate a location and gain funding through a sustainability grant. If WMU wants to pursue greater sustainability goals then their next project should be opening a thrift store, based off of our research.
VII. Limitations of Analysis and Future Work

We experienced several limitations while trying to further our project. Communication with appropriate faculty, staff, and students proved to be time consuming. Some of our emails did not receive a response or the response was weeks after the initial email was sent. It was also difficult to know who were the appropriate faculty to contact were and we were redirected several times. We emailed Doreen Brinson, Labor and Business Relations under Administration asking her about setting up a meeting about locating a space for our store. She forwarded our email to Peter Strazdas, Associate Vice President Administration Division, Joyce Parsons Executive Assistant under Administration who clarified the process of gaining a space on WMU’s campus. They notified us that if we were a student organization we needed to get approval from the VP of Student Affairs Office and if we were through an Academic Department we needed to go through the Provost Office. Upon approval from either of those VP’s, our request would be able to move through to the University Space Committee. We decided our time was better used doing research, conducting surveys, meeting with The Share Space, etc. If we were more persistent in contacting the correct administrators and following university procedure we may have made more progress locating a permanent space on campus for our store.

The surveys we conducted were extremely helpful in gaging student interest and ideas, but we only collected 100 responses. To get more significant data we would need use a much larger sample size, as WMU’s student population was 24,598, as of Fall 2012. Surveying faculty would have also offered more relevant data. If we included demographic information questions on the survey we also could have gotten more specific data about our data set.

While we gained valuable best practice research from email communication and website information, but it would have been helpful to take a trip to see other university thrift stores in action. Observing best practice in person would prove extremely beneficial when it comes time to open Western’s store. Another important aspect of traveling to university campus thrift stores would be for networking and outreach purposes.

Our biggest challenges this semester were locating space, obtaining funding, and getting university backing. These were the most time consuming and difficult problems to
solve. In order to locate space, we needed to already have funding and university support. However gaining funding required a Student Sustainability Grant, which was not time permitting for our group this semester. To get a space we also needed detailed business plans and blueprints in order to get university backing so the plan could go through the University Space Committee Process. As we are undergraduate students not studying business, this would prove to be out of our reach without more time. Overall, it is not easy to start a student initiative at WMU without incredible persistence, ample time, and university support.

One final challenge we encountered was deciding if we wanted to see if the Bronco Share Space was interested in collaborating with our project or simply using them as a best practice at WMU. We decided to use them as a best practice because our business plans were different. They are a free store and we would like our store to generate profits to be put back into the university.

**VIII. Conclusions/Recommendations**

From all of our research we have come to the conclusion that an on campus thrift store would both benefit students and help Western reduce waste. Our recommendations for continuing with this project are to gain university support, apply for a student sustainability grant, work with administration to secure a permanent space, and finally figure out further logistics about how the store will be run.

Specifically, short-term goals for this recommendation consist of assisting the Bronco Share Space with their future goals; locate space, and gain funding, partnerships, and WMU support. Long-term goals for the future would be to open for business, reduce waste, increase sustainability awareness, and work towards the store offering business or sustainability internships to further increase the wellbeing of students involved. Hopefully this project can continue to progress so one day WMU can be the proud owner of a university thrift store.
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X. Appendices

Appendix 1- Current Contact list
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Appendix 3- Business Plan

Executive Summary
This business will be an on campus thrift store for Western Michigan University Students and faculty, with potential to expand to the Kalamazoo community. This store will accept items from students and then sell them back to students who need or want such items. This would be a unique opportunity on campus. We would offer students coupons for discounted items for donating their unwanted goods or offer a trade for items in our store. This store will be making money for the University by selling items that students need or want. Financial requirements for this would be for the cost and up-keep of the store and other general startup costs such as shelving, advertising, payment of employees, etc. This company will be owned and operated by Western Michigan University and would be a partner with the Office for Sustainability. Major achievements for this project would be the continual interest in this and continual donations and purchases made by students. On top of that, WMU would be able to expand their sustainability practices while spreading awareness of our waste problem. Ideally there would be a fast turn around of items so that there are not many items that continually sit and take up space. If items are left on the floor for too long they will be donated to a local charity.

Business Description
This business would benefit all those on campus who would take advantage of this service, especially those who are able to purchase items they otherwise would not be able to afford. The thrift store industry in Kalamazoo is fairly decent. However, on campus there is only one place where students can get used goods. This store or the Bronco Share space is located in the basement of the Wesley foundation. Since the Wesley foundation will be demolished in 2015, this service’s future is questionable. Along with this, this business does not offer the same opportunities that the Bronco Throwback store will. This store will be more accessible for students and offer more of a variety of items that students need. It will also provide profits to be used for other WMU projects. The store will serve as a permanent reminder of WMU’s commitment to sustainable practices.

**Market Strategies**
The target market for the Western thrift store will be Western students and faculty. We will target students and let them know of this store by specifically targeting incoming freshmen, international students, and those living on campus. Students will be told of this store when they go through orientation and during fall welcome. This way if a student realizes they need something, they can visit an on-campus location to buy a cheap product that they need. This store will need a lot of marketing and advertising at its start-up to get the WMU campus informed. The store will need students aware of the fact that they can donate items that they do not want or do not need anymore. Flyers should be put up at the end and start of each semester while students need items and also need to get rid of items the most. Ideally, the store will be centrally located in order to attract the most visitors.

**Competitive Analysis**
As mentioned previously, there are a few thrift stores located in the Kalamazoo/Portage area. There are currently 12 thrift stores, reuse stores in the area; none are conveniently located to students living on campus without a car. There is currently a student share space on campus, but its future location and return is questionable. Also, the bronco share space has a very different vision than the Bronco Throwback store. This store you can donate clothes and small items and take whatever you want free of charge. The Bronco Throwback store would have more items that students actually need and want upon arrival at Western Michigan University. According to surveyed students on Western Michigan University’s campus, 80% of the students surveyed believed that an on-campus thrift store
would be beneficial. The survey also suggested that that students, 91% would donate, purchase or both items from this store. The bronco throw back store will also make sure items in the store never sit for too long. We want our products to be brought in within the last year or so. No one wants to buy things from ten years ago, unless of course it’s a vintage item. In addition to the items for sale in the store, our store will have a better advantage over the share space since it will be a part of Western Michigan University, officially. This will be an advantage since this way more students will be aware of this store. Also Western could provide us a better location than the Bronco Share Space and more space than they have. Western will also benefit from recognizing the thrift as its own. Several other Universities that are dedicated to sustainability also have thrift stores on their campus.

Design and Development
Once space was allocated and funding was granted through a sustainability grant, the logistics of the store could be implemented and refined. The store would need a space that is approximately 3 times larger than the current Bronco Share Space (60 feet x 45 feet). The space would need to be in a high traffic area on campus to get ample business and exposure. Based off of best practices from other Universities, start up funding would need to be between $4,000 and $5,000. Gaining funding through a Student Sustainability Grant would allow the Office For Sustainability to be a major contributor to the success of the store.

Operations and Management Plan
Students, faculty, and staff would be able to donate and purchase items at the store. Move in and move out times of year would be the busiest for donations and purchases. W will accept in store donations as well as end of year pick up at residents halls or other student housing complexes. With appropriate funding and permission, there is potential to have a couple large donation bins throughout campus for convenient donating. According to surveys taken by WMU students the items they would be most willing to donate or purchase would be clothing, WMU apparel, shoes, electronics, books, household items, school supplies, kitchen supplies, bikes, shelving, and other small furniture items. Volunteers and/or permanent workers will run the store. Continued progress with the store would allow for interns from the College of Business or Office for Sustainability to
manage the store. Hours of operation are to be determined by building regulations and workers availability.

Appendix 4- Image Archives

Clark University Thrift Store

Red Bus Project